

Stretching Labour Historiography: Pointers from South Asia

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PRIVILEGING FREE LABOUR

Studies of working people have long been framed by the concepts of “free” and “unfree” labour, a pair that distinguishes workers who are fully proletarianized from those who are not. Proletarians are working people without property, and therefore compelled to sell their capacities for money, but at the same time personally free to choose whom to sell their capacities to. Such (double-) free labour is contrasted with labour that is unfree, either because workers are compelled to offer their capacities to specific takers – under conditions established by those takers rather than by means of a labour market – or because these workers are not completely propertyless. Throughout the twentieth century, a dominant assumption among labour historians has been that the two concepts of free and unfree labour also reflect a basic trend in modern world history: the progressive replacement of unfree labour by free labour – or the progressive proletarianization of the world’s workers.

Today, labour historians are much less sanguine about this belief. They have come to realize that the history of labour has never been a unilinear process in which unfree labour is being replaced by free labour. This realization has much to do with the fact that the study of labour is becoming de-provincialized. It used to be highly occidentalist in outlook. Based on empirical knowledge of labour in industrialized parts of Europe and North America (the “West”, or now more frequently: the “North”), it sought to construct theories that were deemed to be universally applicable. But as detailed empirical studies of labour in Africa, Latin America, and Asia became available and labour historians began to take these more seriously, it became clear that the basic concepts derived from labour history do not suffice. For one, in the world beyond the West it was impossible to construct the history of labour as a march from unfree to free. Gradually, labour historians realised that it is necessary to revitalize the field by de-occidentalizing it and devising a truly comparative approach.

The extent to which comparisons will refashion the way we think about labour history is difficult to gauge. What is clear, however, is that they have begun to challenge the adequacy of basic categories and intellectual

mindsets. Already, they have influenced how labour historians think about Northern trajectories. The “free wage-labourer” is now treated much more gingerly as an ideal type rather than a category of Northern historical reality, wage labour independent of the rise of industrial capitalism is taken more seriously (e.g. in debates about European proto-industrialization and worker-peasants), and it is realized that in the North unfree forms of labour have sometimes succeeded freer forms.

One major world region that has recently produced conceptual challenges is South Asia.¹ Histories of labour in South Asia show many finely shaded degrees of labour relations that fall between the two theoretical constructs of free and unfree labour, and many shifts between these. Some are the outcome of transformations of traditional arrangements but many others have developed *de novo* in recent times. Predictions about the effects of capitalism on labour – particularly regarding its proletarianization, the making of a working class, and labour movements – have proved almost consistently off the mark in South Asia. For Dipesh Chakrabarty and Peter Robb, this signals that the universalist claims of Marxist theory are based on cultural assumptions that are far from universal.² In particular, the continuing salience of religion and social status “in determining identities and perceptions of self-interest [in South Asia] may be regarded not as a temporary imperfection in the march to a ‘true’ working class, but as a persistent feature flowing from specific conditions.”³

If this is true, the contribution of labour-histories-beyond-the-North may lie not just in a rethinking of the *teleological* assumptions of the older occidentalist labour history, or a finer grading of categories. It may also lie in a call to reconsider the *cultural* assumptions underlying the field’s main categories.⁴ While the former is already being taken up seriously, the latter is by far the more difficult and radical.⁵

SOUTH ASIAN LABOUR HISTORY

In South Asia the systematic study of labour relations dates back over 200 years. Making sense of labour in various forms has been a concern for

1. The region of south Asia is usually understood to cover the territories of Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. It is home to about 1,500 million people, or one-fifth of mankind.

2. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Delhi, 1989); Peter Robb, “Introduction: Meanings of Labour in Indian Social Context”, in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (Delhi [etc.], 1993), pp. 1–67.

3. Robb, “Introduction”, p. 8.

4. For example, the legal, religious and intellectual pre-histories of Europe, especially ideas of liberty, freedom, egalitarianism and modernity that are usually associated with Europe and the Enlightenment.

5. Cf. Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *“Peripheral Labour”? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization* (Cambridge, 1997).

administrators, politicians, entrepreneurs, and academics since early colonial times but a recognizable field of labour history has developed here only very recently, and only in one country of South Asia: India. Historically, much of what we know about labour, labourers, employers, and state policies regarding labour has been subsumed under other fields of study, notably caste, law, and development studies. The links between these fields and labour history have been quite weak, with the result that labour studies have largely failed to deal with the position of labour as it mostly appeared in South Asia.

Peter Robb puts it like this: “The consequence of not connecting questions of work and status is in the end to separate out, even within the category of ‘labour’, all but one type of work. The norm is always the wage labourer, and often labour organised under a capitalist or proto-capitalist system.”⁶ This obsession with the wage-worker is also noted by Ranajit Das Gupta, who describes the approach of many labour historians to what they perceive as the emergence of a homogeneous Indian working class under capitalism as “celebratory”.⁷ In South Asia, however, wage-workers in the “organized sector” never formed more than one-tenth of the working population, and in many regions much less.⁸

The invisibility, within the study of South Asian labour history, of other, numerically far more prominent, forms of labour (tenancy, bondedness, sharecropping, domestic labour, family production, etc.) and the forms of social coercion that often accompany these, is increasingly being considered as a serious shortcoming. The assumption that the industrial proletariat was the advance guard of modern labour – the model that all other workers would (be forced to) emulate – has been proven wrong. Not only did the organized sector remain remarkably

6. Robb, “Introduction”, p. 10.

7. “Writing on the history of labour in India from a Marxian point of view has a respectable lineage. But till a few years back most such writings tended to proceed from an assumption of a uni-directional, uni-linear process entailing the dissolution of all pre-capitalist social relations and eventually clear articulation of class relations under capitalism, that is, generalization of commodity production and polarization between capital and labour. Related to this has also been the assumption of the working of a process of homogenization of labour and the linear view of a progression of class struggle and class consciousness from lower to higher and to still higher levels, ultimately reaching a crescendo of revolutionary and socialist struggle and consciousness. In consequence, though radical labour historians have made notable contributions, particularly in the area of workers’ struggles and the influence of political and ideological movements on these struggles, their writings have by and large adopted celebratory approaches, ignored the complexities of the historical formation and growth of working class in India and have not dealt with many critical areas”; Ranajit Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta [etc.], 1994), pp. xv–xvi.

8. Arjan de Haan claims 10 to 12 per cent for India; the proportion of the organized sector in other south Asian countries is lower; Arjan de Haan, “Towards a ‘Total History’ of Bengal Labour”, in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bengal: Rethinking History: Essays in Historiography* (Delhi, 2001), pp. 119–134, 133.

small, but its workers, though wage-workers, were usually not proletarians.⁹ It is fair to say, with Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, that the revolutionary role of industrial labourers has been exaggerated. We would imprison labour history in an obsolete paradigm if we were to continue privileging them analytically, on the assumption that they act as the vanguard to effect a social revolution.¹⁰ In other words, we could be accused of indulging in wage fetishism.

These findings should be of great interest to any labour theorist because they fly in the face of received predictions. The universalist claim of these predictions shows itself in the question that is often asked next: why does the transformation of labour relations in South Asia not live up to the Northern example? Or more generally: why do labour relations in the world's south not conform to those in the "advanced" capitalist countries of the North? Such questions are misdirected because they take the organized sector and proletarian labour as natural yardsticks for modern labour relations, from which the bulk of the world's labour force happens persistently to deviate.¹¹ A more relevant question is what this persistence implies for the theoretical underpinnings of labour history:

We, historians and social scientists of the South, have been battling with the possibility of histories that are not constituted in terms framed by long-standing Northern discourses. The crucial question [...] is the universalist claims of Euro-American theories. How do these claims fare when viewed through our own particular historical experiences? Most grand theories sustain themselves by pleading large exceptions around much of the globe. Yet we continue to seek to explain the exception rather than question the theory that underpins such descriptions.¹²

In this connection the field of South Asian labour history has thrown up several useful debates. There is now a near consensus that processes of industrialization in South Asia have been predicated on labour relations that differed from those in the North. From its inception, some 150 years ago, factory labour was not free but remained rooted in family labour on rural holdings, and this had far-reaching consequences for gender relations, wage levels, patterns of labour control, and worker politics.

If these findings qualify classic assumptions about relations between capital and industrial labour, an equally serious challenge is thrown up by

9. This was true for jute labourers but even more so for labourers in the tea industry because the latter were tied down by penal contracts that were intended to bind them to employers for long periods and turn them into a stable captive workforce.

10. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Labouring Poor and Their Notion of Poverty: Late 19th and Early 20th Century Bengal* (Noida, 1998), pp. 8–9.

11. Samita Sen calls these "questions of lack" in her "Beyond the 'Working Class': Women's Role in Indian Industrialisation", *South Asia*, 22 (1999), pp. 95–117.

