Dock Labour and a Connected History of Workers in Early Twentieth Century Calcutta

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Abstract

This article argues that class formation and labour radicalism in the industrial cities of colonial India need to be located in connected histories of workers, which go beyond analysis of single industries. It shows that the horizontal mobility of workers in early twentieth-century Calcutta was a result of a pervasiveness of casual work, both among the 'unskilled' and the skilled. Skill levels and occupations were crucial in defining the boundaries of not one, as is frequently posited, but several labour pools. It was in this form that the reserve army of labour was ever-present in the city, which gave workers networks beyond one workplace, one neighborhood and frequently, even one industry. The special role of segments of skilled workers has rarely been studied in relation to labour militancy and politics. The article sustains an emphasis on the role of industrial centres, such as the docklands, through which a high degree of interconnectedness across industrial processes in terms of shared occupations and skills across several industries and neighborhoods, can be excavated and mapped onto episodes of labour militancy. The neighbourhood, the trade unions, and nationalist events have all hitherto been studied to understand the shaping of workers' protest. This article, by contrast, focuses on other crucial elements: the workplace and the industrial processes, which tied workers together in concrete, everyday, and proximate relationships.

Rivers loom large in the popular imaginations of Calcutta and indeed the province of Bengal. The official emblem of Calcutta is *mayur pakhi nao*, the boat of the Bengal of old,[1] and the Howrah bridge on river Hooghly is iconic in the photographic representations

[1] Jean Racine, *Calcutta 1981: The city, its crisis, and the debate on urban planning and development* (New Delhi: Concept, 1990).

of the city. In fact, the city's largest Nakhoda Mosque is located on the Chitpore road, the oldest artery of the city. The name of the mosque refers to a ship captain in several languages from the red-sea littoral to the Malay islands, signifying a maritime connection. However, in the rich historiography of Bengal and that of Calcutta, the connections with the river and the sea remain secondary, and so do the number of associated labouring groups – the boatmen, the seafarers, the dockers, the coolie-workers. This article seeks to brings the sea and the subaltern to the centre of Bengal's historiography.

The region has been core to writing about subaltern groups, but in terms of labouring classes, historians have largely focused on Bengal's largest industry – the jute mills.[2] Only a handful of administrative histories of the port of Calcutta are available, even though it served as the single largest industrial site located within the city.[3] Dipesh Chakrabarty has commented on the density of workers in the jute mills, which were located on a narrow strip of land on the banks of the River Hooghly.[4] The mills employed between 250,000 to 300,000 workers in the 1920s-30s, but these workers were relatively scattered across thousands of individual mills: on average, each mill employed 3,635 workers.[5] In comparison, the Calcutta port concentrated a far greater number of workers in an industrial centre, comprising the neighborhoods of Khidirpur, Watgunge, and Metiaburuz within the city, and employed between 20,000 and 50,000 workers with varied skills and social backgrounds. The prevailing focus on the jute mills, which were situated in mill towns, has also meant that labour historians have rarely taken the urban city as a framework of analysis, resulting in the exclusion of the inter-relationships between the workers that are subject of their studies and the rest of the city's workforce.[6] However, as this paper will show, the struggles of dockworkers were intimately connected with those of Calcutta's other workers. Workers at the docks came into frequent contact with many

[2] Among others see: Subho Basu, *Does Class Matter? Colonial capital and workers' resistance in Bengal, 1890 - 1937* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India : The Bengal jute industry* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ranajit Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in colonial history* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co, 1994) ; Anthony Cox, *Empire, Industry and Class: The imperial nexus of jute, 1840-1940* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Nirban Basu, *The Working Class Movement : A study of jute mills of Bengal, 1937-47* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1994.); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[3] Nilmani Mukherjee, *The Port of Calcutta: A short history*, (Calcutta, 1968); Sachinandan Sau, *Port and Development: A study of Calcutta Port in India*, (Calcutta, 1997); Calcutta Port Trust, *The Calcutta Port Trust. A Brief History ... 1870-1920. [With Plates and Maps.]* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1920).

[4] Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 8.

[5] Ibid., 8-9.

