Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940*

DIPESH CHAKRABARTY

I

At the heart of this essay are two rather general propositions: first, that the ruling-class documents often used for historical reconstructions of working-class conditions can be read both for what they say and for their ‘silences’; and secondly, that an attempt to understand their silences cannot stop at the purely economic explanation—though the economic is undoubtedly important—but has to push itself into the realm of working-class culture. It will also be claimed here that in arguing thus we are arguing with Marx and not against him.

The discussion in the first volume of Marx’s Capital raises the possibility of a relationship between the day-to-day running of capitalism and the production of a body of knowledge about working-class conditions. Marx in fact presents us with the elements of a possible theoretical approach to the problem. Even at the risk of appearing to digress a bit, it may be worthwhile to go over that theoretical ground once again, as the rest of this essay will examine one particular working-class history—that of the Calcutta jute mill workers between 1890 and 1940—in the light of Marx’s discussion. Perhaps it should also be emphasized that what we are borrowing here from Marx is essentially an argument. Marx used the English case to illustrate his ideas but the specifics of English history are not a

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concern of this essay. We are not reading Marx as a historian of England and this is not an exercise in comparative history.

As is well known, Marx used the documents of the English state for the wealth of detail they usually offered on the living and working conditions of the English proletariat. But Marx also noted in the process that the English state’s interest in closely monitoring the conditions of labour had an extremely useful role to play in the development of English capitalism. ‘This industrial revolution which takes place spontaneously’, wrote Marx, ‘is artificially helped on by the extension of the Factory Acts to all industries in which women, young persons and children are employed’.1 This the Acts achieved in two important ways. First, they sought to make ‘the conditions of competition’ between different factories uniform: Marx referred in his discussion of the Factory Acts to the ‘cry of the capitalists for equality in the conditions of competition, i.e. for equal restraint on all exploitation of labour’. Secondly, by regulating ‘the working day as regards its length, pauses, beginning and end’—that is, by making ‘the saving of time a necessity’—they ‘forced into existence’ more developed and complex machinery and hence, by implication, a more efficient working class.2

For the Factory Acts to secure these aims, however, the state needed to ensure that the knowledge generated by the administration of the Acts was not influenced by the narrower considerations of any particular industrialist. Individual masters, it is true, were often in ‘fanatical opposition’ to the Acts. But the very fact that Marx derived many of his details of the ‘cruelties’ of early capitalism directly from factory ‘inspectors’ reports speaks of the ‘political will’ that the English state was capable of mustering, the will that allowed it to distance itself from particular capitalists and yet serve English capitalism in general.3

Marx’s discussion clarifies some of the conditions for this success. The ‘political will’ of the English state did not fall from the skies. While Marx did see the Factory Acts as ‘that first and meagre concession wrung from capital’ by the government and the working people, he also noted that important sections of English industrialists were in fact themselves in favour of the Factory Acts, their humanistic

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1 Karl Marx, Capital, I (Moscow, n.d.), p. 474.
2 Ibid., pp. 474, 476-9, 490.
3 Ibid., pp. 480, 482-4.
impulses often spurred on by the forces of competition. Competition was the key to the demand for 'equal restraint on all exploitation of labour'. 'Messrs. Cooksley of Bristol, nail and chain, &c., manufacturers', Marx noted, 'spontaneously introduced the regulations of the Factory Act into their business' (emphasis added). The Children’s Employment Commission of the 1860s explained why: 'As the old irregular system prevails in neighbouring works, the Messrs. Cooksley are subject to the disadvantage of having their boys enticed to continue their labour elsewhere after 6 p.m.' Marx also gave the instance of one 'Mr. J. Simpson (paper box and bag maker, London)' who told the Commission that 'he would sign any petition for it [legislative interference]. . . .' Summarizing such cases, the Commission said:

It would be unjust to the larger employers that their factories should be placed under regulation, while the hours of labour in the smaller places in their own branch of business were under no legislative restriction. . . . Further, a stimulus would be given to the multiplication of the smaller places of work, which are almost invariably the least favourable to the health, comfort, education, and general improvement of people.4

Even if competition in the economy is regarded as instrumental to the autonomy of the English state, one still has to explain however why the factories, in the first place, produced the necessary documents without the state having to do much policing. Marx’s answer lies in his discussion of the industrial discipline that the capitalist system of manufacture involved. In the process of the 'disciplining' of the labour force, the interests of the individual capitalists and those of the state meshed, since, in England, the pressure towards discipline arose both from within and without the factory. If one effect of the factory legislation was to produce 'uniformity, regularity, order and economy' within 'each individual workshop',5 these were also produced internally, according to Marx, by the capitalist division of labour: 'continuity, uniformity, regularity, order . . . ' are also the words that Marx used to describe discipline.6

Discipline, in Marx’s discussion, had two components. It entailed a 'technical subordination of the workman to the uniform motion of the instruments of labour'; hence the need for training, education,

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4 Ibid., pp. 488-91.
5 Ibid., p. 503.
6 Ibid., p. 345.
etc. Secondly, it made supervision—‘the labour of overlooking’—an integral part of capitalist relations of production. The supervisor or foreman was the executor of the ‘private legislation’ of capital, the ‘factory code in which capital formulates . . . his autocracy over his workpeople’. The supervisor thus embodied the authority of capital, and documents representing factory rules and legislation—e.g. attendance registers, finebooks, timesheets—became both symbols and instruments of his authority. Supervision, so crucial to the working of capitalist authority, was thus based on documents and produced documents in turn. In Marx’s words:

The place of the slave-driver’s lash is taken by the overlooker’s book of penalties. All punishments [in capitalist production relations] naturally resolve themselves into fines and deductions from wages (emphasis added).\(^7\)

The every-day functioning of the capitalist factory, therefore, produced documents, hence knowledge, about working-class conditions. This was so because capitalist relations of production employed a system of supervision—another name for surveillance—that, in the language of Michel Foucault, ‘insidiously objectified those on whom it is applied’.\(^8\) It was thus in the nature of capitalist authority that it operated by forming ‘a body of knowledge’ about its subjects. In this it was different from, say, pre-capitalist domination which worked more by deploying ‘the ostentatious signs of sovereignty’ and could do without a knowledge of the dominated.\(^9\)

In pursuing Marx’s ideas on the relationship between industrial discipline and documentation of the conditions of workers, we thus end up with the notion of ‘authority’. Marx was quite clear that the supervisor represented the disciplinary authority of capital over labour; but ‘authority’, in Marx’s hands, was never a one-sided affair. Quite early in his discussion on capital, Marx wrote: ‘A . . . cannot be “your majesty” to B, unless at the same time majesty in B’s eyes assumes the bodily form of A . . .’.\(^10\) Or a few pages later:

Such expressions of relations in general, called by Hegel reflex-categories, form a very curious class. For instance, one man is King only because

\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 423-4.


\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Marx, op. cit., p. 51.
other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is a king.\textsuperscript{11}

A particular form of authority or a system of power, then, implies a particular cultural formation. In Marx's exposition of 'capital' as a category, it is quite evident that the figure of the worker invoked was that of a person who could be produced only by a society where the bourgeois notion of equality (before the law or the market) was ingrained in culture. Marx saw labour as a 'moment' (that is, a constituent element) of capital, and capital 'is a bourgeois production relation, a production relation of bourgeois society'.\textsuperscript{12} The labourer of Marx's assumption had internalized and enjoyed 'formal freedom', the freedom of the contract (which brought legal and market relations together), and he enjoyed this not just in abstraction but as 'the individual, real person'.\textsuperscript{13} Until this was ensured and so long as pre-capitalist, particularistic ties made up and characterized the relations of production, capital, as Marx understood it, was 'not yet capital as such'.\textsuperscript{14} This is why Marx thought that the logic of capital could be best deciphered only in a society where 'the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice'\textsuperscript{15} and hence chose the historical case of England as the one most illustrative of his argument.

Indeed, as we now know from historians of our times, the 'notion of equality before the law' was an essential ingredient of the culture with which the English working class entered and handled its

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 57, n. 1


\textsuperscript{13} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, p. 464.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 296-7. Emphasis in the original.

\textsuperscript{15} Marx, \textit{Capital}, I, p. 60. Admittedly, Marx made this statement with reference to the problem of deciphering the 'secret of the expression of value'. But then one has to remember that for Marx capital is self-expanding value and labour a moment of capital. For these and related points also see I. I. Rubin, \textit{Essays on Marx's Theory of Value} (Montreal, 1975).
experience of the Industrial Revolution. It is this working class that is present—though only as an assumption—in Marx’s discussion of the disciplinary authority of capital that the act of supervision embodies. If our exposition of Marx’s ideas is correct then it would mean that such authority was rooted as much in the factory codes that capital legislated out of its own needs as in the culture of the working class over whom the authority was exercised. The point seems important even in another respect. By assuming a particular kind of culture on the part of the worker, Marx assigns the working class a place—an active presence, in fact—in the whole process of disciplining by supervision and record-keeping. And this he does, not just for moments of protest when the working class is obviously active and shows its will, but even when it does not protest and is seemingly a passive object of documentation and knowledge.

For a historian of the jute mill workers of Calcutta, the relevance of all this is immediate. Any projected history of the conditions of this working class is soon bedevilled by the problem of paucity of sources. True, some of this scarcity of documents can be explained by the characteristics of the Bengali intelligentsia who never produced social investigators like, for instance, Henry Mayhew. Some of it may also be explained by the non-literate nature of the working class. A problem still remains. What puzzles is the relative poverty of information in the documents of the state—especially documents that needed the co-operation of capital, the factory inspectors’ reports, for instance—which compare rather badly with the apparent richness of similar English documents that Marx put to such effective use in the first volume of *Capital*.

Marx’s argument could then be used as a measure of how different capitalism in colonial Bengal was from the one described by him. There is yet another question that Marx’s argument helps us raise. The Calcutta jute mill workers, being mostly migrant peasants from Bihar and UP, did not have a culture characterized by any ingrained notion of ‘human equality’ and were thus very unlike the workers of Marx’s assumption. Their’s was largely a pre-capitalist, inegalitarian culture marked by strong primordial loyalties of community,

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language, religion, caste and kinship. Since, in Marx's argument, the question of documentation of conditions of work within a factory was linked to the problem of 'disciplinary authority', and that in turn was linked to the question of working-class culture, the cultural differences of the Calcutta working class raise a whole series of problems. Were relations of production within a Calcutta jute mill still characterized (in spite of differences in working-class culture) by the disciplinary authority that Marx described? The answer would appear to be in the negative. What then was the nature of 'supervision' in a Calcutta jute mill? Did it behave like a huge apparatus documenting the conditions of labour? Did it have a bearing on the problem that a historian of the working class faces today: paucity of 'sources'?

The following sections will pursue these questions. This essay aims at two objectives. It aspires to draw a picture, however incomplete, of the conditions of the jute mill workers of Calcutta in the period mentioned. At the same time, it also intends to account for the gaps in our knowledge and argues that the gaps are as revealing of working-class conditions as any direct reference to them. It is thus a history both of our knowledge and of our ignorance. And the explanation offered here is both political-economic and cultural.

II

Government interest in working-class conditions in India is of relatively recent origin. It was only after the end of the First World War that the conditions of the Indian working class became an object of knowledge for the Government of India. A Labour Bureau was set up in May 1920 'to collect all available information on labour conditions in India, and classify and tabulate it'. One important factor contributing to this development was the establishment of the International Labour Office (ILO) immediately after the war. The Indian government had been at an 'active participant' in the process of the ILO's formation and was pledged to its goals. A second important factor was one internal to the Indian political scene. The conclusion

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of the war and the subsequent period of nationalist agitation had seen trade unions mushroom all over the country on a scale previously unknown. This was accompanied by a countrywide outburst of labour unrest. With the Russian revolution still fresh in its memory, the Government of India’s reaction to these developments was coloured by a fear of Bolshevism. 21 ‘Labour is growing more conscious of its own wants and power’, the government warned its provincial heads in 1919, ‘[and] it is showing signs of a capacity for organization’. 22 By its militancy, thus, labour was drawing upon itself the gaze of the government.