12. Samita Sen and Shamil Jeppie, "Editorial", *SEPHIS E-Magazine*, 1 (2004), p. 1.

Gyan Prakash. On the basis of a study of *kamias* (agricultural labourers with long-term ties to landlords in Bihar, India), he argues that the categories of free and unfree labour need thorough reconsideration. These categories are based on an “ideology rooted in the post-Enlightenment belief that freedom constituted the natural human condition” and that “the universalization of free labour [was] the *raison d’être* of history”. This discourse of freedom led to the banishment of unfree labour (servitude, slavery, bondage) from the life of capital by defining it “in opposition to free labour, as the suppression of the innate condition of freedom”.¹³ And yet the emergence of capitalism as a global system “took shape in and profited from structures ranging from peasant production to plantation slavery, though it represented them as its opposite. In this sense, the history of unfreedom is the history of capital in disguise.”¹⁴ For this reason, Prakash concludes that:

[...] if servitude was the form that the capital-labour relationship was compelled to assume in the process of its universalization, then colonial servitude must be included into the account of free labour. Because slavery and bondage contain the displaced history of freedom, the history of unfreedom in the colonies must be written into the history of freedom in the metropole.¹⁵

In other words, Prakash challenges labour historians to undo the discourse of freedom that permeates their work and to discard the oppositional categories of free and unfree labour that structure it.¹⁶

13. “[C]apital enacts servitude as the suppression of a prior human essence, as a system of *restrictions* on freedom to exchange labour power as a commodity. Power is banished from the realm of free labour and manifests itself in servitude alone; it becomes visible only in its juridical form, not in the realm of the economy but as ‘extra-economic coercion’ – as an economy of suspended rights and suppressed essence. Such a naturalization of free labour conceals capitalism’s role in constituting bondage as a condition defined in relation to itself, and presents servitude as a condition outside its field of operation, as a form of social existence identifiable and analysable as alien and opposed to capitalism”; Gyan Prakash, “Colonialism, Capitalism and the Discourse of Freedom”, in Amin and Van der Linden, “*Peripheral Labour?*”, pp. 9–25, 9, 10.

14. “To recognize in the history of unfreedom in India the history of free labour in disguise is to question the absolute separation maintained between the two, and to dismantle the opposition between the history of free labour in the West and unfree labour in the non-West”; Prakash, “Colonialism”, p. 22.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

16. Prakash takes a position in an ongoing controversy among neo-Marxist theorists that cannot be covered in this paper. For South Asian contributions that framed the battlefield in terms of modes of production in the 1970s, see Ashok Rudra *et al.*, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism in India* (Lahore, 1978). Recently the debate has been rekindled. For example, Banaji takes a position close to that of Prakash, which Brass denounces as aligning oneself with “anti-Marxist theory in general, and neoclassical economic historiography in particular”; Jairus Banaji, “The Fictions of Free Labour: Contract, Coercion, and So-Called Unfree Labour”, *Historical Materialism*, 11:3 (2003), pp. 69–95; and Tom Brass, “Why Unfree Labour is Not ‘So-Called’: The Fictions of Jairus Banaji”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 31 (2003), pp. 101–136. Cf. Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (Berne [etc.],

Clearly, then, the contributions of labour-histories-beyond-the-North go far beyond “accretions of knowledge that can be accessed when the need arises to understand the working-class history of one or several non-Western societies”.¹⁷ They go beyond providing students of the labour histories of Northern societies with an opportunity to benefit from a larger database to compare with. They have outgrown the role once assigned to them in the practices of labour history: to provide a cast of supporting characters exemplifying less successful or less complete transitions to modern forms of labour. Their real potential lies in revealing and challenging the cultural underpinnings of the entire field. In other words, labour historians need to reconsider their most precious assumptions, or, in the words of one labour historian: “we should re-examine all the schemas we were educated in on their merits”.¹⁸

LABOUR HISTORY IN BENGAL AND NORTH-EAST INDIA

It is with this potential in mind that we need to develop the study of labour history in the world beyond the North. Rather than holding up the history of South Asian labour as if it were caught in a time warp or failed to advance according to some world-historical norm, it is essential to analyse what actually did happen to labour in South Asia. We will look at the achievements of labour historians and suggest links with findings in adjacent fields that may advance the search for new general interpretations.

South Asia as a whole is too broad a canvas for this purpose. This paper focuses on labour in the north-eastern region of South Asia. For lack of a better term, I refer to this region as “Bengal and north-east India” (see Figure 1).¹⁹ Currently inhabited by some 300 million people, the area is economically diverse. Many inhabitants find employment in its mega-cities – Kolkata (Calcutta), Dhaka, Chittagong, Guwahati – and rural industrial complexes (tea plantations; oil, gas, and coal extraction). Far more subsist on the labour they put into agriculture, fisheries, domestic service, trade, state employment, and crafts.

The region is of interest because labour historians have done especially

1997). For a critique of Prakash, see also Neeladri Bhattacharya, *Labouring Histories: Agrarian Labour and Colonialism* (Noida, 2004), pp. 16–19.

17. Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden, “Introduction”, in Amin and Van der Linden, “*Peripheral Labour*”?, pp. 1–7, 5.

18. Marcel van der Linden, “Refuting Labour History’s Occidentalism”, in Arvind N. Das and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Work and Social Change in Asia: Essays in Honour of Jan Breman* (Delhi, 2003), pp. 249–261, 261.

19. Because of frequent name changes in this region during the twentieth century, and the intense political sensitivities connected with them, it is difficult to designate it with a single term. Today the region is divided between Bangladesh and India. The Indian part covers the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh.



Figure 1. Bengal and north-east India

innovative work here.²⁰ They have concentrated their efforts in four specific and related loci: jute factories, tea plantations, coal mines, and steel factories. These large-scale capitalist enterprises developed during the colonial period largely on the basis of foreign capital and a migratory labour force consisting of hundreds of thousands. It is from these studies that insights have emerged about regional features of working-class formation. Three dimensions have been especially highlighted: the importance and heterogeneity of non-economic factors – notably gender, religious community, caste, and regional identity – the persistence of links between industrial workers and their villages of origin, and the diversity of workers’ experiences. As expected, an important lesson drawn is that rather than viewing “the history of the Bengal working class as a deviation from the European model, particularly the model of the making of the

20. For a review of the historiography, see Arjan de Haan and Samita Sen, “New Lamps for Old? Debates in Eastern Indian Labour Historiography”, in Arjan de Haan and Samita Sen (eds), *A Case for Labour History: The Jute Industry in Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1999), pp. 1–22.

English working class [...] we should look for its own specificities and dynamism”.²¹ Samita Sen points to a crucial specificity:

In South Asia [...] [n]o clear separation of the household and production was effected: the household's own productive functions proved tenacious and in poor households, especially, women combined consumption, wage earning and reproduction, often simultaneously. The notion of a male wage earner as the single source of the household's sustenance – the single male breadwinner – was not a ubiquitous one and the inception of the modern factory system was not critical in this regard.²²

In a recent overview of the labour historiography of West Bengal, Arjan de Haan suggests that the empirical focus of Bengal labour studies is too narrow and needs to be expanded to help include the diversity of workers' experiences: “their continuing link with rural areas, religious, cultural, ethnic, caste and linguistic differences[, and an understanding of class] as constituted by gender, and by other non-economic factors”.²³ Such broadening, he argues, should take place in terms of economic sector, period, the nature of labour politics, geographical reach, and labourers' narratives. De Haan is not alone in his call; there is now broad support among Indian labour historians for studying the “multiplicity of worker practices and identities [and] the heterogeneity of labour forms”.²⁴

And yet, this understanding that the field must be renewed by broadening it still hovers at the level of exhortation rather than that of execution. Perhaps held back by a fear to step outside the familiar unified theoretical framework, labour historians have not yet set out research strategies that will deliver the goods. Starting from their suggestions, this paper examines eight partly overlapping themes that promise to be especially effective in broadening the history of labour in this region.

Industrial labour: jute and beyond

So far debates about the history of labour in Bengal and north-east India have been restricted chiefly to labour in large industrial enterprises. Within this sector, there has been a remarkable concentration on the jute factories in colonial Calcutta (or Kolkata, as it is now spelled). On the one hand, this has been a felicitous development because it allowed for productive, well-focused conversations between scholars thoroughly familiar with each

21. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “Introduction”, in Bandyopadhyay, *Bengal: Rethinking History*, pp. 13–35, 25. Cf. De Haan, “Towards a ‘Total History’”, p. 127.

22. Samita Sen, “Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal”, *International Review of Social History*, 42 (1997), pp. 65–86, 65.

23. De Haan, “Towards a ‘Total History’”, p. 132.

24. Prabhu Mohapatra, *Situating the Renewal: Reflections on Labour Studies in India* (Noida, 1998), p. 34. Cf. De Haan and Sen, “‘New Lamps for Old?’”; Bhattacharya, *The Labouring Poor*.

other's turf, as reported in *A Case for Labour History: The Jute Industry in Eastern India*.²⁵ On the other hand, it remains unclear what relevance these findings might have for labour beyond the colonial jute factory in Calcutta. The operative words here are "colonial", "jute", "factory", and "Calcutta". For example, little work has been done on Calcutta's jute factories after British rule ended in 1947, and even less on labour relations in the new jute factories that were set up in Dhaka and Narayanganj (East Pakistan, later Bangladesh) after 1947.²⁶ Such comparative work could fruitfully examine a number of themes. For example, in the existing literature much is made of the ways in which caste identities structured the workforce. This makes comparisons with East Pakistan/Bangladesh highly relevant for here jute labourers lacked caste identities because they were overwhelmingly Muslim. Did this absence lead to any differences in recruitment, the labour process, or labour politics? Were these workers less constrained to make themselves into a working class? And if not, why?

Similarly, the existing literature strongly emphasizes the colonial nature of labour relations in the Calcutta jute industry. Anthony Cox's study of jute manufacturing in Dundee (Scotland) and Calcutta during the colonial period has begun to qualify this by arguing that the two were rather similar in their treatment of labour.²⁷ Studies of post-colonial labour relations in both Calcutta and Dhaka/Narayanganj could examine this argument further. To what extent can we actually attribute the behaviour of jute labourers in the colonial period to the fact that they were subjected to the "mad and violent agency of imperialism"?²⁸ How important was the *colonial* dimension of capital in the equation?