[6] Exceptions include: Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal, 1928-1934: The politics of protest* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987). Nirban Basu, *Politics and Protest, 1937-47: A comparative study of four major industries in Bengal* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2002).

other workers of the city – the cartmen, the jute mill workers, the railway workers, the boatmen, the skilled artisans and the scavengers, as well as workers from outside the city, such as the Indian, Chinese, and European seamen who had travelled to and from shores afar. Ferment among any section of the city's workers could quickly spread to workers at the port and through them to others in the city. This article investigates how docks emerged as a centre for labour militancy and politics by focussing on the structure of the labour market – specifically on the division between casual workers and skilled workers, labour processes (in terms of questions of skill and technology), and the industrial organism (or the interconnections between docks and other industries). By doing so, I offer a fresh perspective on the history of the post-war strikes and explain the tendencies towards 'mass' strikes in early twentieth-century urban India.[7] The article underlines the need to go beyond single-industry studies, as it shows that inter-war workers were far more mobile than has previously been accounted for, and that interconnected industrial processes in 'modern' economies intrinsically shaped labour as a political category.

Frederick Cooper has argued in the case of the Port of Mombasa and the African waterfront that the conditions of dock labour were typical of casual labour employed in a variety of different industries in the city, and therefore, 'the problem of the casual dockers in Mombasa … was the problem of labour in general.'[8] To make his point clearer, he contrasts the case of Mombasa with that of London. London dockers, with their irregular work patterns, were considered a class apart from the sections of regularly employed workers—the more respectable section of the working class.[9] This article develops arguments along similar lines. It shows that dock labour shared working and living conditions of casual labour with most workers in the city, and that this had implications for connections and political mobilisations. In India's case, casualty of labour has been traditionally understood as a product of the early stages of industrialisation, or 'imperfect industrialisation.'[10] Chandavarkar's work, which explored the nature of the labour market

[7] On the 1929 jute mills strike, see: Anna Sailer, "'Various paths are today opened': The Bengal jute mill strike of 1929 as a historical event," in *Working Lives and Workers Militancy: The politics of labour in colonial India*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (Delhi: Tulika, 2013), On the strikes of early 1920s in Calcutta, see: Sumit Sarkar, "The conditions and nature of subaltern militancy: Bengal from *Swadeshi* to non-cooperation," in *Subaltern Studies III*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984); Stephen Nicholas Gourlay, "Trade unionism in Bengal before 1922: Historical origins, development and characteristics" (Unpublished PhD diss., SOAS, 1983).

[8] Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban disorder and the transformation of work in colonial Mombasa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 8, 21.

[9] Ibid., 21.

[10] See, for example: David Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A study of the Bombay cotton mills, 1854-1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); David Arnold, "Industrial violence in colonial India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22, 2 (1980), 234-55; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*.

in the early twentieth century, made a significant contribution by arguing against the idea of 'imperfect industrialisation' and deconstructing the myth that divided formal and informal sectors into silos, highlighting at the same time the shared strategies of capital, which engendered fluctuating and uncertain demands for labour across industries in colonial Bombay.[11] Crucial to this casual regime of labour were segments of skilled workers, who were more crucial in technically advanced industries, such as at the ports, on the railways, and in engineering, than in other domains, and which have received comparably little scholarly attention. Studying the theme of skilled labour is important for deepening our understanding of casual labour regimes in the first half of the twentieth century.

This perspective is in line with recent trends in economic history, which have challenged an older view that emphasised the deskilling of labour and deindustrialisation. They instead stress significant continuities between 'traditional' and 'modern' industry in India.[12] Trithankar Roy and Douglas Haynes have both examined how artisans adapted to new dynamics of industrialisation in innovative ways. They also displayed how skilled weavers were particularly mobile in both the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and that in the latter period, this was not always a process of skilled artisans turning into unskilled workers.[13] Arun Kumar's work has additionally shown how railway workshops 'produced a culture of skilling under a paternalistic tradition...governed by hierarchies of caste, race, region and race.'[14] Reports from the 1920s confirm Kumar's argument that Indian workers were trained 'on-the-job' by senior workers in engineering and railway

[11] Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Ch.3; Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *History, Culture, and the Indian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59-82. Aditya Sarkar has explored the urban crisis caused by the threat of work stoppages of 'arterial labour': those who connected the major nodes and channels of the city's economy as part of their workday. Although Sarkar's focus remains spatial, it significantly displays the speed with which the occupational boundaries were crossed to make common cause, precipitating riots that assumed threatened the social order of the city. Aditya Sarkar "The city, its streets, and its workers: The plague crisis in Bombay, 1896-98," in *Working Lives and Workers Militancy*, ed. Ahuja, 28-39.