What distinguished this new outlook on labour from the traditional law-and-order view of the state was a desire to reform the conditions of labour and thus change the nature of the working class. In an impressive range of labour legislation considered (and partly enacted) in the twenties and afterwards, the Government of India sought to take a direct role in structuring the situation of the working classes. The amended Factories Act (1922), the Workmen’s Compensation Act (1923), the Trade Unions Act (1926), the Trade Disputes Act (1928), the Maternity Benefits Bill (1929), the Payment of Wages Act (1933), etc., were all aimed at creating a working class different from the traditionally-held image of the industrial labour force in India. The worker was henceforth to receive a new ‘legal’ personality, more welfare, and even some official help to organize into trade unions (naturally, of a non-communist kind). Introducing a bill for the ‘registration and protection of trade unions’, the Government of India wrote to the local governments in September 1921 that ‘in so far as the [trade union] movement makes for the organization of labour, and for the steady betterment of the conditions of labour . . . every facility should be offered for its development along healthy lines’. 23

The government’s concern for a ‘steady betterment of the conditions of labour’ was sustained and animated by a recently-acquired vision of a burgeoning industrial growth in India. The war had left the government in a ‘developmentalist’ mood 24 from which sprang the arguments regarding working-class conditions.

21 See for example W.B.S.A., Home Political (hereafter Poll.) Confidential (hereafter Confl.) 405(1-3)/1919.
There are indications of a considerable expansion in the near future in the number and size of industrial establishments. Moreover machinery and power are being employed in factories to a much larger extent than . . . before. Mines are being worked at greater depths. . . . The transport industries are developing.

With these words the government pleaded in August 1921 the case for creating a system of rules for compensations to be awarded to workmen injured in accidents in the course of work. The argument was elaborated during the discussion that followed. The Government of India explained that the ‘growing complexity of industry . . . with the increasing use of machinery’ required a more efficient labour force than had hitherto been available. It was therefore ‘advisable that they [the workers] should be protected . . . from hardship arising from accidents’, because this would not only increase ‘the available supply of labour’ but also produce ‘a corresponding increase in the efficiency of the average workman . . .’

‘Efficiency’, in this logic, was a function of working-class conditions. The government noted in 1919 that while there was ‘a keen and increasing demand for factory labour’ in India, there was ‘little apparent desire on the part of the labourers to increase their efficiency’, and—more to the point—‘little prospect of their being able to do so under present conditions’ [emphasis added]. Improving efficiency meant improving these ‘conditions’, and they included not only ‘education, housing and social welfare’ but also such aspects as the ‘comfort’ and ‘spare time’ of the worker.

The efficiency of workers is closely connected with their education, and their standard of comfort; the shortening of hours may not prove an unmixed good, if the workers are not put in a position to make a proper use of their spare time.

The argument was broader than it might appear at first sight. For it was not only a question of giving the workers ‘spare time’, but of structuring that ‘spare time’ as well, of ensuring that the workers made ‘proper use’ of it. It was thus that the government’s eyes fell—for the first time in Indian history—on several aspects of the

28 Ibid.
worker’s life that had so far been held to be beyond the ken of capital. Issues of indebtedness, the ‘monetary reserve’ of the worker, his wages, food, health, home life—all came under the scrutiny of the government.30 ‘Efficiency’ produced its own code of ethics which opposed the image of the vigorous and healthy worker to that of the overworked and fatigued.

They [the Government of India] believe that the longer interval [of rest] is desirable in order to enable the worker to maintain his vigour, and that its enforcement should ultimately prove beneficial to the employer. There are grounds for believing that the absence of sustained work, characteristic of many factory employees in this country, has been due . . . to the fact that the hours fixed did not in the past allow sufficient opportunity for the rest necessary to prevent fatigue.31

It was only in the context of this search for an ‘efficient’ working class that working-class conditions became an object of knowledge. How did the Government of India propose to produce and gather this knowledge? Provincial governments were equipped with new departments meant to perform this task. For instance, under pressure from the Government of India, the Bengal Government established in July 1920 an office of the Industrial Intelligence Officer, later named the Labour Intelligence Officer, whose duty it was to ‘maintain a proper watch over the industrial situation’, and ‘in particular to investigate and report on labour conditions and the facts and causes of labour disturbances’.32 The Government of India also realized that much of this knowledge would have to be generated within the factories and that the provincial staff of factory inspectors might be employed to collect and monitor the information. Since ‘leisure’, ‘rest’, ‘fatigue’, ‘sparetime’, etc., were some of the key concepts supporting the government’s notion of ‘efficiency’, control over the labourer’s working hours naturally emerged as a problem of the highest importance. It is in this context that attendance registers maintained by individual factories and the factory inspectors’ reports came to be regarded as crucial documents from the Government of India’s point of view. With this end in view, the Factories Act was amended in 1922 with a new section 35 now requiring the manager of

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a factory ‘to maintain . . . [an attendance] register of all persons employed and of their hours of work . . .’.

III

The conditions of jute mill labour in Bengal never fully received the documentation that the Government of India had arranged to give them. In other words, the desired knowledge was not produced. The inaccuracies in the attendance registers of the jute mills were witness to this failure, for, as the Chief Inspector of Factories admitted to the Royal Commission on Labour, ‘the records given in such registers do not represent the true conditions . . . of . . . labour’. The Labour Office of Bengal, too, suffered from a peculiar bureaucratic malaise, the history of which only shows that the Bengal Government never shared the Government of India’s eagerness for knowledge of labour conditions. For one thing, as the Labour Commissioner of Bengal recalled in 1935, the office was set up with ‘no immediate purpose of having a large investigating office, with cost of living indices and other standard concomitants of an organised labour office’. Besides, so low was the priority of this office in the eyes of the Bengal Government that ‘when the first Retrenchment Committee’ reported in 1921, ‘the Labour Office seemed bound to go’; but ‘instead of abolishing it, the [Bengal] government changed its character’. To economize, the Labour Intelligence Officer was saddled with various responsibilities and his investigative functions suffered badly in consequence. He was placed ‘in charge of the Commerce Department, and later of the Marine Department [as well]’. He was made responsible for the administration of all the labour laws that were to come in the twenties, as well as for other legislative measures only ‘partly concerned with the welfare of labour, e.g., the Boilers Act and the Electricity Act’. The Labour Intelligence Officer thus became, in his own words, ‘an ordinary secretariat officer’ who had little time to investigate the conditions of labour.

With the growing volume of office work and the addition of one duty after another, the Labour Intelligence Officer found it impossible to continue his personal investigations regarding every strike, and also to some extent,

his visits to factories ...; although, as far as possible, he continued these visits up to 1929 when the enormous increase of work due to the advent of Whitley Commission tied him completely to his desk.36

The atrophy of the Labour Office was not a matter of simple bureaucratic mindlessness. What calls for an analysis is precisely the ‘mind’ of this bureaucracy. To this ‘mind’, any interest in labour conditions beyond that called for by the immediate needs of capital or of law and order, was suspect. ‘For some peculiar reason’, wrote a rather frustrated Labour Commissioner in 1935, ‘in Bengal, interest in labour matters or desire for knowledge of labour developments is read as sympathy for the labour point of view.’37

The ‘reason’ for this suspicion is not difficult to analyse. The Government of India’s ‘desire for knowledge of labour developments’ assumed that the investigating authority would be capable of maintaining a degree of independence from the point of view of particular capitalists. The government desired to stand above the ‘unevenness’ of such particular views. For example, in insisting on ‘uniform rules’ for fines or accident-compensations, the Government of India argued that the question of ‘welfare of the working classes’ could not ‘any longer be left to the uneven generosity of employers’.38 Such ‘neutrality’ of the state, however, threatened to rupture the almost ‘natural’ unity that had existed in Bengal for years between the provincial government and owners of capital (especially those represented by powerful organizations such as the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and the Indian Jute Mills Association).

This ‘natural unity’ received its fullest expression in the nineteenth century when the moral order of the day was unashamedly pro-capitalist and when the Government of Bengal plainly considered it its duty ‘to do all it can to afford moral support to the [jute] mill-owners’ in the face of labour unrest.39 In those years even the meagre provisions of the first two Factories Acts of India were seen by senior officers of the Government of Bengal as ‘needlessly harassing to the [mill] managers’.40 A factory inspector who once insisted on age-

verification for all jute-mill child-workers in his jurisdiction was sharply pulled up by the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal. 'Inspectors', he was told, 'by making the [medical] examination of every child compulsory, would give to owners or managers of factories the maximum of trouble, and to the government the maximum of expenses without conferring any compensating benefit on the majority of the children employed'.

It would not be very profitable to see this merely as an instance of ruling-class hypocrisy. The evidence yields more value when treated as an expression of the ruling-class outlook on conditions of labour. The Bengal officials were not just displaying their lack of respect for the factory laws; underlying their statements was also the conviction that the labour conditions themselves did not leave much to be desired. To most of the factory inspectors, therefore—contrary to the aims of the factory legislation—the conditions always seemed satisfactory. A typical example is the report of the working of the Factories Act in Bengal for the year 1893. The 'general conditions of the [mill] operatives' were found 'very satisfactory', the coolie-lines were 'well laid out', their work 'not arduous', the water supply 'good', the latrines 'well kept', the children 'thoroughly healthy' and their work 'in no way detrimental to them', and arrangements for the workers' medical care 'satisfactory'. Even the 'fact' that 'five or ten per cent' of the children were 'weak, feeble in growth and stunted for their age' could not be attributed, it was said, 'to the work they perform in the mills, as about the same proportion of undersized and weakly children may be observed among the outside population'.

To such an official 'mind', labour conditions deserved investigation only when they posed law and order problems. A Government of Bengal file discussing a sudden outburst of working-class unrest in the jute mills in 1894-5 gave some attention to the question of housing for labour. But this attention was merely bestowed for reasons of control and no more. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal welcomed the IJMA (Indian Jute Mills Association) to 'co-operate with the [Bengal] Government in improving both direct control [i.e. policing] over the mill-hands in case they should break into violence, and also indirect control which will make acts of violence less likely by bettering the conditions of the employees':

41 Ibid.
His Honor therefore confidently invites the co-operation of the mill-owners to provide comfortable and well-ordered homes for mill-hands, and thus avoid such conditions as those at Samnagar and Titanagar, which offer temptations to the disorderly and make control difficult. But the amount of improvement desired in the ‘conditions’ was severely limited. Too much ‘bettering’ of conditions might make the task of control harder. ‘Rice is very cheap, and this makes them [the labourers] independent’, was the diagnosis of a police officer in the same file, who quoted jute mill managers’ views in support of his own: ‘Experienced mill managers seem to think that . . . when the labour market becomes once more over-stocked, as they say it will be, mill hands will grow less independent, and matters will quiet down to their normal state.’ In taking a law and order view of labour conditions, then, the state just reproduced the point of view of capital.

Much of this nineteenth-century spirit can be read off twentieth-century documents as well, especially those coming from the years before the First World War. There was for instance the Civil Surgeon of Serampore who thought (in 1909) that ‘the mills in Hooghly need no legislation for the well-being of the operatives’; or the factory inspector who felt (in 1910) that ‘an Inspector’ was ‘legitimately entitled to place the telescope to his blind eye’ if he came across ‘a child of seven or eight years sewing or hewing a gunny bag in the vicinity of the mother’, even though the law demanded ‘the Manager . . . be prosecuted for employing a child under nine’; or there was the even more striking case of C. A. Walsh, the Chief Inspector of Factories, boldly declaring in 1912: ‘I see no poverty in the quarters surrounding the great [jute] mills in Khardah, Titagarh, Shantinagar, Kankinare, Naihati, Budge-Budge or Fort Gloster. . . .’