And what do findings on jute labour tell us about industrial labour here in general? Were labour relations similar in other large-scale urban industries (such as chemicals, paper manufacturing, tobacco, or engineering) and in small-scale enterprises (such as leather, ceramics, brick-making, rice milling, or medicinal drugs²⁹)? One obvious comparison is to look at cotton and silk textile production because, unlike jute, these covered the

25. See n. 20.

26. On Calcutta, see Arjan de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta* (Hilversum, 1994); Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia, PA, 1997). On Dhaka/Narayanganj, see V. Bhaskar and Mushtaq Khan, "Privatization and Employment: A Study of the Jute Industry in Bangladesh", *American Economic Review*, 85 (1995), pp. 267–273.

27. Anthony Cox, "Rationalisation and Resistance: The Imperial Jute Industries of Dundee and Calcutta, 1930–40" (University of Cambridge, Fellowship Dissertation, 1997), cited in De Haan, "Towards a 'Total History'", p. 128.

28. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, p. 225.

29. See e.g. Amit Bhattacharyya, *Swadeshi Enterprise in Bengal, 1900–1920* (Calcutta, 1986); Smriti Kumar Saha, "The Rice Milling Industry in Bengal, 1920–1950: A Case Study of the Impact of Mechanization on the Local Peasant Economy", *Calcutta Historical Journal*, 13 (1988–89), pp. 1–111.

entire spectrum from small- to large-scale enterprises, from local to European capital, from traditional handloom to modern machinery, from local to migrant labour, and from domestic to export markets.³⁰ Moreover, studies of labour in silk and cotton production, both with a long and important pre-colonial history in the region, would allow us to develop a better understanding of what the transition to colonial rule actually meant for labour relations. This could be a crucial contribution to a field that bristles with assumptions about the impact of colonial capitalism on South Asian labour relations.³¹

Another potentially important line of enquiry is to explore to what extent workers' experiences differed between Indian-owned and foreign-owned industrial enterprises.³² Such research would, significantly, also allow labour historians to push their analyses of industrial relations beyond the metropolis of Calcutta, not only to other cities and towns but also to industries – such as indigo or brick-making – that were located in rural areas because of the perishable or mineral nature of their raw materials or, possibly, because of special characteristics of their labour supply.

Agriculture: proletarianization or pauperization?

In 150 years of large-scale capitalist production, industrial labour in South Asia did not bear out the assumption that, under capitalism, labour is proletarianized. Labour historians have tried to explain this by pointing to cultural and social specificities, and to the colonial nature of capitalism up

30. For references to the literature on labour in the silk industry, see Willem van Schendel, *Reviving a Rural Industry: Silk Producers and Officials in India and Bangladesh, 1880s to 1980s* (Dhaka, 1995). For labour in the modern export-oriented garments industry of Bangladesh, see Hameeda Hossain *et al.*, *No Better Option? Industrial Women Workers in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1990); Pratima Paul-Majumdar and Salma Choudhuri, *The Conditions of Garments Workers in Bangladesh: An Appraisal* (Dhaka, 1991); Dina M. Siddiqi, "Gender and Labor in Bangladeshi Factories" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1996); Petra Dannecker, *Conformity or Resistance? Women Workers in the Garment Factories in Bangladesh* (Bielefeld, 1999); Dina M. Siddiqi, "Miracle Worker or Womanmachine? Tracking (Trans)national Realities in Bangladeshi Factories", *Economic and Political Weekly* (27 May 2000), L-11-L-17; Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (London [etc.], 2000); Naila Kabeer and Simeen Mahmud, "Globalization, Gender and Poverty: Bangladeshi Women Workers in Export and Local Markets", *Journal of International Development*, 16 (2004), pp. 93-109.

31. To give but one example, Amiya Kumar Bagchi asserts that colonial rule resulted in "the retardation of the forces of production by inhibiting technical change, routinising coercive and brutalising (and not just dehumanising) labour process, and sustaining a social process that requires the regular waste of a considerable amount of human and non-human resources"; Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "Colonialism and the Nature of Capitalist Enterprise in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 July 1988, PE 38.

32. See Bhattacharyya, *Swadeshi Enterprise in Bengal*.

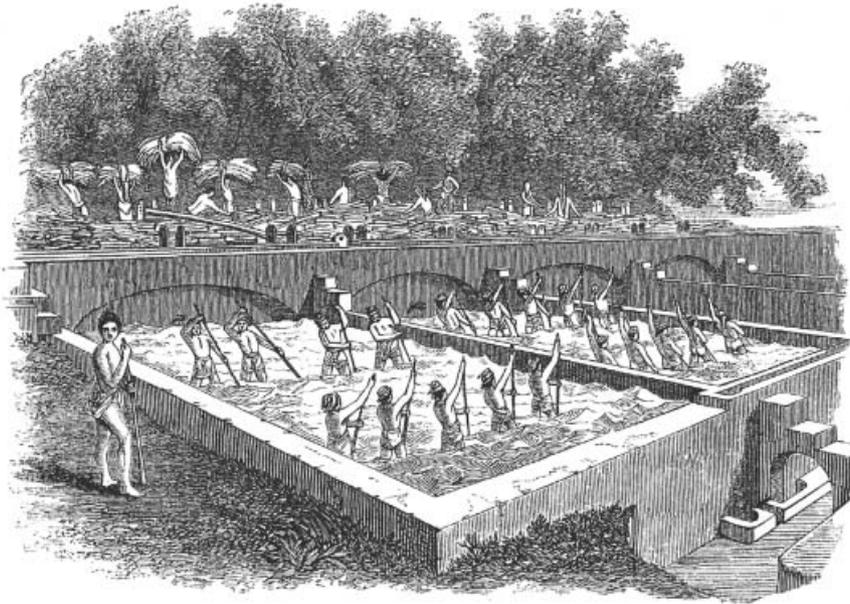


Figure 2. Indigo factory, 1850s.

From Rural Life in Bengal Illustrative of Anglo-Indian Suburban Life; More Particularly in Connection with the Planter and Peasantry, the Varied Produce of the Soil and Seasons; With Copious Details of the Culture and Manufacture of Indigo – Letters from an Artist in India to His Sisters in England (London, 1860).

to 1947. Similarly, the assumption that capitalism in agriculture would produce a separation of capital and labour has failed to materialize. Although agriculture in most of Bengal and north-east India has been considerably market-oriented and monetized for centuries, agricultural production has shown no signs of falling into step with the model of capitalist entrepreneurs in possession of the means of production – land, production technology, knowledge, capital – and landless agricultural labourers freely offering their labour.

This is not to say that wage-labour has not developed in the region's agriculture. It existed before colonial rule commenced and it has expanded enormously in the colonial and post-colonial periods. But students of agricultural labour have continually warned against the tendency to read wage-labour as shorthand for proletarianization. They have made a distinction between that process, emerging from the workings of capitalism, and pauperization, the dispossession of producers through interlinked processes of impoverishment, inheritance and population growth.³³

33. Other terms for this process in the literature on Bengal are “depeasantisation” and “non-proletarian immiserisation”.

Although wage-labour has been an important element in agricultural production, labour historians of Bengal and north-east India have not concerned themselves much with the history of agricultural labour. Remarkably little historical research is available, with the exception of research on the tea plantations of Assam and north Bengal.³⁴ Beyond these enclaves of colonial capitalist agriculture, our picture of agricultural labour remains dim and patchy. And yet, it appears that the transformations that took place are of wider conceptual relevance. From the late eighteenth century, various state attempts were afoot to foster capitalist agriculture, by creating a class of landlords and by introducing a range of commercial crops. Despite the fact that agriculture became more market-oriented, unambiguously capitalist relations of agricultural production did not materialize. By the early nineteenth century very few wage labourers could be found in the rural parts of the region, a situation that contrasted with that in many other parts of South Asia. This scarcity of local wage labour was an important reason to use migrant wage labourers for the emerging tea and jute industries.

From the third quarter of the nineteenth century, however, observers noticed a clear shift. While the official image of Bengal as a land without rural wage-labourers lingered on, the dominant system of autonomous peasant production based on family labour began to weaken. Significantly, this shift did not take the form of either wage-labour or sharecropping, but of both at the same time. In 1888 the first survey of the “lower classes” in Bengal demonstrated that 26 per cent of the rural households now had wage-labour as their sole or principal source of income, and another 13 per cent depended on wage-labour as a subsidiary source of income.³⁵ A

34. Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826–1947* (Delhi, 1977); Sharit Kumar Bhowmik, *Class Formation in the Plantation System* (New Delhi, 1981); Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India*; Ranajit Das Gupta, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869–1947* (Delhi [etc.], 1992); Samita Sen, “Questions of Consent: Women’s Recruitment for Assam Tea Gardens, 1859–1900”, *Studies in History*, 18 n.s. (2002), pp. 231–260.