[12] C.J. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy 1880-1955: The Tamilnad Countryside* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), Ch. 5; Tirthankar Roy, *Artisans and Industrialization: Indian weaving in the twentieth century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Konrad Specker, "Madras handlooms in the nineteenth century," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 26, 2 (1989), 131-66; Douglas Haynes, "The Dynamics of Continuity in Indian Domestic Industry," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 23, 2 (1986), 127-49.

[13] Douglas Haynes and Trithankar Roy, "Conceiving mobility: Migration of handloom weavers in precolonial and colonial India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 36, 3 (1999), 275-302.

[14] Arun Kumar, "Skilling and its histories: Labour market, technical knowledge and the making of skilled workers in colonial India (1880–1910)," *Journal of South Asian Development*, 13, 3 (2018), 266-7.

workshops, as opposed to in the training schools set up by the colonial state.[15] Together, this literature, even if scant, draws our attention to significant sections of skilled workers, who found that their existing skills were valuable, even in the most technically-advanced sectors of the economy. In what follows, this article discusses in detail the kinds of skills required in the maritime economy of port cities, some of which were closely related to those found in engineering and railways.

In the absence of many studies on the artisans and skilled workers in the colonial economy, there is an assumption that workers in most industries required little skills and were therefore easily replaceable. It has been argued that such employment patterns resulted in lack of unionism and collective action.[16] In Bengal's case, Chakrabarty has most influentially argued that the nature of work, which required such little training, had implications for authority and power in the jute mills. This authority, 'the near-feudal domination' in Chakrabarty's words, whether of the sirdar or the Scottish managers, was highly 'personalised, excessive, [and] terrorising.' It never developed into the authority, which is supposedly the universal characteristic of capitalism, in which the rule-book replaces the lash. The protest of workers then 'inverted' this structure of authority; it was *defined* by acts of physical violence and personal vengeance.[17]

There are several problems with such a line of argumentation. At the outset, the nature of work is described in a superficial manner. Chakrabarty too easily dismisses the varying degrees of skill requirements in Bengal's industries. The preponderance of workers who required little training may have been particularly striking in the jute mills, but even here the situation of weavers needs to be studied. Second, although violence against management was very much part of workers' protest, Chakrabarty interprets his fascinating sources about the ubiquity of physical violence in a way that reduces 'protesting' to 'a ceremony of defiance.'[18] He imprisons labour militancy spanning half a century within imagined notions and 'structures' of feudal culture, which hardly seem to change, precluding any analysis of the novelty of forms of protest that erupted in the twentieth century.

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[15] A.R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay: A study in the working and living conditions of the wage-earning classes in Bombay* (London: P.S. King and Son, 1925); Royal Commission of Labour in India (hereafter: RCLI), Vol. VIII, Part 1, written evidence railways, 12-13.

[16] See, for example: J. Harriss, "The working poor and the labour aristocracy in a South Indian city: A descriptive and analytical account," *Modern Asian Studies*, 20, 2 (1986), 231-83.

[17] Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, esp. Chs. 3-5.

[18] Ibid., 182.

By contrast, this article shows how the condition of 'casuality' was widely shared, and that it shaped spectacular episodes of labour militancy that frequently became generalised across occupations and industries. These strikes – 1890s, 1919-21, 1927-29 – can be characterised as 'mass strikes,' to borrow a concept from Rosa Luxemburg, as these were spontaneous in a specific sense. They were not pre-planned, they lacked overall direction by labour organisations of any kind, and they did not have a set of common demands.[19] Nevertheless, the spontaneity of the strikes did not make them less significant than organised general strikes or political demonstrations. In fact, such events, which began as localised strikes, engulfed several industries at once, exacted concessions from employers, disrupted existing social relations, defined the arrival of workers' movement on the scale of the city, and opened wide possibilities for threatening the social order, including for general strikes to emerge. For instance, Sailer's work shows how the first general strike of jute mill workers in 1929 cannot be understood to have been proclaimed in advance and from above, with its pathways and outcomes predictable and planned in advance. It *emerged* out of a context of intense labour militancy involving several industries in 1927-29.[20] Local strikes in mills became 'generalised' as a result of tense interactions between workers, unions, and the state authorities, taking the shape of a general social upheaval of jute workers. That the mass strikes were effective is indicated by the adoption of labour legislations to contain them – the Factories Act (1922), Workmen's Compensation Act (1923), Trade Unions Act (1926), Industrial Disputes Act (1947). Legislations referring specifically to dock labour include: Indian Dock Labourers Act (1934) and Dock Workers Regulation of Employment Act (1948).[21]