The tone of official pronouncements changed somewhat after 1920, thanks to the efforts of the Government of India and of nationalist and radical politicians who espoused the cause of labour. ‘The increasing solidarity of labour’ entered the calculations of the Government of Bengal and the realization dawned that ‘industrial disputes will in future form an integral part of the industrial life of this province’. Yet this did not bring about any ‘epistemological

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shift' in the status of the 'conditions of labour' question. It never acquired any priority over the question of control. The Industrial Unrest Committee of 1921 recommended that the Bengal Government set up some means for investigating strikes but made it clear that the means proposed 'must be designed for the purpose of alleviating unrest... rather than for a detailed investigation of current labour conditions'. It was the same 'disease' that had warped the career of the Labour Office in Bengal. The periodic reports the Labour Intelligence Officer sent up to the Government of India were, it was admitted, 'nearly always' the views of the local police—'merely thana officers' views', as Donald Gladding, a senior official of the Bengal Government, once described them. 'Neither superior police officers nor Magistrates go about seriously to find out the truth by questioning the workmen on the one hand and the employers on the other—and this', Gladding insisted, was 'polite and correct'.

The factory inspectors' reports bore ample testimony to this absence of a spirit of investigation. A good example is the treatment that the question of the 'health' of the workers received in these reports. This was an important question from the Government of India's point of view, carrying obvious implications for the dietary conditions, the standard of living, the wages situation and finally the efficiency of the worker. None of these latter considerations, however, ever influenced the Bengal factory inspectors. For years, their reports carried a section called 'General Health of the Operatives' where the workers' health was always described as 'good' if there had been no epidemics. 'The general health of operatives has been good', said the Factories Act report in 1928, 'no outbreak of disease in epidemic form having been reported during the year'. Why was health a question of epidemics, and not one of diet, nutrition or standard of living? The following quotation from the factory inspection report for 1921 suggests the answer:

The Naihati Jute Mills at Naihati, Baranagar Jute Mills at Baranagar, [etc.]... reported a shortage of labour in the month of August last owing to

outbreaks of malaria and influenza. The shortage . . . was not serious and
the general health of the operatives . . . has on the whole been satisfactory.\(^9\)

Or, to put the argument in an even more precise form, as did the report for 1923:

The general health of operatives during the year . . . has been comparatively
good, no shortage of labour on account of epidemic diseases or sickness
having been reported by the mills.\(^0\)

At heart, this was the employer’s argument. In the jute mills, health-care for workers was essentially aimed at the prevention of epidemics. Information regarding diseases treated free by the doctors of twenty-three jute mills in 1928 was collected by the Government of Bengal for submission to the Royal Commission on Labour. It is interesting to observe that none of the diseases treated were of nutritional origin: cholera, small-pox, malaria, enteric fever, relapsing fever, kala-azar, dysentery, diarrhoea, pneumonia, tuberculosis of the lungs, and respiratory diseases ‘other than infections’.\(^1\) Clearly, most of them were infectious diseases or water- or food-borne diseases, capable of affecting a number of people at the same time, especially under conditions of over-crowding. In other words, potential epidemics. Epidemics were what caused large-scale absenteeism that affected production; besides, they respected no class-barriers. Speaking to the IJMA in 1918, Alexander Murray, then hairman of the Association, referred to a proposal put by mills ‘in four different municipalities up the river . . . to spend anything up to Rs 100 per loom’ in improving workers’ housing, and remarked that he could ‘imagine no more profitable investment from a mill labour point of view’. Supporting this view, he said:

In proof of this I might refer to the experiences during the influenza epidemic last year of the mills with which I am most closely associated. Our mill doctors’ reports show that the hands living in the bazar suffered far more severely than those living in the mills’ own coolie lines. At most of our mills the production for the week ending 20th July, which witnessed the epidemic at its worst, was anything from 15 to 30 per cent below normal. But in the case of one of our mills which houses nearly all its labour in its own lines, the drop was only 5 per cent.\(^2\)

Clearly, to Murray, as to the jute industry, the measure of the severity of epidemics was the drop in production. Hence the health of the workers was mainly a question of epidemics.

One implication of such an outlook was that large areas of working-class life escaped official notice. Once again, the health question illustrates the problem. As a result of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Labour, an investigation was carried out into the conditions of women workers in jute mills in 1931-2. The investigating doctor discovered several diseases that had never found their way into the records of the mill dispensaries. She noted that many of the working-class children ‘have a tendency to rickets, shown by slight bending of the legs and bossing of the forehead’. This was ‘probably due to deficiency of vitamin D in the food’. While many children looked ‘fine’ ‘in the first year of life’, a ‘healthy appearance was less common’ after that age. Venereal diseases were ‘said to be wide-spread’, yet there was ‘no evidence on the subject’. In the lines of one mill, she came across a young girl ‘obviously dying of a pernicious type of anaemia’, but ‘she was having no treatment’. ‘In the lines of another mill’, she found ‘a woman suffering from a severe degree of ostomalacia, unable to walk. This is a very great danger in childbirth and with careful treatment can be cured or greatly relieved.’ She noticed ‘several cases of children reduced to almost extremity’. Another time she saw ‘a woman obliged to stop her work for blindness and suffering great pain in the eyes [which]… would have been susceptible to treatment’. But a certain kind of ‘blindness’, in these cases, was what characterized the employer’s outlook. The investigating doctor remarked: ‘None of these cases were known to the mill doctors, who always accompanied me when I visited the lines.’

Thus, in claiming as their own a view of labour conditions that really belonged to the owners of capital, the documents of the Bengal Government reproduced something else as well: the ‘optical errors’ of that vision. Significant aspects of working-class conditions remained hidden from it. This was what in the end undermined the Government of India’s project for ‘knowledge’ of these conditions. The Government of Bengal lacked the political will necessary to distance itself from the employers in the jute industry. This was open knowledge even to the Government of India who, however, never

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felt powerful enough to force anyone's hand. On 13 September 1928 Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, wrote to the Secretary of State:

We had a discussion in Council this week on the contemplated enquiry into labour matters... no Local Government except Bengal had any objection to our announcing now that such an enquiry would be held; but the Bengal Government entered a strong protest... Bengal have on other occasions lately shown a disposition to act as a brake in questions of this kind; for example they stood alone in adopting an uncompromising attitude in respect of minimum wages, and they were nearly alone in pressing for the circulation of the Trade Disputes Bill when we asked if Local Governments would agree to our pushing on with it.

Irwin's conclusion was significant: 'The influence of the employers—and particularly the European employers—is strong there [in Bengal], and they were not likely to receive the news of an enquiry with joy.'

It would once again be wrong to see this 'influence' as a conspiracy of state and capital against labour. Its expressions were too above-board and direct for it to be treated as such. It is better seen as part of the existing political culture. In deciding, for instance, if commercial bodies like the IJMA should be approached directly with the recommendations of the Industrial Unrest Committee (1921), Sir J. H. Kerr, a member of the Governor's Council, wavered:

We must walk warily [he wrote]... Sir Alexander Murray warned me specially that the Jute Mills Association would have to be led, not driven, and I think we should be safer in leaving the matter in his hands.

Kerr felt frightened even to start an office like a Labour Bureau with some pretension towards investigation of labour conditions: 'the term bureau frightens people', he wrote; 'I would not start anything in the nature of a Bureau even on paper without consultation with employers.'

So keen was the Government of Bengal in its desire to avoid any confrontation with the owners of the jute mills that factory inspectors were actually encouraged to leave all 'controversial' matters out of their reports. Further, capitalists themselves sometimes had a direct role in weeding out statements unfavourable to their interests. The

56 Ibid.
report for 1923 had to be redrafted because of objections from industrialists like Alexander Murray. As the Labour Intelligence Officer explained:

Normally the Chief Inspector of Factories sends in his report to Government without previous sanction, but last year owing to a number of controversial paragraphs being inserted, the report was first unofficially examined. The report had ultimately to be reprinted as strong objection was taken by Sir A. Murray and others to the remarks of the Chief Inspector. There is nothing objectionable in the report [now being] put up, but I have toned down some of the remarks . . . 57

Even the attendance register that the 1922 Factories Act required the factories to maintain was modified in Bengal to suit the convenience of the jute mill managers. It was made into a less detailed document than it could have been and as a result, admitted the Chief Inspector of Factories in 1930, it became ‘a type of register satisfying the view of the employers [in the jute industry] but futile and inadequate for ensuring establishment of the provisions of Chapter IV [relating to working hours] of the [Factories] Act . . .’ 58

Thus if working-class conditions in the jute mills never quite became an object of knowledge in the way envisaged by the Government of India, the ‘failure’ occurred at two levels. The industry never produced the necessary documents; and the government lacked the political will to carry out its own investigations.

IV

The question of the lack of a ‘political will’ on the part of the Government of Bengal, its inability to force any issue on the IJMA or the jute industry, can be partly comprehended as a negative illustration of Marx’s argument. I say ‘partly’ because some of the spirit of co-operation between the state and capital must have derived from the tight racial bonds that existed between European employers and the British bureaucracy in colonial Bengal. 59 But one also has to note that the industry (or any sections of employers) never exerted any pressure on the government to equalize ‘the conditions of competition’

59 See A. K. Bagchi, Private Investment in India 1900-1939 (Cambridge, 1972), Ch. 6.
between different mills. ‘Conditions are different in different [mill] centres’, said the IJMA to the Royal Commission on Labour. ‘One mill provides housing accommodation for all their workers whereas another mill provides none whatever. One mill provides good water, another provides no water.’ An official of the Government of Bengal was to use much stronger words:

Perhaps in no industry in the world, situated in such a circumscribed area, is the wage position more inchoate. The mill groups under different managing agents work under wage systems which have developed many local idiosyncrasies during the long and short years of their existence. Even in mills under the same managing agents there are differences which to persons not acquainted with the position would seem incredible. . . . In . . . groups of mills situated close to each other and under different managing agents, the wage-rates in individual mills are kept, or are supposed to be kept, strictly secret.

Yet the jute industry was always content to let all this be; there never arose any significant demand for standardization of wage rates. At the instance of the Royal Commission, the IJMA decided in 1931 to set up a sub-committee to look into the latter problem. The committee admitted in its report the following year that ‘nothing can be done in the direction of general standardization [of wages] for all the mills’ as there were ‘circumstances which preclude any immediate steps being taken’. The report ended with extremely cautious recommendations for slow and gradual standardization of rates for mills ‘in the same districts’, but very little came of this. A confidential report on ‘Jute Mill Labour Conditions’ written in October 1945 by J. Lee, the Senior Labour Officer of the IJMA, referred to the lack of standardization of wage rates as a continuing problem:

Over the last year I have collected statistics of wage-rates paid in the mills and these have all been transferred into a rate paid as “pues per hour” . . . I prepared a list of all occupations, and then gave the maximum rate paid as well as the minimum. The differences in many occupations was very great, and in itself, was . . . a good case for wage-standardization.