35. This *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1888), also known as the Dufferin Report, is available in the British Library (IOR L/E/7/185). Its main conclusions on labour have been summarized as follows: “The rural labour market was fragmented and male labour fetched a higher wage than that of women and children. Wage rates for day-labour diminished as one travelled westwards. The investigators tended to relate this fact to the general level of prosperity which also declined towards the west. No correlation with differences in population density or with the proportion of labourers to the total local population was demonstrated, and no mention was made of any form of collective bargaining by rural labourers. However, there was a clear correlation of wage levels with the proportion of landlessness and thus of full-time dependence on labour. Contrary to common belief, the relation between labour dependence and landlessness was not straightforward. Not all labourers were landless; many owned some land and a few even a considerable quantity. Households generally took to wage labour for survival but some households used (seasonal) labour as a way of augmenting an already adequate income”; Willem van Schendel and Aminul Haque Faraizi,

century later, the majority (at least 55 per cent) of rural people in Bengal had become wage-dependent and, because of population increase between 1880 and 1980, their numbers had grown from 13 to 60 million.³⁶

But outright expropriation of peasant producers was not the major trend. On the contrary, the dominant change that affected rural Bengal in this period was the rapid growth of sharecropping, mainly, it appears, by means of the transformation of fixed cash rents into share arrangements and by the enforcement of share contracts on newly cultivated lands. Furthermore, most wage-labouring households retained small plots of land. Thus rural proletarianization remained restricted, and surplus extraction through other means (notably credit, crop-sharing, and land mortgage) flourished.³⁷ Researchers have resisted the tendency to think of these arrangements as representing classes of landlords, peasants, sharecroppers, and wage labourers, or to apply designations such as “semi-feudal” to them, because such hasty labels are unhelpful in framing a system of exceptional fluidity and complexity. In Bengal agriculture, even smallholding households would typically own numerous minuscule and dispersed fragments of land, a result of ecological conditions and a partible system of inheritance. Such households often gave their distant plots to sharecroppers but they might well cultivate other plots as sharecroppers themselves. They were also likely to hire in wage labourers and at the same time hire themselves out for wages to others as well.³⁸

Such dynamic and persistently finely graded labour relations in a largely market-oriented system of agricultural production form an exciting field for labour historians. Fortunately, they can benefit from a body of sophisticated studies of agricultural labour relations that deal with many of the conceptual issues to be understood in a longer time perspective. These

Rural Labourers in Bengal, 1880 to 1980 (Rotterdam, 1984), p. 21, cf. p. 9. For a summary, see Willem van Schendel, “Economy of the Working Classes”, in Sirajul Islam, *History of Bangladesh, 1704–1971* (Dhaka, 1992), pp. ii, 542–599. For an introduction to the literature on agricultural labourers in other parts of South Asia, see Bhattacharya, *Labouring Histories*.

36. Van Schendel and Faraizi, *Rural Labourers*, p. 46.

37. The relative importance of appropriation by means of sharecropping as against wage labour in colonial and postcolonial Bengal remains an unexplored area. It is clear that there have been considerable local differences as well as fluctuations over time. For example, in 1939 sharecroppers outnumbered wage labourers in some districts of north and central Bengal but, on the whole, wage labourers were far more numerous than sharecroppers, who cultivated 21 per cent of the cultivable land; Government of Bengal, *Report of the Land Revenue Commission Bengal* (Alipore, 1940), vol. 2, pp. 117–119 (the “Floud Report”). Cf. Van Schendel and Faraizi, *Rural Labourers*, p. 108. For further references to the historical literature, see Willem van Schendel, *Three Deltas: Accumulation and Poverty in Rural Burma, Bengal and South India* (Delhi [etc.], 1991).

38. For example, in three villages in different parts of Bangladesh in the 1970s, about 15 per cent of the households were found to be engaged in complex combinations of sharecropping and mortgaging land in and out simultaneously; Willem van Schendel, *Peasant Mobility: The Odds of Life in Rural Bangladesh* (Assen/Delhi, 1981/1982), pp. 300, 309, 318.



Figure 3. Agricultural labourers, Bangladesh, 2003.
Photograph by the author

studies by economists, anthropologists, and development scholars are based on careful surveys, mainly in a small corner of the region (West Bengal). From the work of Ashok Rudra and his collaborators in the 1970s to that of Ben Rogaly and his collaborators in recent years, a baffling complexity of multiple and coexisting contractual forms has gradually come to light.³⁹

Criticizing “abstract models” for ignoring the agency of rural workers and the ways in which labour markets are socially as well as economically

39. For example, Ashok Rudra and Madan Mohan Mukhopadhyaya, “Hiring of Labour by Poor Peasants”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 January 1976, pp. 33–36; Ben Rogaly, “Embedded Markets: Hired Labour Arrangements in West Bengal”, *Oxford Development Studies*, 15 (1997), pp. 209–223; Molly Chattopadhyay, “Waged Labour Arrangements in a West Bengal Village”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 February 2001, pp. 569–575; Ben Rogaly and Abdur Rafique, “Struggling to Save Cash: Seasonal Migration and Vulnerability in West Bengal, India”, *Development and Change*, 34 (2003), pp. 659–681; Ben Rogaly and Daniel Coppard, “‘They Used to Go To Eat, Now They Go To Earn’: The Changing Meanings of Seasonal Migration from Puruliya District in West Bengal, India”, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3 (2003), pp. 395–433. On agricultural labourers and the labour *sardar* system in Bangladesh, see Geoffrey D. Wood, *Bangladesh: Whose Ideas, Whose Interests?* (Dhaka, 1994), pp. 259–289. On labour brokers in urban markets, see Aftab E.A. Opel, “The Social Content of Labour Markets in Dhaka Slums”, *Journal of International Development*, 12 (2000), pp. 735–750.

embedded, recent contributions pay special attention to the decisions that rural workers make. One of the conceptual challenges thrown up is the rejection of notions of a labour market segmented into “casual” and “permanent” contracts.⁴⁰ Another raises questions about the very categories of “migrant” and “person who stays put” because decisions to migrate involve entire households and their “stretched lifeworlds”: “for some, migration, and the earnings that accrue from it, form part of a struggle not to have to migrate.”⁴¹ These studies also demonstrate the possibilities for labour historians to make effective use of alternative methodologies to study labour in South Asia, especially the practices bracketed under the term oral history.⁴²

Gender and stretched lifeworlds

According to labour historians, a gender shift occurred within labouring households in the region after the middle of the nineteenth century. Women and children took on more unpaid “family” labour and less wage-labour, and men moved in the opposite direction. At the same time, men dominated in the more capital-intensive forms of labour and women’s activities became more labour-intensive, low-status, and poorly rewarded.⁴³ This gender division of labour varied markedly between social groups, between economic activities, between periods, and geographically.⁴⁴ For example, in rice cultivation in western Bengal, men ploughed and sowed and women transplanted and weeded. In eastern Bengal, however, women did not work the fields but concentrated on crop-processing. Non-Bengali groups in Bengal (such as Santals and Oraons) had another division of labour between the sexes and shifting cultivators in north-east India had yet another. In fact, among groups

40. Rogaly, “Embedded Markets”.

41. Ben Rogaly, “Who Goes? Who Stays Back? Seasonal Migration and Staying Put Among Rural Manual Workers in Eastern India”, *Journal of International Development*, 15 (2003), pp. 623–632, 631. Cf. *idem et al.*, “Seasonal Migration, Social Change and Migrants’ Rights: Lessons from West Bengal”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (2001), pp. 4547–4559; *idem et al.*, “Seasonal Migration and Illfare/Welfare in Eastern India”, *Journal of Development Studies*, 38:4 (2002), pp. 89–114. For a similar argument regarding the stretched lifeworlds of households engaged in both industrial labour in colonial Calcutta and agricultural production rural areas, see Sen, “Beyond the ‘Working Class’”.

42. This point is also made by De Haan who argues that oral history has been neglected by Bengal’s labour historians: “The step that was taken in Britain after the seminal work of E.P. Thompson – projects to document local histories, for example in Dundee, including the workers’ voices – has not been made in Bengal”; De Haan, “Towards a ‘Total History’”, pp. 133–134.

43. Banerjee, “Working Women”; Sen, “Gendered Exclusion”, pp. 66–67.

44. On women in the labour force in Bangladesh, see Salma Khan, *The Fifty Percent: Women in Development and Policy in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1988).

practising shifting cultivation, there were numerous variations in the way they divided agricultural labour between men and women. And whereas the urban industrial workforce became increasingly male, labour in the tea industry feminized.⁴⁵

If agriculture threw up a variety of gender roles, so did other important economic activities: fishery, animal husbandry, trade, cottage industries, and, from the mid-nineteenth century, factory labour. Labour historians have begun to explore these gender roles, the ideologies of kinship and family supporting them, their transformations over time, and how they were interconnected.⁴⁶ Clearly, however, there is still a long way to go. Progress has been made in linking the gendering of jute factory and tea plantation labour with the rural systems on which these industries depended for their labour supply. These studies indicate that the peculiarities of the industrial working class in Bengal were predicated upon the structural adaptability of rural families, factory managers' preference for a flexible labour force, the emergence of a male-provider ideology and a secular impoverishment of rural producers. It is here that connections with the literature on the "stretched lifeworlds" of migrant labourers, mentioned above, could be especially helpful: those lifeworlds, described for contemporary migrants, clearly have a long history. Speaking of the colonial period, Sen points out that:

[...] the typical working-class family was spatially fragmented and was as crucially dependent on the unpaid (or poorly paid) labour of women and children in the rural economy as on men's industrial wages [...] women operated at a remove from the emerging "modern" sectors and the urban labour market which helped entrench the notion of the male provider.⁴⁷

These findings may shift the practice of labour history away from a fascination with the sheer power of capital to transform societies and recreate them in its own image, as well as with state interventions such as taxation and legislation to facilitate this. The power of kinship and family ideologies in deploying the labour of household members, parcelling out entitlements and shaping household strategies needs to be taken more seriously. This requires us to focus on the agency of workers and the transformative role of their living strategies, cumulating over generations.⁴⁸ If stretched lifeworlds were the outcome, then these lifeworlds

45. Sen, "Questions of Consent".

46. *Idem*, "Gendered Exclusion".

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 86. Cf. *idem*, "Beyond the 'Working Class'."

48. These strategies include long-term ones, such as fertility strategies, heirship, and the manipulation of household composition. See Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain* (Cambridge, 1976); Van Schendel, *Peasant Mobility*.

were stretched by workers themselves as much as by the contexts in which they had to operate. This point can be driven home only if we learn more about workers' decision making and about struggles within households regarding the gendered deployment of family labour.⁴⁹

Labour and rice: a special case?

The region's agriculture holds other attractions for labour historians as well. Among them is the possibility of a crop-specific explanation of the historical trajectories of labour relations in Asian societies. Not really pursued by any scholar of the region so far, this eco-technological explanation links social structure to the botanical properties of the rice plant. Writing about Asian agriculture, Clifford Geertz and Francesca Bray have, in different ways, pointed to these features of rice as a crop: much higher yield-to-seed ratios than wheat, barley, maize, or rye, and a short cropping season that does not exhaust the soil and thus allows two or three crops a year from the same field. These features imply that wet-rice cultivation can always be intensified by applying more labour.⁵⁰

In such systems, technological changes that absorb labour and reduce agricultural unemployment are preferable to those that increase output at the cost of reducing the labour force.⁵¹ Geertz and Bray argue that, historically, wet-rice cultivation has not been subject to economies of scale, nor has it responded positively to the centralization of management or the introduction of machinery. On the contrary, rice producers selected innovations that favoured both land productivity and labour demands. Unlike the European pattern, "skill-oriented technologies" proved more effective than "mechanical technologies", and the historical trend was not towards larger and more efficient, but towards smaller and more efficient units of production. In this way, "where the plantation sector becomes addicted to capital, the peasant sector becomes addicted to labor – the more they use, the more they need".⁵²

Of course, we may question the extent to which the ecological and technological specificities of wet-rice cultivation actually did put

49. Greenough's study of the collapse of employment and the abandonment of family "dependents" during the great Bengal Famine of 1943 provides perspectives on household living strategies in extremis. Although it is true that acute starvation forces extraordinary decisions, the crisis exposed intra-household power relations that operate to deploy labour in less desperate times; Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–44* (New York [etc.], 1982), pp. 183–236.

50. Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley, CA, 1963); Francesca Bray, *The Rice Economies: Technology and Development in Asian Societies* (Oxford, 1986).

51. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

52. Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, p. 101.



Figure 4. Cigarette (*biri*) maker, West Bengal, India, 2005.

Photograph by the author

constraints upon agrarian capitalism in rice economies.⁵³ Still, it is clear that the enormous tenacity of the family farm in rice production under both capitalism and state socialism in Asia provides labour historians with an important problematic that concerns not only agricultural labour but

53. For a critique of Bray, see Willem van Schendel, “Rural Transformation in Asia: Models and the Interpretation of Local Change”, in Jan Breman and Sudipto Mundle (eds), *Rural Transformation in Asia* (Delhi [etc.], 1991), pp. 281–309.

also its links with industrial labour, as discussed above.⁵⁴ Are we to analyse this persistence in Prakashian terms, as a history of capital in disguise? Was it a form that the capital-labour relationship was compelled to assume in the process of its universalisation in rice-growing societies? If so, we must include the history of peasant production into the account of free labour and we must discard the oppositional categories of peasant and labourer.

The evolving labour systems of shifting cultivation

The cultivation of rice may be of exceptional importance in the regional economy but there are several other forms of agrarian production that deserve more attention from labour historians as well. In about half of the region, particularly the north and east, wet rice cannot be cultivated. Here steep hills, mediocre soil quality, and extremes in rainfall do not allow even for the rice terraces of Java. Instead, agriculture takes the form of shifting cultivation, locally known as *jhum*.⁵⁵ Nothing could perhaps be further from the classic concerns of labour historians than this system of

54. This tenacity was demonstrated by the emergence of a prawn export industry in coastal Bangladesh from the 1970s. Here, according to Ito, “institutional forms traditionally associated with the rice economy have been carried over into the new process of prawn farming”. Despite predictions that “prawn-lords” would appropriate large areas of land, this did not happen. After an initial spurt in land sales, entrepreneurs/absentee landowners were gradually pushed out, either giving up completely or deciding to lease out their properties. Small landholders, combining family labour with hired wage labour, became important beneficiaries of the new production regime, and even landless households leased in plots in order to breed prawns. Sanae Ito, “From Rice to Prawns: Economic Transformation and Agrarian Structure in Rural Bangladesh”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 29 (2002), pp. 47–70.

55. Shifting cultivation is a term that refers to a diversity of agricultural systems. Another term for the *jhum* systems is *taungya* (Burmese: hill agriculture). Recent studies of these systems in north-east India and Bangladesh have been inspired almost exclusively by socio-ecological concerns, especially social forestry, resource management technology, and carrying capacity. These studies usually provide very little information about labour relations, often treating it as having no exchange value. Even basics such as labour inputs are either vaguely referred to as ruled by traditional arrangements or are pronounced difficult to measure. For introductions to *jhum*, see. P.S. Ramakrishnan, *Shifting Agriculture and Sustainable Development: An Interdisciplinary Study from North-Eastern India* (Paris [etc.], 1993); Raymond L. Bryant, “Shifting the Cultivator: The Politics of Teak Regeneration in Colonial Burma”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 28 (1994), pp. 225–250; Daman Singh, *The Last Frontier: People and Forests in Mizoram* (New Delhi, 1996); Golam Rasul *et al.*, “Determinants of Land-Use Changes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh”, *Applied Geography*, 24 (2004), pp. 217–240. One study that does concern itself with labour, and shows shifting cultivation (in the Orissa hills) to be more labour-intensive than wetland cultivation, while giving comparable returns to labour, is Smita Mishra Panda, “Towards Sustainable Natural Resource Management of Tribal Communities: Findings from a Study of Swidden and Wetland Cultivation in Remote Hill Regions of Eastern India”, *Environmental Management*, 23 (1999), pp. 205–216. See also *Chittagong Hill Tracts Region Development Plan, Final Report No. 10: Life Histories and Livelihoods in CHT* (Rangamati, 2001).



Figure 5. Shifting cultivation, Bangladesh, 1957.
 Photograph by Lorenz G. Löffler

agriculture in which wage-labour does not normally play a role and cooperative labour systems based on rules of mutual assistance dominate.⁵⁶

From the earliest colonial writings, *jhum* cultivation has been represented as “primitive” and on its way to the dunghill of history.⁵⁷ State policies in colonial and post-colonial times generally misrepresented it as static and unchanging, and they have striven to replace it by more “advanced” plough cultivation, usually with little effect. Such evolutionist biases have placed *jhum* cultivation in opposition to capitalist production, suggesting that its interest is largely antiquarian or anthropological. It is no surprise, then, that labour history, a field that itself is suffused with

56. For a description of such cooperative labour systems in shifting cultivation in another part of the humid tropics, see Tereza Ximenez, “Division of Labor and Resource Management in Eastern Pará, Brazil”, *Agriculture and Human Values*, 18 (2001), pp. 49–56.

57. Kaushik Ghosh shows how “primitivism” was a term used not just to classify shifting cultivation but also to classify shifting cultivators, and how it became an important element in structuring the market for plantation labour. What remains to be explained, however, is why “hunting the primitive for the plantations of colonial civilization” was well developed in the Chhota Nagpur hills on the western borders of our region but not in the much larger eastern areas of Assam, Tripura, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Kaushik Ghosh, “A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India”, in Gautam Bhadra *et al.* (eds), *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, [etc.], 1999), pp. 8–48.

evolutionist assumptions, has given it no attention. And yet, if we are to follow Prakash's suggestion that the history of labour unfreedom is the history of capital in disguise, the field broadens and the study of the labour process in *jhum* cultivation takes on more urgency.⁵⁸

How did this system survive, develop, transform and become market-oriented, without a separation of capital and labour? Which links did develop between kin-determined labour relations in *jhum* production and capitalist forms of production? How and why, for example, did *jhuming* communities free labour to work in far-away plantations, factories, and road construction?⁵⁹ And why did generations of experience with capitalist labour relations have so little effect on labour arrangements in shifting cultivation? In other words, it is the very persistence and adaptation of these presumably "primitive" forms of production today that make them so interesting for historians of labour. To some extent, such studies can benefit from earlier theoretical work, especially in African history, that attempted to capture similar questions in terms of the "articulation" of modes of production.

New coercions: labour trafficking

Perhaps the most pressing task for historians of labour in Bengal and north-east India is to analyse the historical processes that have given rise to the massive labour migrations that are currently taking place in the region. Predicated upon the movement of cultivators from the Bengal delta to surrounding areas (notably Assam, Tripura, and Arakan) in the nineteenth century, the streams of Bengalis in search of work and land beyond Bengal itself have never stopped growing. More than anything else, it is this migration that makes it essential to study the region of Bengal and north-east India as a unit.