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The case for standardization remained ‘good’ and valid into the 1950s.\(^4\)

Why was it that the jute industry, notorious for the feelings of rivalry that mills often harboured against one another, was happy to carry on with an ‘inchoate’ wage position? Several answers suggest themselves. To consider outside competition first, the relationship between the Calcutta and the Dundee industries was never one of straight-forward competition—as it was between Bombay and Manchester. With Dundee branching off into finer products for survival and Calcutta providing a big employment market for Dundee technicians and managers, the pressures of that potential competition eased off a great deal after 1914-19. The kind of uproar that Dundee industrialists often caused in the 1890s over labour conditions in Calcutta,\(^5\) became a matter of the past in the twentieth century. Also, the state of organization of the Calcutta jute mill workers was too weak for them to exert any effective pressure on the wage question. Thirdly, the ‘individualism’ of individual (or a group of) mills was something that the IJMA accepted as the price for its organizational unity, which the industry saw as crucial to its overall prosperity. And fourthly, one must take into account the concentration of economic power within the industry; this must have gone some way towards mitigating any spirit of competition between the mills.

There were, however, two other factors which were perhaps more important than those mentioned above. Paradoxical though it may sound, the per capita expenditure incurred by the mills on their respective labour forces might have varied in fact far less than the discussion on wage rate differences suggests. In other words, it is possible that the ‘conditions of competition’ between mills remained more or less at par and thus made state intervention superfluous. It will be interesting, in this respect, to depart from the practice of calculating bonuses by themselves and try instead to study these along with other expenditures on labour, e.g. housing, sanitation, water supply, health clinics, etc. Since the amount spent under these latter heads also varied from mill to mill according to differences in the volume of labour supply, employers who paid lower wages might


well have ended up by spending more on housing, etc., and vice versa. It then seems quite possible that the average amount spent per unit of labour worked out to be roughly the same for different mills, so that the disparities in the ‘conditions of competition’ did not matter very much.

The point cannot be statistically verified here, detailed information on wage rates and other matters being extremely hard to come by. But there is some evidence to suggest that the industry had developed certain informal means for equalizing ‘labour conditions’ between the mills (especially those close to one another) or at least for keeping the ‘inequalities’ well within ‘tolerable’ limits. For one thing, it was hard to keep the information about wages a secret however much the managing agents might desire such secrecy. ‘The total earnings [for different occupations] are not necessarily kept secret’, the Government of Bengal told the Royal Commission, and the piece-rates or bonus rates could easily be ‘ascertained by spy-work in the bazar’.

Further, the worker’s idea of a ‘fair wage’ often involved a principle of parity with those paid by mills in the neighbourhood. Localized strikes therefore often tended to bring local wage rates in line with one another.

Even more important perhaps was the fact that managers could effectively create an informal climate (and pressure) of opinion which also had a homogenizing influence on labour conditions. When an American firm, the American Manufacturing Company, started a jute mill in Calcutta in the early 1920s, it was said that ‘the Directors in the States . . . sanctioned large amounts to be spent on sanitation and welfare of workers, as they were accustomed to such outlay in connection with their jute mills in the United States’. Yet the eventual amount spent turned out to be much less than that sanctioned, for the managers of the other jute mills had objected.

In many cases they [the Directors] would have been willing to go much further than they had actually Gone e.g. to give electric light in the workers’ houses, as well as a plentiful installation outside in the lines, but had been told that this had never been done here. So at present electric light is limited to the durwans’ houses.

It is significant that this mill ultimately settled for the ‘district rate’ of wages and followed ‘the custom in jute mills in the district’ in respect

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of accident compensation. It also ‘modelled’ its leave rules (or the laxity of them!) on those at the ‘neighbouring jute mills’. And while the agents had been willing to put in as good a drainage system as possible’ the actual ‘type copied was that used by the other Calcutta Jute Mills’.67

A lack of standardization in wage rates therefore did not necessarily reflect a competitive situation among the mills regarding their labour conditions. Effective pressure from international competitors was also conspicuously absent. The Bengal Government’s views on labour conditions were therefore governed solely by its relationship with capitalists in the jute industry, and in this relationship the latter always predominated. What the state therefore reproduced in its documents was the blinkered vision of capital.

V

But that leaves us with the more crucial question: why was the ‘vision’ of capital ‘blinker’d’? Why did the jute mills fail to produce the daily records that the Government of India had asked for? Or to put the question differently: why were the attendance registers kept in such a state that they did not ‘reflect the true conditions of labour’? Once again, Marx’s argument is useful. To understand the lack of documentation at the level of the factory we have to turn to the problem of ‘discipline’. A discussion of ‘discipline’ has to begin by considering the nature of work and technology in a jute mill, for discipline is, in the first place, a question of training and skills, the ‘technical subordination of the worker’ to the motion and requirements of the machine. Discipline of course also involves supervision, but we shall take that up later.

Work inside a Calcutta jute mill involved mechanical processes broadly similar to those in a nineteenth-century cotton mill, except that jute was a rougher material than cotton and the humidification necessary for cotton was not needed for jute.68 After the raw jute was sorted and batched as it came into the mill, it went through a process


of softening and preparation for the eventual spinning and weaving of jute. Softening included passing the jute ‘through a softening machine consisting of fluted rollers under heavy pressure when simultaneously an emulsion of oil and water . . . [was] applied’, the oil being necessary ‘to facilitate the succeeding process of manufacture as jute fibre contains no natural lubrication.’ After softening came the preparation stage which included three distinct operations: carding, drawing and roving. The object of carding was ‘to break down long stalks or strips of fibre into a continuous broad ribbon of fine fibres’ and to lay the fibres parallel to one another. The carding process involved the use of two machines—the breaker card and the finisher card. The former ‘breaks and hackles the stalks of [the] fibre’ to make it into a broad ribbon ‘termed sliver in the trade’. About twelve such slivers were then fed manually into the ‘finisher’ card ‘where the carding operation is continued on finer scale’. The carded slivers were still not uniform or straight and were therefore subjected to processes called drawing and doubling, where the aim was to obtain ‘a greater length of [uniform] fibre for the same unit of weight’. The operations of drawing and doubling were ‘combined into one machine called [the] drawing frame’. Drawing thinned out the sliver, doubling counteracted it by combining ‘two or more such drawn out slivers into one at the delivery end of the machine’. The last of the preparatory processes was roving, the object of which was to draw out the slivers even further, according to the spinning requirements, while strengthening them by giving them a partial twist. The twisted sliver was called ‘rove’.

The next step was spinning, where yarns were made by spinning frames which further drew out the rove, spun it, and finally wound it on spinning bobbins. Warp yarns were twisted harder than weft yarns. The winding department followed next and ‘the yarn forming the warp of the cloth . . . was wound round . . . bobbins into the form of comparatively large rolls, thereby obtaining a greater continuity in length’. The yarn for the weft in the cloth was wound into ‘“cops” fitting exactly into the shuttles employed in weaving’. Warp yarn, saturated with a starchy material to prevent breakage in weaving, was then ‘drawn on to large beams’ (the ‘beaming’ process) and placed at

Ibid.: ‘The principle of these [carding] machines is a rapidly revolving cylinder armoured with pins whilst smaller pinned rollers revolving at a slower speed are placed parallel to this cylinder and retard the fibre, thus promoting the combing action.’
the back of the loom for weaving. The final stages in the manufacture constituted the finishing process, where the woven cloth was passed through the heavy rollers of a calendering machine for ironing and eventually cut and sewn into bags. The bags again were ‘made into bundles of 25 or 30’ and packed by a hydraulic press.

The technology accompanying these processes had been ‘perfected’ in the nineteenth century. S. G. Barker, who investigated the technical side of the Calcutta jute mills in the 1930s, found the technology so stagnant that he likened the industry to a gramophone needle: ‘It runs in a groove and plays a nice tune. If either needle or record gets worn, new ones are demanded.’ The ‘groove’ in Barker’s description referred to the lack of diversification of products in the history of the industry and to the crude and rough nature of what was produced. This he saw as a fundamental factor behind technological stagnation: ‘hessian, sacking or canvas has not called for any alteration in machinery’. In Barker’s words:

Jute being a cheap material producing fabrics for rough usage . . . the machinery and technique in India became standardised upon an elementary mechanical basis. Simplicity of operation without the necessity for textile science since changes were practically non-existent . . . soon led to the mass production of the limited range of Indian jute products becoming almost automatic. The conversion of Jute fibres into fabrics therefore became a mechanical engineering proposition, a position largely maintained to this day. The mechanical influence was greatly enhanced by conditions in India, since spare machine parts and renewals were difficult to get from home. Thus each mill or group was equipped with an efficient mechanics’ workshop, which not only maintained the machinery in excellent order but even extended to the construction of duplicates of existing looms, etc.

Again the simplicity of the machine principles facilitated this. . . . Machinery in the mills in general, therefore, has had a long working life, perhaps too long.  

The industry considered this technology so adequate for its purpose that it placed very little premium on the scientific and technological training of its workers and the superior technical staff. Barker was surprised to discover many large and crucial gaps in the technical knowledge of the Scottish managers and assistants—gaps which they

71 Ibid., pp. 41-2.
usually filled up with that rather undefined human quality called ‘experience’. The softening process contained a number of ‘unknowns’ like ‘temperature, moisture content and distribution in the [jute] pile’ as well as the optimum pressure between the rollers, ‘the actual value for which seemingly . . . [had] no criterion but experience’. He was also struck by ‘the lack of finality in technical knowledge of the carding process’. The same went for drawing and doubling, where ‘the ideal roller pressure’ and ‘the size of flutings for Jute . . . [had] been determined by experience’. For the process of roving, the list of things unknown was formidable. ‘Roller covering and pressure, surface speeds, spindle speeds, the flyer mechanism, the distribution of fibre length in the rove, the degree of levelness along its length, fibre control and, in addition, the factors concerning twist and the form of bobbins’ were all yet ‘to be studied’. Barker’s correspondence with some of the mill managers on technical problems dramatically revealed the low priority that the industry gave to technical education. Technical issues were often treated merely as matters of the ‘experience’, ‘opinion’ or personal judgement of the people concerned:

From my experience [wrote one manager to Barker] I have found that certain makers’ machines are suitable for one class of fibre, while others are suitable for a different class. . . . Pinning [on the rollers]. A number of people favour pinning with light pins whilst others prefer a coarser pinning with a corresponding heavier pin, again only a matter of opinion.

Another point which allows a certain latitude to be taken is roller speeds and ratios, but to my mind this item is not nearly as important as pinning and setting.72

If the manager’s knowledge of the machinery had such a glaring ‘lack of finality’ about it, one can imagine the want of understanding that separated the worker from the machine. This is not to say that the machine did not in any way affect the worker’s life in the factory. The mechanical processes in a jute mill were continuous, with one process feeding another, and the work was heavier and noisier than in a typical cotton mill.73 The continuous motion and speed of the machinery was something that the worker had to adjust to. ‘Continuous and even flow’ of the jute sliver was the responsibility of the

72 The quotations in this paragraph are from ibid., pp. 26-7, 30-1, 33, 36. Emphases added.

labourers working on the softening, carding, drawing and roving machines. The work of feeding the breaker cards, for instance, was 'heavy' and needed 'constant attention'. The finisher card required the co-operation of three women at a speed matching that of the machine: 'one arranges the slivers side by side at the feed end, one takes delivery at the other and one carries'. In the spinning department, the shifting of bobbins 'must be done quickly for with bulky material such as jute, the bobbins fill fast and require frequent changing, which necessitates stopping the machine'. But as the payment of the managing agents and managers often depended on the output, such stoppages were seen as time lost and therefore had to be as brief as possible. Pace also characterized the work in piece-rated departments like weaving or sack-sewing where the worker's earnings depended on how much, and hence how rapidly, he could produce.