The administrative separation into two states in 1947 has complicated the processes of migration because, first, it led to two additional streams of people fleeing from one part of the region to the other and, second, it turned labour migration into an international affair. Today, most migrants are Bangladeshi who end up in West Bengal (India) and north-east India, although the Bangladeshi diaspora has now become worldwide. The

58. *Jhuming* communities also knew forms of labour bondage that historians have largely ignored. In colonial reports these forms, usually equated with slavery, were said to emerge from three mechanisms: capture in war, sanctuary seeking, and debt bondage. Whereas slavery was abolished by law in the lowlands in 1843, hill slavery was not outlawed till the 1920s. On hill slavery, see e.g. T.H. Lewin, *Wild Races of the Eastern Frontier of India* (Delhi, 1984 [1870]; N.E. Parry, *The Lakhers* (Calcutta, 1976 [1932]), pp. 223–228.

59. For an example of shifting cultivators from the Orissa hills migrating long-distance to build roads in Arunachal Pradesh, see Mishra Panda, "Towards Sustainable Natural Resource Management".

Indian government claims that some 20 million undocumented Bangladeshis are living in India today. The arrival of so many migrants has led to a host of political repercussions in India: anti-Bangladeshi pogroms, forcible deportations to Bangladesh, the building up of vote banks, and so on. Many economic repercussions have also been noted: low real wages in areas with many immigrants, the existence of enterprises in India that can be run only on the basis of undocumented Bangladeshi labour, and particular labour market niches (brick-making, construction, weaving, cigarette-factory work, domestic service, sex work, rag-picking, rickshaw-pulling) being taken over by immigrants.

Very little is actually known about the identities of the migrants and their motives for leaving Bangladesh, their migration strategies, the mechanisms that allow them to cross the border and find work, their further careers, and their return migration. As far as organizations are concerned, we get hints of Indian-run agencies recruiting labourers in Bangladesh to work in brickfields, in factories, and on public works in India; of Bangladeshi brokers helping migrants across the border; of cross-border kin networks facilitating migration and finding employment; and of Bangladeshi migrants striking out on their own and “self-smuggling” themselves across the border.⁶⁰

One of the core conceptual issues here is the agency of labour migrants. In a general discussion of human smuggling, Kyle and Dale distinguish two ideal-types.⁶¹ A *migrant-exporting industry* is driven by migrant demand. It provides a package migration service out of a sending region, most of the organizational activity is at the sending side, and the contract is terminated once the migrant has arrived at the destination. A *slave-importing operation*, on the other hand, is set up to import weak labour for ongoing enterprises. It is usually carried out by relatively stable (criminal or semi-legitimate) organizations in the destination country and nearly always depends on corruption of state officials in all countries involved. In most cases, victims of such operations – who tend to come from weaker social backgrounds than the customers of migrant-exporting schemes – are duped into believing that they are embarking in a migrant exporting scheme.

In order to create this false image, seemingly well-to-do women often act as initial contact persons in slave-importing schemes.⁶² The victims’

60. For details, see Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London, 2005).

61. David Kyle and John Dale, “Smuggling the State Back In: Agents of Human Smuggling Reconsidered”, in *idem* (eds), *Global Human Smuggling Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore, MD [etc.], 2001), pp. 29–57.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 34. See Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, for some examples of the role of women in procuring Bangladeshi workers for the Indian sex industry. In a similar way, women had been used to lure female labour to the tea plantations in colonial times. On this, and a



Figure 6. Brickfield, West Bengal, India, 2004.

Photograph by the author

own complicity is then used to facilitate making them pay off a rolling debt through coerced labour.

Contrary to the conventions of enforcement agencies and news reporting, which tend to identify “the bad guys” and their victims, much migrant smuggling or trafficking operates in an ambiguous area that is neither purely voluntary nor involuntary from the perspective of the migrant. Many contemporary slaves know that they will be smuggled illegally across borders to work, and they sometimes know the nature of the work – what they often do not know is the terms of the “contract”.⁶³

Both men and women, children and adults, are smuggled across the Bangladesh-India border but the trafficking of women has attracted most attention. In many cases it is only after the women reach their final destination that they realise they have been tricked: often they are sold to sweatshops or brothels. Middle-men play the same trick on boys and men

discussion of “kidnapping” of tea labourers, See Sen, “Questions of Consent”.

63. David Kyle and Rey Koslowski, “Introduction”, in *idem* (eds) *Global Human Smuggling*, p. 9.

when they offer them jobs in faraway factories, only to sell them as bonded labourers to rural landlords or sweatshop owners.⁶⁴

The prospect of employment or marriage is commonly used to entice women to cross the border.⁶⁵ In the case of many women and children, however, it is not consent or enticement but force or sale that makes them cross the border. Kidnapping is common, especially of young children, even babies, but some parents sell their children. In this way, about 15,000 children are said to cross the border from Bangladesh to India every year, a practice that has been going on for a long time. Boys aged between 2 and 12 are in high demand in the Gulf states as jockeys in camel races.⁶⁶ Young girls and boys are sought after as domestics,⁶⁷ and as sex workers.⁶⁸ Very young girls are said to “command a high price as they are likely to be free from HIV/AIDS”, and,

[...] in West Bengal, children used as jockeys in camel races are the most expensive, followed by those used for prostitution, while those pushed into begging or used as labourers cost the least. In Bangladesh, the prices are said to be very low, with the average ranging between Rs 1,000 and Rs 5,000.⁶⁹

Exploring the history of coerced migration in Bengal and northeast India is a pressing task for labour historians for three reasons: it is a

64. Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (New Delhi [etc.], 1999); Van Schendel, *Bengal Borderland*.

65. John Frederick and Thomas L. Kelly (eds), *Fallen Angels: The Sex Workers of South Asia* (New Delhi, 2000), pp. 67–68, 74.

66. For a documentary about the working conditions of these boys, see *United Arab Emirates: Camel Jockeys*, by Geoff Thompson (in the series *Foreign Correspondent*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2003).

67. Historical studies of domestic service in colonial Bengal and north-east India are still rare. See Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (Delhi [etc.], 1999); Tanika Sarkar, “Bondage in the Colonial Context”, in Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (eds), *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India* (Madras, 1985), pp. 97–126; Raka Ray, “Masculinity, Femininity, and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Twentieth Century”, *Feminist Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 691–718; Swapna M. Banerjee, “Down Memory Lane: Representations of Domestic Workers in Middle Class Personal Narratives of Colonial Bengal”, *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2004), pp. 681–708. Cf. *Employment of Domestic Servants in Dacca City* (Dacca, 1963); Thérèse Blanchet, *Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhoods* (Dhaka, 1996), pp. 97–121. For an impressive evocation of the labour conditions of child domestic servants in middle-class Calcutta, see Mrinal Sen’s film, *Kharij (The Case Is Closed)*, 1982.

68. According to a United Nations report, around 300,000 Bangladeshi women and children were sold to Indian brothels in the mid-1990s; *The Daily Star*, 15 December 1998. The market for sex workers is a highly complex one: Bangladeshi women ended up in the sex industry in India and Pakistan, but at the same time Indian sex workers were active in Bangladeshi border towns. Boys from the borderland were also known to end up in the sex industry in India. “Rajshahi Most Vulnerable to AIDS Onslaught”, *The Independent*, 19 June 2002; “Rescue Blows Lid Off Boy Trafficking”, *The Telegraph*, 22 August 2003.

69. i.e. between about US\$25 and US\$125. “27,000 Bangladeshis Trapped in Indian Brothels”, *Dawn*, 8 April 1998; Sanghamitra Chakraborty, “Repatriated Bangla Children May Never See Their Real Families Again”, *Times of India*, 19 April 1998.

neglected aspect of this region's social transformation that has huge contemporary political significance; it concerns important categories of labour that have been disregarded in the region's labour historiography (women, children, domestic service, sex work, "illegal" labour⁷⁰); and it provides a link with the debate on forms of migrant labour control in capitalist enterprise (e.g. the *sardar* system) that have been analysed for colonial jute factories and tea plantations. Are there historical continuities between these forms of migration?

Cultures and meanings of labour

As labour historians are re-examining the universalist claims of theoretical constructs that have long underpinned their efforts, the study of cultures of labour has proved to be particularly helpful. In Bengal and north-east India, this has meant taking labour beyond the gate of the jute factory and into the communities that provided factory labour; it meant interpreting

70. The importance of highlighting the gendered nature of labour has been stressed continually in recent times. See e.g. Nirmala Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi, 1989), pp. 269–301; Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Case of the Jute Industry, 1890–1940* (Cambridge, 1999); *idem*, "Beyond the 'Working Class'"; *idem*, "Gendered Exclusion"; *idem*, "Questions of Consent"; Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery*; Banerjee, "Down Memory Lane". Cf. Mead Cain, S.R. Khanam, and S. Nahar, "Class, Patriarchy and Women's Work in Bangladesh", *Population and Development Review*, 5 (1979), pp. 405–438.

The history of child labour has not been taken up, although there are studies by anthropologists and others to build on, e.g. Mead T. Cain, "The Economic Activities of Children in a Village in Bangladesh", *Population and Development Review*, 3 (1977), pp. 201–277; Mead Cain and A.B.M. Khorshed Alam Mozumder, "Labor Market Structure, Child Employment, and Reproductive Behavior in Rural South Asia", in Gerry Rogers and Guy Standing (eds), *Child Work, Poverty and Underdevelopment* (Geneva, 1981), pp. 245–287; Alia Ahmed and M.A. Quasem, *Child Labour in Bangladesh* (Dhaka/Lund, 1991); Blanchet, *Lost Innocence*, pp. 97–143; Arup Maharatna, "Children's Work Activities, Surplus Labour and Fertility: Case Study of Six Villages in Birbhum", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 February 1997, pp. 363–369; Emily Delap, "Child Housework in Urban Bangladesh: An Exploration of Intra-Household Labour Deployment", *Journal of International Development*, 12 (2000), pp. 723–734; Sarah C. White, "From the Politics of Poverty to the Politics of Identity? Child Rights and Working Children in Bangladesh", *Journal of International Development*, 14 (2002), pp. 725–735.