This 'subordination' to the machine that the worker suffered in the jute mill, however, was not very 'technical'. The worker did not come to terms with the machine on the basis of even an elementary understanding of its working principles. The story is poignantly told in the nature of accidents which occurred in the jute mills. Many of the fatal ones resulted from the workers attempting to clean the machinery while still in motion or from their (especially women's) loose-fitting clothes getting caught in the moving parts of the machinery. Accidents of this kind revealed the emphasis that the mill managements placed on the continuous running of the machinery, the laxity of factory rules (about dress) and the little value attached to a worker's life, but also the worker's incomprehension of the running principles of the machinery. In fact, the worker's relationship to the machine, instead of being mediated through technical knowledge, was mediated through the north Indian peasant's conception of his tools, where the tools often took on magical and godly qualities. A religious outlook rather than 'science' determined this relationship, with the difference that in a jute mill, the labourer's tools were far more powerful and malignant than the peasant's implements and were

74 See Report of the Central Wage Board for Jute Industry (Delhi, 1963), Appendix XVII.
77 The factory inspection reports for different years have material supporting this observation.
even capable of claiming lives at the shortest notice. The vivid details of the following report from the 1930s bear witness to this religious consciousness:

In some of the jute mills near Calcutta the mechanics often sacrifice goats at this time [autumn: the time of the Diwali festival]. A separate altar is erected by the mechanics of each of the four or five departments in the mill. Various tools and other emblems of their work are placed upon it, together with heaps of sweetmeats and decorations. Incense is burned during an entire day and . . . the buildings are effectively filled with smoke. Towards evening a male goat is thoroughly washed, decorated with proper colors and flowers and prepared for a parade and final sacrifice. The little procession, made up principally of the goat and a band, then marches through the grounds and up and down the aisles of the department to the altar. The animal is fed as many sweets as he will accept, and is then decapitated at one stroke by a long knife and sword. With proper ceremony the head is deposited in the river, in this case . . . the sacred Ganges, while the meat is retained for a feast in the evening. . . . The factory and the power-machine have been readily adopted and given due place in religious ceremony.\(^{78}\)

It is of course not being claimed here that this religious outlook of the workers would have vanished if only they had been given a scientific knowledge of the machinery. The fact that modern Indian 'holy men' have always counted a good number of Ph.Ds in physics among their camp-followers should act as a sufficient deterrent against such a point of view. Besides, cultures have their own ways of surviving even the most 'hostile' of environments. But what is relevant here is that the Calcutta jute worker's subordination to the pace and requirements of the machinery was not affected through training and education. It was not, in that sense, a case of the 'technical subordination' of Marx's description. The mills in fact were largely averse to the idea of giving their workers or their children any education at all. In 1929, the IJMA said to the Royal Commission

\footnote{Buchanan, op. cit., p. 409. The practice of worshipping machine-tools seems to have been widespread among factory workers in eastern India. The present writer remembers being present, as a child, at some of the these ceremonies at a small engineering factory in Calcutta. The Jamshedpur steel-industry workers had their annual day of 'Hathyar Puja' (tool-worship) when 'tools and implements attained the status of deity'. 'Bedecked with flowers, the giant cranes and travelling derricks clanked to their appointed tasks; caparisoned with blossoms, the locomotives snorted about on the sidings; streaming garlands, the wheelbarrows squeaked from coalpit to furnace.' Lillian Luker Ashby (with Roger Whatley), *My India* (London, 1938), pp. 287-8.}
that it did not think that the provision of education was a ‘duty’ of the employers. But their deeper attitudes were revealed in 1914-15 when the Government of Bengal, acting under pressure from Delhi, made some money available for the education of working-class children in the jute mill areas and was forced by the IJMA to confine such education only to those children who were not yet old enough to work in the jute mills. And the lessons, insisted the mill owners, had to be confined to the teaching of ‘the three “R”s’ and nothing beyond.

The argument that the IJMA put forward to the government (and one that was accepted by the latter) contained an important ‘reason’ for their lack of interest in workers’ education:

The character of the education must not be such as to draw the children away from the profession which they would adopt if they were allowed to continue illiterate...it must not render them unfit for cooly work.

Literacy, in other words, was irrelevant to work in the jute mills. This was so, for, according to the employers, the work was easily learnt and required no rigorous training. Indeed, the bulk of the labour force was made up of totally unskilled labourers (called coolies) employed without exception on manual work. The Census of 1921 found that of a total of 280,854 workers in the Calcutta jute mills no less than 156,633 (i.e. over 55 per cent) were engaged in work involving no machinery at all. Even of the work that involved the use of machinery it was said in 1937 by jute mill owners themselves that ‘up to spinning...most of the work is mechanical or routine and can be easily learnt, and labour for these departments is plentiful; winding, weaving and [machine] sewing required skilled labour’. How ‘easily learnt’ was explained in 1906 by the Chairman of the IJMA who spelt out the different amounts of time that were needed to train in the different occupations in a jute mill:

82 Census of India 1921 (Calcutta, 1923), vol. V, pt. 2, Table XXII, pts. IV and V. This Census report defined all work involving machinery as ‘skilled work’.
Coolie ['s] [work] ... ... ... [one] week
Women ['s] [work: mainly preparing and hand-sewing] ... ... ... [one] week
Shifter ['s] [work] ... ... ... [one] week
Spinner ['s] [work] ... ... ... Graduate from shifters; may be a year or more on shifting.

Weaver ['s] [work] ... ... ... A year to be first-class workman

This 'learning', again, was purely experiential. It was pointed out by several witnesses to the Royal Commission that there was no apprenticeship system in the jute mills. The IJMA said in its evidence that 'the bulk of the work in the mill is unskilled, and where training is necessary, as for instance in the spinning department, this is obtained in the course of actual employment, by the efforts of the worker himself'. On the preparing side, 'a few weeks at any of the machines ... [was] long enough to make the worker proficient'. Weaving needed 'skilled' work 'but, generally speaking, weavers become proficient very quickly'. Even mechanics, joiners, blacksmiths had no system of formal training: '[they] ... start as boys, and are paid a nominal wage until they become of use'.

The informality of the jute mills’ system of recruitment and training—two important features of industrial discipline—was the subject of comment in 1945 in a note on 'Apprenticeship to Jute Mill Weaving Departments' prepared by the newly-formed Labour Department of the IJMA. 'Notwithstanding that the Jute Industry has prospered and expanded upon the output of its many looms', the note said, 'there has never been established any common method of selecting recruits or of teaching young workers the business of weaving.' Worse still, such informal training as the workers could receive by watching or helping others was often a matter of breaking factory rules or legislation: '[the] knowledge of power loom weaving could only be gained by the efforts of the novice himself in time spent, usually surreptitiously, beside a friendly weaver already employed in a mill factory'. What permitted such a state of affairs to continue was the stagnation in technology which reflected, as we

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have seen, a lack of diversity in the products of the mills and their rather crude nature. This, again, was commented on in the note:

Of recruits who had any specialised tuition in weaving there were none, and there are very few today. . . . No lasting improvement of quality or quantity of outturn could possibly result from this system, and it is probably true that the operative himself is no better equipped technically to turn out good fabric today than was his grandfather fifty years ago. Pride of craftsmanship has not been fostered, nor have any efforts been made to improve or widen the outlook of the operative who frequently never attains greater proficiency than is needed for operating a loom weaving [only] one type of fabric.88

This discussion helps explain why the owners in the jute industry took a rather selective view of working-class conditions. Given the easily-learnt nature of jute mill work, individual workers remained highly replaceable as long as the supply of labour was adequate. The task of structuring a labour force was therefore largely a supply proposition to the mills and not a question of skill formation, training or efficiency. An ‘ample supply of [cheap] male labour’, and not efficiency, was what was always seen as an important key to the prosperity of the mills.89 It was in fact the concern with the supply of labour that often produced a certain atmosphere of laxity of rules within a jute mill. As the Factory Inspector explained in his report for 1893:

A number of men, women and children can at most times of the day be seen in the grounds of the large [jute] mills, either asleep under the trees or shady parts of the building, taking their meals, bathing or smoking in a special shed . . . built for the purpose. The question might suggest itself to some . . . as to why so many are able to leave their work at all times of the day when in the Home Mills everyone is kept under lock and key. The answer is simple but a very striking one. There are 100 per cent more hands employed in every Jute Mill in Bengal than is required to work a similar sized mill in Dundee.90

The mills obviously found it cheaper to carry with them some excess labour (to meet contingencies like epidemics and absenteeism) than

88 This and other quotations in this paragraph come from IJMA, Labour Department file on [confidential] Circulars and Notes of the Committee, 1945-46: Note on ‘IJMA Apprenticeship Scheme’. Emphasis added.
to invest in a healthy, vigorous, efficient working class. As late as 1929, the Indian jute mill worker was half as efficient as a worker in Dundee. The IJMA explained that this was not because 'the work [in India] is unduly hard'. Nor was it caused by 'climatic conditions', but 'simply because this has been the custom so far as the Calcutta jute mills are concerned'.

In the eyes of the employers, then, certain aspects of working-class conditions gained priority over others and received more attention. And the knowledge produced as a result of this attention bore the unmistakable stamp of the employers' concern about labour supply. The 'areas of origin' of the workers, for instance, became an object of investigation, especially at moments of inadequate labour supply. Hence the availability of such information. Foley's report of 1905, itself a document on labour supply, gave evidence of this. J. Nicoll of the IJMA told Foley that 'he [Nicoll] had experienced some difficulty [in procuring labour] in his three Jute Mills in 1902, and had therefore caused a census to be made that year, showing the districts from which the hands came', and it was this data that Foley reproduced in his report. But Foley also noted that such information was not collected except in times of labour scarcity. The average jute mill manager, who was 'usually a kindly Scot from Dundee', was 'generally . . . unable to say from where his hands come, and if told the information would convey no meaning to him'. Foley's impressions are confirmed by a 1921 report on 'The Conditions of Employment of Women Before and After Child-Birth in Bengal Industries' by Dr D. F. Curjel of the Indian Medical Service. Of the twenty-five jute mills Curjel visited, none were able to offer any information about the number of children born to their female workers. Curjel was also struck by the managers' lack of interest in working-class conditions. The manager of the Soorah Jute Mill 'did not concern himself with conditions affecting lives of the workers'. Curjel found the manager of the Lawrence Jute Mill 'rather vague as to [the] class of labour employed', and he 'seemed to take little interest' in their conditions. The manager of the Union Jute Mill who 'had been in charge 6 months' told her that 'he had been too busy to think about the health of the workers'.

The Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890–1940

lack of interest was once again reflective of capital's view of labour conditions: they mattered only if and when they affected labour supply. 'It is interesting to find', Curjel noted after talking to the manager of the Howrah Jute Mills, 'how little managers know of the origins of the labour employed in their mills. As long as the sirdars produced the required number of workers, it does not concern them from what district it is drawn.' Even more telling was the reception that Curjel had from the manager of the Ballighata Jute Mill. The manager 'would scarcely discuss' the subject of labour conditions with Curjel. He said 'he did not concern himself with the workers' lives'. 'He took no interest in modern labour questions [and] “thought it all useless”.' Curjel notes why this was so: The manager who had been in this mill for many years, did not appear to be the very least interested in conditions affecting his workers, so long as he got the labour.95

Thus it was that in the jute mills of Calcutta the employers' vision of labour conditions developed its particular blind spots: the worker's health became a question of epidemics and not one of nutrition; sanitation became a matter of interest but not the standard of living of the worker;96 and while the areas of 'origin' of labourers became on occasion a subject of documentation and research, the individual worker remained largely undocumented almost throughout the period under consideration.97 The political economy of the jute industry thus goes a long way towards explaining why the mill managers were not particularly careful about the proper maintenance of records relating to conditions of labour.