The history of prostitution is still in its initial stages: Zarina Rahman Khan and Helaluddin Khan Arefeen, *Potita Nari: A Study of Prostitution in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1989); Zarina Rahman Khan and H.K. Arefeen, *The Situation of Child Prostitutes in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1990); Kamal Siddiqui et al., *Social Formation in Dhaka City* (Dhaka, 1990), pp. 277–345; Blanchet, *Lost Innocence*, pp. 123–143; Carolyn Sleightholme and Indrani Sinha, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta* (Calcutta [etc.], 1996–1997); Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Calcutta, 1998).

For the history of "illegal" (undocumented, unauthorized) labour, see references in Van Schendel, *Bengal Borderland*.

labour practices as embedded in a broader urban culture in Calcutta. Although some have posited that jute labourers were driven by “vertical” pre-capitalist community consciousness rather than by “horizontal” capitalist class-consciousness, others have criticized this juxtaposition.⁷¹ Research on workers’ culture continues to explore to what extent a “working-class” experience was a “relatively insignificant dimension in the world experienced by the migrant workers in Bengal’s industries”.⁷²

In this endeavour it is essential to avoid a dichotomous approach in which urban and rural are used as categories of opposition. If we take the idea of stretched lifeworlds seriously, we have to steer clear of ideas that equate urban with the more modern and class-conscious, and rural with the more traditional/pre-capitalist and community conscious. Studies of workers’ culture should themselves be stretched to embrace the rural–urban continuum rather than focusing on urban neighbourhoods alone. There was a continual two-way exchange of ideas, identities, and individuals between villages and towns. In shaping workers’ identities, rural forms of class-consciousness may have been just as important as urban forms of community consciousness.⁷³

Another way of probing more deeply into the culture of labour is to consider what labour means to those who engage in it. Such meanings are not self-evident but a matter of empirical inquiry. For starters, it would seem highly relevant to study terms relating to labour. What terms do workers use, and what are the connotations of those terms? How do these change over time? To take but one example from the largest of dozens of languages spoken in the region: the Bengali language is rich in terms for what the English language would describe as labour, work, or toil. Some of these terms are: *srom*, *kaj*, *kormo*, *karjo*, *kam*, *chakori*, *khatuni*, *porisrom*, and *mehonot*. There are many more, and much regional and historical variation. It is easy to suggest similar multiple terms for wages, day-labourer, employer, unemployment, labour-broker, factory, and so on.

When do Bengalis employ which terms for labour, and why? Are there

71. See e.g. Subho Basu’s study of strikes in Calcutta and his critique of the historiography of labour politics: “Historians have been wrongfooted by a set of assumptions based upon the notions of class consciousness. This has resulted in the search for set behavioural models among workers, and the absence of such archetypes has led them to construct alternative monolithic models like ‘community consciousness’ in explaining labour politics that deny Calcutta workers even agency to make their own history”; Subho Basu, “Strikes and ‘Communal’ Riots in Calcutta in the 1890s: Industrial Workers, Bhadrakol Nationalist Leadership and the Colonial State”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 32 (1998), pp. 949–983, 983.

72. De Haan and Sen, “‘New Lamps for Old’?”, p. 7.

73. In studying culture, we should be mindful of De Haan and Sen’s call for balance: “Doubtless, questions of ‘labour’ and, more specifically, of the industrial working classes, have to be enriched by a better understanding of culture, as well as of gender and agency. But these new concerns should include rather than displace examination of the material conditions of the working classes”; De Haan and Sen, “‘New Lamps for Old’?”, p. 2.

class, gender and generational variations in use? Which terms for labour are privileged in political or academic discourse in Bengali? If we are to develop an understanding of the cultural assumptions underlying labour relations, a socio-linguistic approach could be extremely elucidating. So far, the field of labour history has largely neglected this angle. Of course, labour history is strewn with problems regarding the translation of key concepts of labour between European languages. Did German *Arbeit*, Italian *lavoro*, Russian *trud*, English *labour*, and French *travail* really refer to the same phenomenon?

South Asian labour historians, who have access to this historiography almost exclusively through English, are well placed to examine the problem of translatability in a much wider context. First there is the level of academic and political discourse. Which vernacular terms did South Asian labour historians select to indicate “labour” or “wages” when discussing labour history in their own languages? What repercussions did these choices have for their understanding of the historical realities they were studying? Second, how did this politico-academic vocabulary relate to the vocabularies of working people? What has been the effect of these choices on the permutation of their identities? And last but not least, what were the vocabularies of working people? How can we use these to come to better interpretations of what labour meant to them and how these meanings changed over time?

It is clear that we know most about these matters regarding Calcutta’s jute labourers; however, this is only a sub-field if we think about the labour history of the entire region. Now that there is an increasing emphasis in labour history on the agency of labourers, their living strategies and their lifeworlds, we need to know how they conceptualized work. We need to know how a household head in rural Chittagong talked about labour when she decided to send her teenage son to the Karnaphuli paper factory in Chandraghona. Or how tea labourers in Assam discussed their jobs. What words did Sylheti dockworkers in Calcutta use? Or Rakhain cigar-makers in Cox’s Bazar? Did Garo maids in Shillong use the same terms as Garo maids in Mymensingh? There is a range of sources that labour historians could use to explore these questions. In addition to records and oral testimony, songs may be an important source, as suggested by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya.⁷⁴

The comparative potential of labour histories in Bengal and north-east India

To the labour historian, the region of Bengal and north-east India provides an important research site for comparative research because of the fluid

74. Bhattacharya, *The Labouring Poor*.

complexities of its labour relations, the quality and volume of its historical sources, the sophistication of studies already done, and the sheer fact that the number of its labouring poor runs into the hundreds of millions. In addition, the region is also a unique research site for comparative research because it was divided between two independent states after 1947. This partition has created a veritable laboratory in which to test theoretical notions about how state policies affect labour and how labour impinges on state formation. During the second half of the twentieth century, India and East Pakistan/Bangladesh devised divergent policies regarding wages, labour conditions, sharecropping, etc. Labour historians, unlike agricultural economists and development scholars,⁷⁵ have not yet plotted, compared, and explained the resulting trajectories.

The creation of an international border right through the region also affected the strategies of the labouring poor in many ways. Circuits of labour migration had to be adapted or fell apart – seasonal migrants from north India to East Bengal and Burma, tea labourers from central India to plantations in East Bengal, East Bengal labourers to industries, ports and mines in West Bengal, and so on.⁷⁶ Seasonal migrants either created new patterns of migration that steered clear of the international border, or, if they did cross the border, adapted to the now unauthorized character of their migration. The borderland itself became a new site of employment for boatmen, porters, sex workers, petty traders, factory workers, smugglers, and various state employees: policemen, clerks, border guards, *peons* (orderlies), and watchmen.⁷⁷

There was also much settler migration across the border and among these migrants were many small land holders, tenants, and labourers. One strategy for those with some land was to exchange it for land across the border, a strategy that allowed many poor and middling families to start their new life with some assets. Many others lost their land in the process of migrating across the border and so joined the ranks of the labouring poor.⁷⁸ In other words, the partition of Bengal and north-east India provides labour historians with an unique opportunity for studying comparatively both institutional transformations affecting labour and the agency of the labouring poor themselves.

75. James K. Boyce, *Agrarian Impasse in Bengal: Institutional Constraints to Technological Change* (Oxford, 1987); Abhijit Dasgupta, *Growth with Equity: The New Technology and Agrarian Change in Bengal* (Delhi, 1998).

76. See Van Schendel and Faraizi, *Rural Labourers*, pp. 46–57; Willem van Schendel, “Working Through Partition: Making a Living in the Bengal Borderlands”, *International Review of Social History*, 46 (2001), pp. 393–421.

77. Van Schendel, “Working Through Partition”; *idem*, *Bengal Borderland*. Cf. *idem*, “Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 61 (2002), pp. 115–147.

78. Md. Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel, “‘I Am Not A Refugee’: Rethinking Partition Migration”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 37 (2003), pp. 551–584.

THE LABOURING POOR

Labour historians of Bengal and north-east India have given short shrift to most labour relations discussed above. One explanation could be that they considered these forms of labour to be less modern and dynamic, and therefore less important for explaining the transformation of society than “the making of working classes”.⁷⁹ In this perspective, these other forms of labour could be interpreted as survivals from an earlier age that some contemporary societies had not yet shed completely.

If this is indeed the reasoning behind the research choices of so many labour historians, then their reasoning shows some parallels with that of classical evolutionist anthropologists such as E.D. Tylor, who developed the concept of “survivals” to indicate customs or institutions that had lost their function but had been carried on into a later stage of society by force of habit. Survivals were of interest because they proved the existence of earlier, more primitive stages of society. Evolutionist anthropologists were later criticized by functionalist colleagues such as Bronislaw Malinowski, who insisted that there could not be non-functioning aspects of society. In this view, the customs and institutions labelled as “survivals” need to be explained, not as past forms, but as aspects of contemporary culture.

In similar vein, labour historians who believe in a historical movement, under capitalism, from unfree labour to progressively freer labour, must present unfree labour as a marginal and increasingly peripheral survival. The historical support for this position is now highly contested. Many authors maintain that there is no necessary correlation between capitalist expansion and a decline of unfree labour; indeed, unfree labour has emerged repeatedly within capitalist industrial societies.