VI

The selectiveness with which the industry treated the question of labour conditions meant that the factory documents covered a narrow

95 Ibid.
97 For example, up to 1924 the jute mills did not keep any records of the home addresses of individual workers. The Workmen's Compensation Act made such records necessary (see R.C.L.I., vol. V, pt. 2, p. 21). Up to 1937 the mills did not keep any employment cards bearing the service histories of individual workers. These were to be introduced in 1937 at the instance of the Bengal Government but not properly till 1948. See Report of the I.J.M.A. for 1937 (Calcutta, 1938).
range of issues, touching upon only a few aspects of the workers’ lives. But apart from the narrowness of their scope, there was yet another problem that the authorities faced in handling these documents: their unreliability. This is why the attendance registers of the jute mills were described in 1930 as not reflecting 'the true conditions' of labour. Factory inspectors, courts of justice trying cases involving jute mill workers, the managers of the mills—all complained of this. ‘You will admit’, Alexander Murray of the IJMA was asked by Sir Victor Sassoon of the Royal Commission on Labour, 'that it must be very difficult for the management to be sure that the attendance books that come before them are accurate?' ‘It is difficult’, Murray admitted. The extent of the 'difficulty' was underscored in the Factory Inspector's report for 1927 where he quoted a letter 'from a Subdivision Officer' as only 'an example of the value of such documents. The letter read:

In connection with a bad-livelihood case one *** said to be the clerk in charge of the attendance register of the *** Jute Mills, was summoned on behalf of the defence as witness. He gave sworn testimony that the undertrial prisoner *** had attended the mill from the 10th to 13th January 1927 and had drawn Rs 4-11 as wages. He stated that he had not had the attendance personally. It transpired, however, that the said *** was arrested by the Police on 30th December 1926 in connection with a dacoity case and since that day he was continuously in the Jail lock-up to the end of February 1927. The entries in the attendance register must be false entries.

The attendance register has been kept in a very slovenly manner and there are many unattested corrections and many entries are in pencil.

Similar remarks were made by the Subdivisional Officer of Serampore who tried the ‘Time Babu’ of the Champdany Jute Mill in 1913 for employing a child on the basis of a cancelled medical certificate. I would point out [he said] that the provisional certificate shown to me does not bear any doctor's signature, and appears to be merely a blank form filled up by an unknown person. This suggests a lack of supervision, specially as I was told [that] this was the customary practice.

The problem of the unreliability of documents then takes us back to a question already highlighted in our discussion of Marx’s argument—the nature and quality of supervision inside the mills. The 'subordinate supervising staff' in the jute mills were of two classes. ‘In the first class there would be the more or less educated

babu who has never been a mill operative himself. Initially appointed as an apprentice, the babu was soon promoted to supervisory work under a Scottish assistant. The duties of the babu would be to ‘check attendances, to keep attendance registers’, to prepare wage books and ‘generally assist in the supervision and work of the department’.101 Below the babu was the sardar who was both a supplier and supervisor of labour and whose social origins were often the same as those of the ordinary worker himself. The Government of Bengal pictured the sardar thus:

The immediate employer of a worker is his sirdar. The sirdar gives him his job and it is by his will that the worker retains it. . . . The sirdars are the real masters of men. They employ them and dismiss them, and, in many cases, they house them and can unhouse them. They may own or control the shops which supply the men with food. The operative, too, pays his lump or recurring sum to the sirdar to retain his job. His life, indeed, at every turn is coloured by sirdarism.102

The IJMA described the sardars and the under-sardars as constituting ‘the lower subordinate supervising staff of the mills’.103

The sardar assisted the babu in the latter’s task of maintaining factory documents. The process was explained in the conversation that took place between Victor Sassoon and Alexander Murray during the proceedings of the Royal Commission on Labour:

Sassoon [S]: Is the only check as to attendance after the men are at their machines?
Murray [M]: That is right.
S: Token [designating shifts] are not taken at the gate and put on their machines?
M: No. The check is taken after the workman is at the machine.
S: The baboo walks round the machinery and puts down the number of people he happens to see working at the machines or probably the sardar tells him are present?
M: He is supposed to check up each worker individually.
S: But I take it the sardar tells him who is there and he takes the word of the sardar to a great extent?
M: That may happen.104

102 Ibid., p. 153.
103 Ibid., pp. 280-1.
We have quoted earlier the Government of Bengal’s description of the sardar. As that description will have made clear, sardari was primarily about supervisory workers making money at the expense of the ordinary worker through such means as money-lending, bribery, etc. More sardars ‘dismissed labour and engaged fresh hands just at their pleasure’, the IJMA complained to the Royal Commission, and ‘each man who signed on had to pay for the job’. In this the sardar often acted in league with the babu.

It is easy to see that the ‘corruption’ of the sardar and the babu would have necessarily imparted a perverse character to the mill documents relating to working-class conditions—wage books, attendance registers, fine books, shift tokens, medical certificates, etc. This at any rate was the burden of the official complaints. One example that the authorities often gave to support their contention was the way the medical certificates of child workers were treated in the mills. In point of law, these certificates were meant to protect the health of the working class by preventing the employment of underage children. But the practice of each child recruit having to bribe the sardars and the babus made this impossible of attainment. As the Chief Inspector of Factories explained to the Royal Commission:

The sirdar produces the children and, in many cases, allows them to be employed whether they are fit, certified or not, and he being illiterate cannot satisfy himself as to the correctness of the entries in the register. He must, however, keep the spindles going, if not directly to maintain continuity of production, to maintain his receipts on a child capitation basis.

This apparently led to a fairly rapid turnover of children from individual mills, a process that contributed to the ‘unreliability’ of documents. Captain O’Connor, the Senior Certifying Surgeon of Factories, Barrackpore district, wrote: ‘The principal reason why children migrate from mill to mill is that they are forcibly turned out by sirdars for pecuniary gain’. The result was that it became ‘quite normal ... for a child to have a certificate in each of a number of mills in a district’, and a child ‘whose certificate is cancelled for not being produced’ could ‘easily be re-certified under another name’.

Colonel Nott, the Civil Surgeon of Howrah, reported a case in 1913

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105 Ibid., p. 142.
107 Ibid., pp. 333-4.
in which the same child applied to him on the same day for certificates in two different names, one Muslim and the other Hindu—Pir Mahomed and Banojowah. Enquiries revealed that he had done it at the sardar’s instruction.  

A similar phenomenon could be observed in the case of adult labour as well. ‘When checking registers’, wrote the Factory Inspector in 1930, ‘a woman under examination may give two or three names with a certain amount of persistence’.  

The manipulation of the attendance registers (and other documents) by sardars and babus invariably led to an inflation of the wage bill. ‘You may have 10 per cent of the names on your books’, the Royal Commission suggested to the manager of the Caledonian Jute Mill, ‘who actually do not exist as far as working is concerned and that money goes somewhere?’  

‘Yes,’ replied the manager, ‘it is divided between the baboos and the sardars and the man who is doing the two men’s jobs.’  

Another manager admitted in his evidence that about 7.5 per cent of his labour force were probably such ghost workers. The Chief Inspector of Factories however thought these figures to be underestimates. While ‘theoretically’ and ‘according to the register’, the multiple shift mills carried 22 or 25 per cent more labour than single-shift mills, the Inspector knew that in reality it was ‘considerably less than 10 per cent’.  

A study of the process of ‘supervision’ within a jute mill—a problem that Marx saw as central to the question of documentation of the conditions of work—turns on the problem of the ‘corruption’ of the supervisory staff. Why was ‘the labour of overlooking’ in a Calcutta jute mill riddled with ‘corruption’? How does one account for the widespread practice of falsifying documents?

VII

One could obviously and easily develop a ‘needs of capital’ type argument in response to these questions. It could be argued, for instance, that the sardar existed only because he served the ‘needs of

111 Ibid., p. 143.  
112 Ibid., p. 195.
capital" in the jute industry and that his so-called 'corrupt' practices—recruiting workers for bribes, housing them, lending them money at high interests—constituted a kind of service to capital in a labour market that the industry had done very little to structure.

There is a body of evidence that supports this view. The mills, it would appear, were prepared to tolerate the 'corrupt' practices of the sardar as he was considered indispensable. Even though the IJMA bitterly complained to the Royal Commission about sardari 'corruption', they nevertheless insisted that 'you [could] not do without sardars'.

The financial outlays made by the mills on wages to be paid to the labourers clearly allowed for a certain amount of leakage through sardari corruption. Admittedly, this was not true of the (relatively) high-wage, piece-paid department of weaving where 'a check [was] made by calculating the total production of each section of the department, so that the total amount actually earned by production must equal the amount to be paid out'. In weaving, therefore, sardari extortion of ordinary workers took the form of bribery, moneylending, etc.

But in every other department the wage policy followed the simple aim of keeping the 'corrupt' practices of the sardar and the babu (e.g. inflating the wage bill by employing 'ghost workers') under control rather than attempting to abolish them altogether.

In each department throughout the works ... a complement is drawn up, showing the number of hands it requires to run satisfactorily; and against this number is shown the amount in wages that such departments are bound down to.

There is also evidence suggesting the direct complicity, in some cases, of the Scottish overseers and managers of the mills in the 'corrupt' acts of the sardar and the babu. The Kankinarrah Labour Union (formed in 1922) 'once exposed a case of bribery when Rs 3000 had been paid for the position of a Head Sardar'. The President of the Union, K. C. Roy Chowdhury, noted in his diary that 'the money had been received by a friend of the manager of the [jute] mill

113 Ibid., p. 150.
115 Ibid., vol. V, pt. 2, p. 120.
concerned'.

His diary also had the following entry which is even more revealing:

Sen, the Head Babu of the Union [Jute] Mill, informed me today that numerous false tickets [tokens] are distributed every day at their mill. This means that tokens are distributed in the names of people who have not actually done any work. The money is then divided between the sardars, the Head Babu and the European overseer sahib. Bima sardar reported even supplies the weekly groceries for the overseer sahibs free of any cost.

How did all this suit the 'needs of capital'? Why were the owners of capital in the jute industry prepared to overlook, and at best contain, this 'corruption' rather than stamp out the practices? Obviously, the sardar in his role of labour-supplier was important to the industry's view of its own interests. The Chief Inspector of Factories explained this in 1913:

All mills have to rely on the Sirdars and Time-Babus of their various departments for the supply of labour, [and therefore] the Manager has either to overlook irregularities practised by these men or to deal strictly with them and face a shortage [of labour] which results in a reduced weekly outturn in tonnage of gunnies, and seriously affects his position with the Managing Agents.

But as we shall see, finding inexpensive ways of controlling labour was a problem of greater concern to the industry than that of labour supply. And this was the reason for the continued importance of the sirdar. To understand why this was so we have to look at the nature of the demand for labour that the industry created and the way it proceeded to meet that demand.

A plentiful supply of labour was considered necessary for the progress of the industry. Between the years 1895 and 1926, when the industry enjoyed an almost uninterrupted period of prosperity and expansion of output, the number of workers employed in the mills grew from 73,725 to 338,497. The supply of labour had to be adjusted to the IJMA-devised strategy of short-time working which frequently

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117 Papers of K. C. Roy Chowdhury (hereafter K.C.R.P.), Bengali diary no. 3, entries for 25 Aug. to 28 Nov. 1929. These papers, at present in my possession, were made available to me through the kind courtesy of Mr Basudha Chakrabarty and Mrs Nabaneeta Deb Sen.


imposed weekly 'idle days' on the mills as a way of reducing output (to match temporary fluctuations in demand) and wage bills. From 1913 onwards, the mills kept changing 'from four to five days a week or from five days to six days a week and so on at different intervals', sometimes changing 'twice or three times a year'. But as the mills offered no incentives for long-term service, a temporary closure of a mill often meant a temporary loss of labour. The problem was an old one, but assumed critical importance in the prosperous years of 1895-1926 when individual mills always wanted to conserve labour for days when they might be called upon to expand output.

The means devised to meet this end was the multiple shift system whereby the labour force was worked in three or four shifts during the day and into the night. Between 1913 and 1926 more than 90 per cent of the jute mills worked on this system. Its main advantage was not economy. An 'abundance of labour or surfeit of it . . . [was] a necessary concomitant of multiple-shift employment', as that was the only way it could be ensured, at least on paper, that the workers did not work beyond the legally allowed hours. There was for instance an elaborate relief system for weavers which necessitated employing extra 'daily-weavers'. It was generally agreed in 1929 that a multiple shift mill carried 25 to 30 per cent more labour (at least on its books) than a single shift mill. But therein lay its advantage, a reduction in the risk of a bottle-neck developing in labour supply should the trade ever demand an increase in output.

By an accident of history, the industry's search for an ample

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122 The Jute Mills of Bengal (Dundee, 1880), p. 48, mentions the case of Seebpore Jute Manufacturing Co. Ltd. whose directors decided to continue working 'rather than temporarily close the mill and lose the workpeople', even when they were faced with a depressed 'bag market'.
supply of labour took place at a time that saw enormous increases in
the emigration of labour from Bihar and UP and other regions into
Bengal. 'Twenty years ago', Foley wrote in 1905, 'all the hands [in
jute mills] were Bengalis. These have been gradually replaced by
Hindustanis from the United Provinces and Bihar . . . so that at
present in most of the mills two-thirds of the hands are composed of
up-countrymen.'\(^{128}\) And once the flow started 'from up-country', it
flowed—as the Royal Commission on Labour was told—'very
strongly'.\(^{129}\) The situation was considered so satisfactory by 1895
that an official enquiry committee formed to investigate the question
of labour supply to the Bengal coal mines felt that 'there was no
necessity' to conduct any 'exhaustive enquiry into the subject of
labour supply for jute mills'. Nor did the mills particularly press for
one.\(^{130}\) Foley was 'somewhat astonished' in 1905 to find that large
increases in demand for jute mill labour between 1895-6 and 1903-4
had been easily met despite there being 'no recruitment on any
systematic method . . . at all', and without any 'material' rise in
wages.\(^{131}\) Even the problem of a seasonal shortage of labour—as
during harvesting months, for example—that Foley and other early
observers of the industry often commented on seems to have lost its
importance in the later years. In their memorandum dealing with
'methods of recruitment' the IJMA said to the Royal Commission in
1929 that 'labour is in good supply all the year round'. When asked
about the seasonal shortage of the 'olden days', the IJMA repre-
sentatives remarked that even those conditions had changed after
1914: 'the fact remains that since 1914 labour has never been scarce'.\(^{132}\)

Evidence of the industry's sense of satisfaction regarding the supply
of labour may also be seen in certain significant changes in the
geographical location of the mills. In the early days, when the mill
hands were local—that is, 'mostly Bengalis'—an 'isolated site' for a
mill was 'recognized as an advantage, the hands . . . living in the
neighbourhood'.\(^{133}\) In those years 'it was considered by the mills a

\(^{128}\) Foley, op. cit., para. 28.
\(^{130}\) Report of Labour Enquiry Committee of 1895 (Calcutta, 1896), pp. 49-51. See
also A. K. Bagchi, op. cit., p. 135.
\(^{131}\) Foley, op. cit., paras 18, 21-4.
\(^{133}\) Foley, op. cit., para 26. The early mills like Fort Glover, Gourepore, Budge
Budge, Kamarhati, etc., all followed this policy: see The Jute Mills of Bengal, pp. 27,
35-6, 43, 45, 68, 81.
matter of life and death to prevent a rival company settling down in proximity to their labour supply'. 134 The first two years of the Victoria Jute Mill built in 1885 on the river bank opposite the Samnugger Jute Mill were marked by what Wallace called 'the celebrated land dispute' between the two mills. 135 'We are a little short of hands this week', ran a typically complaining letter from the Samnugger Mill to its directors in 1887, '... and this may affect us. The Victoria [Mill] has taken up all our spare hands ... [and] we do not have so many to fall back on and that injures us a bit.' 136 The Hastings Mill's rather 'unremunerative' 137 decision in 1894 to work day and night by electric light was 'said to have been suggested by a rumour that another ... firm contemplated putting up a large Mill near Hastings, whereupon the proprietors of the latter thought they might as well find employment for all the hands in the neighbourhood ... by running 22 hours, instead of from daylight to dark'. 138 As labour became 'chiefly immigrant' and came of its own in abundant numbers, the situation soon reversed itself. Mills were no longer located in isolation from one another. Instead, noted Foley, 'it is considered now [1905] ... an advantage to have a site in a centre, such ... as Kankinara, where immigrant labour congregates'. 139 This explains why the number of mills on the 24 Parganas side of the river Hooghly—where Kankinara, Jagaddal and other centres of immigrant labour were located in very close proximity to one another—eventually grew much faster than the numbers in other districts (see Table 1).

A significant aspect of this migration of labour from UP, Bihar and other places into Bengal was that it enabled the industry to replace Bengali workers by their 'cheaper', up-country substitutes and this at a time when the industry was looking for ways of reducing expenses. The IJMA's move in 1886 to reduce wage expenditure by short-time working was in fact preceded by 'most of the Mills ... taking action to effect a reduction of wages', for 'the tone of the market ... [was] still very unfavourable'. 140 Just how large these reductions were is suggested

138 John Leng, 'The Indian Dundee' in his Letters from India and Ceylon (Dundee, 1896), p. 79.
139 Foley, op. cit., para 26.
140 T.D.A. Minute books of the Titagur Jute Factory, letters from the Calcutta Agent dated 25 June 1884 and 20 May 1885.
The Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890–1940

TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of jute mills in the year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Parganas</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


by a letter that the Dundee directors of the Titaghur jute factory received from their Calcutta manager towards the end of 1885. The letter reported, to the directors’ delight, ‘that the wages at the works have now been reduced Rs 1000 per week below what used to be paid, which the Directors considered very satisfactory and creditable to the Manager’. The prolongation of working hours with the introduction of electricity into the mills about 1895 also seems to have caused a decline in the Bengali component of the labour force. Whatever the specific factors aiding these changes in the social composition of the jute mill working class, the result was that by the 1920s the labour force was of a predominantly migrant character (see Table 2).

It is important to emphasize that the industry did little to help these migrant workers to settle down in the city, and thus develop a permanently stable labour force. The reason for this inaction lay in the very mercantilist notion of profit that the jute mills employed in handling their affairs. To the Scottish (and later Marwari) entrepreneurs in the industry, profit was firmly linked to the idea of ‘cheap products’. It was thought that their cheapness gave these products—sacking and hessian of a very crude quality—a competitive edge over any natural or synthetic substitutes. Hence the insistence within the industry on keeping their products crude and

141 Ibid., Minutes for 21 Oct. 1885.
142 Wallace, op. cit., pp. 49-50.
### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Areas of origin of jute-mill workers, 1921–41 (figures in percentages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bengali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Figures have been rounded off to the first decimal place.)

**Sources:** Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855–1946—Some Preliminary Findings', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XIII, no. 3, p. 297, Table 6, except for the column for 1928 which is derived from W.B.S.A., Com. Dept. Com. Br., Apr. 1930, A7-12. The 1921 figures apply to the whole of the labour force and the 1928 figures relate to 25 jute mills. The 1929 figures are very approximate, and the 1941 figures were drawn from a sample survey of mill workers in the Jagaddal area and hence are not representative of the whole working class.

Inexpensive—a policy which resulted in a stagnant technology and an unskilled labour force. Besides, an inexpensive product had to be produced at a low cost, and the availability of cheap labour in eastern India was seen as a definite advantage in this regard. Thus developed the labour-intensive nature of the industry, where labour alone accounted for about 50 per cent of the cost of converting raw jute into the finished material (see Table 3).

The bulk of this 'labour cost' was constituted of wages. Given their concern for keeping down the prices of their products while using labour-intensive methods of production, the owners of the jute mills were reluctant to spend on labour anything beyond such minimum necessities as wages. And even the wages paid were single-worker wages; they were not enough to support a worker's family. According to an estimate of 1929 the 'average income' of a jute mill worker was Rs 5 per week, while it would cost him at least Rs 7 to maintain a family of himself, his wife and, say, three children. The increase

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144 Space does not permit any substantiation of the statements made here about the industry, but the reader may be assured that they are based on a careful consideration of the available evidence.

TABLE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Labour cost as percentage of the cost of conversion (figures relate to different mills)</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880a</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Figures for two mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1900b</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Figure for a hypothetical Calcutta mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927c</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Figure for one mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937d</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>Figure for four mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: for (a), *The Jute Mills of Bengal* (Dundee, 1880), pp. 20, 47; for (b), Archives of the Modern History Department, Dundee University, Card Collection on Cox Brothers, card entitled ‘Cost of Mill and Factory’ (c. 1900); for (c), D. H. Buchanan, op. cit., p. 250; for (d), C.S.A.S., B.P., Box XIII, ‘Paul’ to Edward Benthall, 20 Sept. 1937, Enclosures.

over the years in investment in workers’ housing was extremely tardy. An 1897 survey of about 73,000 of the Bengal jute mill workers showed only 13.5 per cent of them living in company-built coolie-lines. The rest had had to make their own arrangements.146 Thirty years later in 1929 when the mill labour force had increased to 339,665, only 30 per cent of the jute mill labour were housed by the mills, according to the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and the IJMA.147 Stability of labour was obviously not in itself a crucial concern to the industry—semi-skilled or unskilled workers being highly replaceable—so long as the supply of labour remained abundant.

One can also see this in the extremely underdeveloped nature of the factory rules that were in operation in the jute mills. The service rules, for instance, had been left largely uncodified. Graded wage systems (with provisions for regular increments), pensions, provident funds, sickness insurance, leave rules—all the usual inducements for long-term service and stability—were conspicuous by their absence. Leave as a rule was without pay and the amount of pay due to a worker during his or her sickness remained ‘a matter for the manager’s

discretion'. Sickness insurance was considered 'impossible' and so were provident funds and pensions. When the workers of the Fort William, the Howrah and the Ganges jute mills went out on strike in February 1937, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal concluded that they could not have had any 'serious grievances' as their leaders asked for 'such obviously impossible terms as provision of provident funds and pension'.

For such an uncared-for and poverty-ridden working class, the sardar performed functions that ideally should have been performed by the employers, such as supplying work, credit and housing. R. N. Gilchrist, the Labour Intelligence Officer of Bengal, pictures the average migrant worker 'as he sets out from his village to find work' thus:

The sirdar may oblige him with his fare and a little money to buy food on the way... The sirdar may advance him a little more money, for a job may not be immediately available, and he may also direct him to live in certain quarters and to buy his rice at a certain shop. The day when there is a vacancy comes, and the sirdar may say: 'Your pay on the books of the mill is twelve rupees a month, but I have incurred some expense for you. Usually when I give a job, I require thirty rupees down and one rupee a month for two years. You have no money to give me as a lump sum, so you will pay me two rupees a month for as long as I secure you a job. If you do not, I cannot be certain your job will last.' The grateful youth... gratefully accepts... As he grows older and wiser, he gradually finds out that the sirdar owns the house in which he shares a room with six others and for which they all pay rent, and that he also owns the shop where he buys his rice.