Rather than treating unfree labour as essentially a survival – as somehow outside of capitalism or persisting peripherally despite a capitalist context – labour historians need to study forms of non-proletarian and non-wage labour as functioning aspects of a worldwide political economy dominated by the dynamics of capitalist production. After all, it could be argued that partial rather than full proletarianization has been the hallmark of most labour in the modern world.

Gyan Prakash challenges us to accept that the current conceptual apparatus of labour history is unable to cope with these insights. As Juan

79. E.P. Thompson's study, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1970) has had an extraordinary impact on late twentieth-century labour history, not least in south Asia. As Dipesh Chakrabarty reminisced in 1998: “I remember the day Barun De gave me E.P. Thompson's book *The Making of the English Working Class* and said: ‘We have nothing like this, try and do this’”; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Culture in Working Class History: A Discussion* (Noida, 1998), p. 6. The iconic role of Thompson's book is also reflected in the title of Vinay Bahl's study of steel workers in Jamshedpur (eastern India), *The Making of the Indian Working Class: The Case of the Tata Iron and Steel Co., 1880–1946* (New Delhi [etc.], 1995).

Giusti-Cordero suggests in an analysis of the historiography of labour in the Caribbean, attempts to recombine the concepts of “peasant” and “rural proletarian” can go “no further than their own deeply dichotomous structure [...] [they] first enrich, then constrain our vision”.⁸⁰ It seems that for the moment we have only negative terms to analyse the major embodiment of labour in the modern world – terms that tell us more about what it is not than what it is: partly free, disguised wage-worker, peripheral labour, intermediate forms, semi-proletarian, and so on. As Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden demonstrate, whenever we construct schematic representations of free and unfree labour in the tradition of labour history, we end up by placing the historically most common form (partly-proletarianized labour) outside our scheme, relegated to grey zones of our own making.⁸¹

Prakash’s suggestion to understand these as the hidden history of capital and include them all within the category of free labour is one way of resolving the conundrum. It points the way to a reconstitution of the concepts and practices of labour history based on a far more informed understanding of these “grey zones” than is currently available.

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya takes another route. He does not insist on subsuming unfree labour under free labour but proposes to use the term “the labouring poor” because the historical description of the plural, fluid, and transforming forms of labour that simultaneously existed in Bengal “cannot be achieved by the categories currently in use”.⁸² He argues that if we take the perspective of the poor themselves, there is no point in privileging the industrial proletariat.

There is a commonality in cultural terms among the labouring poor cutting across the wage/non-wage labour boundary [...]. The reference point in this culture is not “wage slavery” under capital, but poverty and the life of labour in everyday experience. In the language of this culture the significance attached to poverty, indigence, destitution and hunger is far greater than to wage work and non-wage work, to proletarianness or its absence.⁸³

This approach may help push the study of labour in Bengal and north-east India in new directions. Not only does it enable labour historians to explore labour beyond the confines of the waged proletariat but it also

80. Juan A. Giusti-Cordero, “Labour, Ecology and History in a Puerto Rican Plantation Region: ‘Classic’ Rural Proletarians Revisited”, in Amin and Van der Linden (eds), *“Peripheral Labour”?*, pp. 53–82, 54.

81. Amin and Van der Linden, “Introduction”, in *idem*, *“Peripheral Labour”?*, p. 3.

82. “The labouring poor is a fuzzy concept without sharp edges at the boundaries and hence suits the fuzziness of the reality of ‘transitional’ economies where gradations shade into each other, class boundaries are porous, and individuals and families are simultaneously located in more than one of the conventional class categories (i.e. categories contraposing wage labour and non-wage labour)”; Bhattacharya, *The Labouring Poor*, p. 5. The quotation is from p. 3.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

brings to the fore the ways in which working poor people in this region themselves have conceptualized both labour and poverty. This allows a new engagement with themes brought up in the historiography on urban jute labourers (e.g. the “precapitalist, communal forms of organization and consciousness” that Dipesh Chakrabarty explored⁸⁴) by juxtaposing them to other conditions of labour as well as with insights gained from other disciplines, especially anthropology and development studies. Understanding the lifeworlds and worldviews of the labouring poor requires utilizing, but also going beyond, the archives of the colonial and post-colonial states. It is here that alternative sources of history become crucially important: poetry, stories and songs; life stories; mental maps; and the memory sites (*lieux de mémoire*) of the labouring poor.

GLOBALIZING HISTORIES OF LABOUR

In the past few years labour historians of Bengal and north-east India have reached near-consensus about the need to broaden their scope and to see the region’s labour history beyond the looking-glass of the North. The next step is to put this consensus into practice by implementing research projects that provincialize the labour historiography of Europe.

This effort is certainly not unique to Bengal and northeast India. It is being replicated by historians and social scientists all over the South who are “battling with the possibility of histories that are not constituted in terms framed by long-standing Northern discourses [or] seek to explain the exception rather than question the theory that underpins such descriptions”.⁸⁵ Such battles are part of a general stock-taking that is currently taking place in the social sciences. Prominent among the reasons for this stock-taking is the challenge thrown up by post-colonial studies. This challenge is directed against dominant social-science practices that, from their inception in early nineteenth-century Europe up to the present, have constructed and perpetuated dichotomies between the superiority of a modern, rational North and the inferiority and “otherness” of Southern peoples and cultures.⁸⁶ Post-colonial thinkers argue that any serious attempt at globalizing social science practices requires a thorough overhaul of these inherited categories.

There are lessons for labour historians here, and these are not restricted to rethinking categories such as free and unfree labour. Do labour historians study the histories of labour, or are they actually interested in studying the progress of capitalism by means of the study of free wage

84. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, p. 226.

85. Sen and Jeppie, “Editorial”, p. 1.

86. For example, Fernando Coronil, “Beyond Occidentalism: Towards Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories”, *Cultural Anthropology*, 11 (1996), pp. 51–87.

labour? There can be no doubt that the development of capitalism has been a major determinant of human life worldwide during the past few centuries. In that sense the study of labour during that period always addresses capitalism head-on, and it is essential to understand proletarianization as a most significant expression of it. But the focus on free wage labour as the embodiment of “modern” labour is clearly problematic. If this focus persists, those who argue that the history of labour is too important to be left to labour historians do have a point. In a period in which ideas about what is modern and what is not are being rethought, labour history must do so too.

In this context Marcel van der Linden refers to a choice between a “universal history of work” and a “history of globalized work”. Suggesting that the former consists of “recounting the development of contractual relationships and labor movements all over the globe as comprehensively as possible”, he chooses the latter view, which he defines as follows: “a global labor history is first and foremost the history of an important aspect of the present capitalist global economy, namely its labor aspect”. In his opinion, global labour history is a modified form of classical Marxist analysis whose research spectrum should include not only wage labour but also slavery, sharecropping, and debt peonage.⁸⁷

This manner of broadening the scope of labour history to include forms of labour that are not “free” raises a number of important questions of theory. We have seen that labour history in the classical Marxist mould assumes a basic trend in modern world history: the progressive replacement of unfree labour by free labour, or the progressive proletarianization of the world’s workers. Marxists have studied slavery, sharecropping, and debt peonage as forms of “unfree” labour, and they have understood unfree labour as either a precursor of free labour or its contemporary other. Van der Linden’s plea is to treat slavery, sharecropping, and debt peonage on a par with free labour in a new practice of global labour history. This is certainly possible, but it is much less clear how this relates to Marxist analysis, classical or modified, or how it meets the post-colonial critique. As we have seen, Prakash, Bhattacharya, and Giusti-Cordero point out that there are fundamental problems with Marxist categorizations of labour and that the required theoretical modifications are very considerable.

A moot point is why a globalized labour history should posit its Marxist credentials *a priori*. In this light, the choice that Van der Linden puts in front of us is perhaps not such a stark choice after all. A “universal history of work” need not be merely a pedestrian, theory-challenged “recounting

87. Marcel van der Linden, “The ‘Globalization’ of Labour and Working-Class History and its Consequences”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 65 (2004), pp. 136–156, 141, 142, 144.

[of] the development of contractual relationships and labor movements all over the globe as comprehensively as possible". It could just as well be a dynamic and crucial field of inquiry in which the histories and identities of working people are compared and analysed from different theoretical vantage points that attempt to see beyond the looking-glass of the North. The "history of globalized work" (histories of labour seen as studies of capitalism through its labour aspect) could then be understood as a special interest within this larger field and it, too, could be approached from various theoretical angles.

It would be a mistake to think of labour-histories-beyond-the-North as new arenas in which to fight old Northern theoretical debates. The contribution of Southern labour histories lies first and foremost in their capacity to allow, indeed compel, globally thinking labour historians to reinvent the field. The endeavour to create a globalized labour history will not be successful unless we discard the teleological biases of the older occidentalist historiography, sensitize ourselves to the cultural limitations of its main categories, undo its construction of inferior "otherness" and superior "selfhood," and challenge its universalist presumptions.

Since it is various strands of Marxism that have dominated Northern labour history, it is this theoretical tradition in particular that needs to be reconsidered in the process of constructing a globalized labour history. The urgency is evident, in view of the fact that Marxist labour historians of the South have found it so very hard to break out of their conceptual shells and to study labour beyond a narrow terrain. Many have come to realize that the core dichotomies that they start from, e.g. free/unfree labour, "first enrich, then constrain our vision". We may find that a successful globalization of labour history demands a more agnostic, open-minded approach.