This of course was part of the 'corruption' that the industry and the government complained of. The sardari practices undoubtedly constituted a kind of secondary exploitation of ordinary workers by their supervisory or superior colleagues. But it could be legitimately

150 W.B.S.A., Home Poll, Confld. No. 60/1937.
151 R. N. Gilchrist, Indian Labour and the Land (Calcutta, 1932), pp. 6-7.
152 The words 'sardari practices' are used here in a generalized sense to designate activities not only of the Head sardari but of the under-sardars and some other workers as well. In an industry devoid of any structuring of skills or promotions, exploitation of the fellow worker was one important means of material advancement. The more ambitious and the luckier worker often followed the sardar's example of being a moneylender or a landlord to the less fortunate. Sardari is thus best treated both as a real institution and as a working-class ideal of success. See R.C.L.I., vol. XI, pt. 2, pp. 358, 365.
argued that the employers allowed such 'corruption' to exist because it saved them the expense of investing in institutions otherwise typical of the capitalist control of labour. *Sardari* control was cheaper than housing, health care or an articulated body of rules guiding the conditions of work.

VIII

A 'needs of capital' type of argument then tells us that the *sardar* existed along with his invariably 'corrupt' practices mainly because they were allowed so to exist. They suited the strategy of capital. This is fine and important but it does not go far enough for the purpose at hand. Most important, it does not answer the question that Marx helps us to raise: what was the relationship between the *sardar's* authority and his 'corruption'? As we have seen, it was *sardari* corruption' that ultimately distorted the documents which the supervisors in a jute mill were required to produce and keep. The nature of supervisory authority in the Calcutta jute mills was thus significantly different from the one discussed in Marx's argument. For Marx, the supervisor's authority in capitalist relations of production manifested itself in the keeping of time sheets, fine books, attendance registers, wage rolls, etc. Such maintenance of documents implied a keeping of the wage contract between capital and labour. And the notion of the contract took us back to Marx's specific assumptions regarding working-class culture, assumptions that informed his category of 'capital'. Our jute mills, however, present a very different picture. The supervisory authority of the *sardar* (or of his accomplice *babu*) produced unreliable, falsified documents. One could in fact go further and argue that falsifying documents was integral to the operation of the power and authority that the *sardar* wielded over the ordinary coolie. What appeared to the state as 'corruption', 'abuse', breaking of the rules, etc., was precisely the form in which the *sardar's* authority was manifested. Or to put it in another way, it was an authority that was incompatible with any bourgeois notions of legality, factory codes and service rules.

We would be mistaken, for example, to see the bribe that the ordinary coolie gave the *sardar* simply as an economic transaction. The bribe was also a sign, a representation, of the *sardar's* authority and its acceptance by the coolie, which is why an act of refusal to
pay the bribe was seen as a gesture of defiance and exposed the worker to a degree of anger, vendetta and violence from the sardar that was often out of proportion to the amount of money involved. K. C. Roy Chowdhury’s diaries mention the not untypical case of one Abdul, a worker of the Hukumchand Jute Mill, who was stabbed by the followers of a certain sardar called Sujat for having refused to pay the latter his dastoori, or customary commission.153 The nature of the sardar’s authority and power is visible in the details of the following letter that some twenty-eight workers of the Budge Budge Jute Mill once wrote to a Bengali barrister in December 1906:

We have to get permission for leaves from the Sahib. But we have to pay bribes to the babu and the sardar at the time of the leave; further, they take bribes from us every month and also when the Durga Puja season approaches. If we refuse to pay them they get the sahib to fine or dismiss us on false charges of bad workmanship. Till recently we felt compelled to meet their unjust demands. But as prices ran very high last year at the time of the Durga Puja, we expressed our intention to pay them a little less than in earlier years. At this the Head Sardar Haricharan Khanra has been going around instigating the Assistant Babu Atul Chandra Chattopadhyay to collect even more parbani [gifts customarily due at times of religious festivals; parban = religious festival] than usual. The two of them have even advised the in-charge Panchanan Ghose, a nice gentleman otherwise, to force us to pay a much larger parbani this year. When [in protest] we stopped paying any parbani whatsoever, they got the sahib to fine us on cooked up charges... But, in truth, we are not guilty.154

A large part of the sardar’s authority was then based on fear: ‘we felt compelled to meet their unjust demands’. So great was the fear of the sardar’s vengeance that several of the workers interviewed by the Royal Commission strenuously denied having paid any bribes for their employment. But their denial lacked the force of conviction. Sorju, an under-sardar of the Anglo-Indian Jute Mill, admitted that there was bribery ‘in every department’ of the mill but claimed that there was none in his own. Kalil, a weaver in the same mill, said that he had heard ‘that sardars take Rs 5 or Rs 10 but so far as I am concerned I did not pay anything’.155 Harilal, a spinner in the Titaghur

Jute Mill, insisted that he ‘did not pay any bakshish for getting my job’ while he thought it possible that ‘other people might be paying bakshish to the sardar’. 156 A Madrasi female worker of the Howrah Jute Mill told her interviewers that she got her employment only after promising the sardar two rupees from her ‘first wages’. On the statement being read out to her, however, she retracted it. ‘It is probably true’, remarked the interviewers. 157

It is of course undeniable that much of this fear of the sardar derived from the employers allowing him to ‘dismiss and engage fresh hands just at [his] pleasure’ (to repeat the words of the IJMA). Babuniya, a Bihari female worker of the Titaghur Jute Mill, expressed her fear to the Royal Commission thus:

When I was first entertained I had to pay Rs 4 bakshish to the sardar who appointed me. Each time I return back from the village I have to pay the same amount as bakshish to the sardar. I also pay him 2 as. every week. My husband paid Rs 6 when he was first appointed. He pays 4 annas a week to the sardar. If we refuse to pay the sardars we will not get work. Every worker pays a similar amount to the sardar. 158

Another important element in the sardar’s domination was the use of naked physical force. For the ordinary worker, as we have noted, there was always ‘the fear of being beaten’. The child workers, it was said, would not normally speak up against the sardar for this very reason. 159 Narsama Kurmi, a female worker of the Howrah Jute Mill, was ‘obliged to leave’ Howrah as ‘she had trouble with a sirdar’. She returned only after ‘she found [that] the sirdar who annoyed her [had] gone’. 160

Like all domination, however, the sardar’s domination was not based on fear alone. There was always an undercurrent of tension between the sardar and the ordinary worker and pushed beyond a certain point, the worker could become openly hostile. To be effective therefore the sardar’s authority also needed legitimacy and acceptance. Fear had to be balanced by respect. In fact, according to R. N. Gilchrist, the typical jute-mill sardar was more respected than feared. ‘The sirdar [is] a man of considerable importance’, Gilchrist wrote. ‘He is... respected, perhaps even feared.’ 161

156 Ibid., p. 78.
160 Ibid., vol. XI, pt. 2, p. 360
161 R. N. Gilchrist, op. cit., p. 6.
What made the sardar's authority effective? Our tentative answer would be 'culture', the culture to which both the sardar and the worker belonged. In essence this was a pre-capitalist culture with a strong emphasis on religion, community, kinship, language and other primordial loyalties. The evidence on this point is not direct but is extremely suggestive. It seems significant, for instance, that all the words used by the workers (and others) to describe sardari extortions—extortions summed up in the legalistic expression 'corruption' or 'abuses'—were words of pre-capitalist, pre-British origin: dastoori, bakshish, batta, parbani, salami, etc. Dastoori, the most widely used of these words, came from the word dastoor which meant 'custom' or 'tradition'. Even the word sardar in its meaning of 'labour supplier'—though literally it meant 'a headman'—was in vogue in the late eighteenth century and perhaps even earlier.162 Besides, the sardar's mode of operation had certain crucial pre-capitalist elements. He usually recruited on the basis of the often overlapping networks of community, village and kin. The Government of Bengal wrote:

Sirdars in the jute mills, engineering works, and other concerns recruit in their own native villages and surrounding areas; hence there is a tendency for people from the same village or the immediate neighbourhood to congregate in the same industrial area in Bengal.163

Much of the basis of the sardar's social control of the work force lay in community, kin or other primordial relationships and in the ideas and norms associated with them. For example, it was usual for important up-country sardars to build temples or mosques for the workers under them. On this depended a lot of the sardar's prestige and authority. Mosques in jute-mill areas are even today named after important sardars and stand as monuments to their one-time enormous presence. 'Manbodh sardar ki musjid', 'Birbal sardar ki musjid', 'Ishaque sardar ki musjid' are, to give a few instances, the names

162 See, for example, the use of this word by Krishnakanta Nandy in his account books of 1787-8 in S. C. Nandy, 'Krishnakanta Nandy's Book of Monthly Accounts of 1195 B.S. (1787-88)', Bengal Past and Present, Jan.-June 1980, p. 10. Bishop Heber's Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay 1824-1825 (1828) had references to such labourers as 'Sirdar bearers and bearers': Heber quoted in Brajendrath Bandopadhyay's 'Introduction' to Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay's Kalikata Kamalalaya (Calcutta, 1951), p. 21.

of three working-class mosques that exist today in the Kankinara area.\textsuperscript{164} Sardari was thus possibly an instance of a pre-colonial, pre-capitalist institution being adapted to the needs of industrialization in a colony.\textsuperscript{165}

The sardar then embodied contradictory elements of authority. He owed his formal position of being a foreman to the managers and owners of capital and, in that sense, was a functionary in the capitalist production system of the jute mills. He was also different from the traditional village headman of north India in that ‘sardar-ships’ could be bought and sold on the market. Yet he was not quite the industrial foreman of nineteenth-century Western Europe whose role ‘became increasingly technical’ as time passed.\textsuperscript{166} Sardars were selected not for any technical ability but for ‘the authority which they display[ed] over their fellowmen’ even before becoming sardars.\textsuperscript{167} Tumko apná sardar ká hukum manna boga (‘you will have to obey the order of your own sardar’) was one sentence that the Scottish managers and assistants in the mills were expected to learn in order to use it in dealing with a refractory worker.\textsuperscript{168} The sentence brings out the ambiguity of the sardar’s authority. His hukum (order) was obviously subordinate to yet another imperative (‘You will have to’), that of the manager, the representative of capital. But the world hukum, once again an ancient word familiar to the north Indian peasant, would have had long and deep resonances within the worker’s consciousness and culture.

The legally required factory documents on working-class conditions were thus largely irrelevant to the exercise of the sardar’s authority which was in the nature of pre-capitalist domination. He ensured obedience to his hukum through means that were either ‘illegal’ or fell outside the rule of law. His was not the ‘disciplinary authority’ that Marx outlined in his argument. When the Government

\textsuperscript{164} This information comes both from my field investigations and from K.C.R.P., Bengali diary no. 3, entries for 25 Aug. to 28 Nov. 1929.

\textsuperscript{165} R.C.L.I., vol. I, pp. 22-4, describes jobbery as the ubiquitous form of labour recruitment and control in Indian industrialization.


\textsuperscript{167} R.C.L.I., vol. V, pt. 1, pp. 280, 298. ‘Capability, efficiency, services’ were the other qualifications required.

of India grafted a disciplinary apparatus of documentation on the culture that supported (and sometimes resisted) the sardar's domination, these documents found their own place and meaning within that culture: as additional vehicles of the sardar's power and authority. The sardar now proved his power by bending rules and falsifying documents. Hence the phenomenon of 'false fines', 'cooked up charges', 'wrongful dismissals', etc. The very exercise of this authority therefore produced 'unreliable' documents.

IX

In conclusion, we may repeat our principal argument. An attempt to write a history of the conditions of the jute mill workers of Calcutta on the basis of documents emanating from the state and the owners of capital invariably reveals certain gaps in our knowledge of these conditions. In this essay we have argued that in so far as that knowledge has a history, the gaps have a history too. In fact it was the same history that produced both the knowledge—enshrined in archival documents—and the gaps which the same documents also contain. An examination of that history (with the aid of an argument borrowed from Marx) led us to investigate the political economy of the industry and the nature of the 'industrial discipline' operative with the mills. The latter question took us into the problem of 'supervision' and working-class notions of 'authority', and hence into the realm of culture.