If the implications of a casual workforce for labour politics and the social order of the city haven't been studied systematically, the mass strikes that workers were part of have been largely understood from the perspective of nationalist mobilisations, their relationships with communist politics, and the plague of 1898.[22] The strikes of the early 1920s have been particularly well-studied. In the older historiography, an exaggerated

[19] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the political party and trade unions* (Detroit: Marxist Educational Society of Detroit, 1906): https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm [Accessed: 2 Nov. 2022]. Luxemburg conceptualises the strikes in the Russian cities in the decade leading to the 1905 revolution as 'mass strikes.'
[20] Sailer, "'Various Paths Are Today Opened'," 207-55.
[21] In reference to Bombay, see, for example: Chandavarkar, *History, Culture, and the Indian City*, 121-90; Meena Menon and Neera Adarkar, *One Hundred Years One Hundred Voices: The Millworkers of Girangaon: An Oral History* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004); Karuna Dietrich Wielenga, "The emergence of the informal sector: Labour legislation and politics in South India, 1940–60," *Modern Asian Studies*, 54, 4 (2020), 1113-48; Ravi Ahuja, "'Produce or perish': The crisis of the late 1940s and the place of labour in post-colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies*, 54, 4 (2020), 1041-112.
[22] For Calcutta, see: Basu, *Does Class Matter*; Suchetana Chattopadhyay, "Muzaffar Ahmad, Calcutta and Socialist Politics, 1913-1929" (Unpublished PhD diss., SOAS, 2004); Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class*.

importance was assigned to nationalist politicians. For instance, Rajat Kanta Ray, argued that 'the real driving power at this point was provided by..., the unions of white-collar employees, who were naturally far more politicised than manual workers.' But Ray wrongly assumed the existence of unions as a barometer for indicating levels of militancy among workers.[23] Even if it is true that unions predominantly existed among the white-collar employees in the early 1920s, these could be as much of a hindrance to strikes as a catalyst. The work of Sumit Sarkar and Subho Basu has emphasized workers' collective agency in the 1920s strikes, and Sarkar's article has allowed us to differentiate the mode of subaltern politics as relatively autonomous from the nationalist movement.[24] The spread of the strikes across industries, in the near absence of trade unions and at a time of workers' tenuous relationship with the nationalists, calls for greater attention to the social composition of the city's workers both in relation to each other and as part of interconnected industrial processes. I examine casuality within the framework of not just a labour market, in which one considers abstract units of labour, but within a concrete industrial economy with varying levels of skills and a diversity of occupations, and I argue that this is vital to understanding the pathways, rhythms, and the possibilities of labour militancy. Closer attention to connections between industries in terms of skill requirements, technology, and ownership, offers a more finely grained analysis of the shape and content of labour radicalism.

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts. The first two discuss the structure of the labour market in conjunction with the social composition of workers at the port, highlighting two seemingly contradictory features: the casual nature of employment and the segmentation of labour market in accordance with skills. It situates the port in the wider industrial organism of the city, exploring the interconnections with other industries – such as engineering workshops, jute presses, railways, and general warehouses. The final section focuses on a specific mode of labour militancy, that is the frequent participation in city-wide episodes of mass-strikes. The article emphasises the role of industrial centres, such as the docklands and as far as Howrah, through which a high degree of interconnectedness across industrial processes and locales can be excavated and mapped on to episodes of labour militancy via shared occupations and skills. The neighbourhood, the trade unions, the nationalist events have all been studied to understand worker protests. This article adds further, crucial elements: the workplace and the

[23] Rajat Kanta Ray, *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure groups and conflict of interests in Calcutta City Politics, 1875-1939* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979).
[24] Sarkar, "The conditions and nature;" Basu, *Does class matter*.

industrial processes that tied workers together in concrete, everyday, and proximate relationships.

THE 'NOMADIC' DOCKER

The twentieth century dockers – those who unloaded and loaded goods – have already received some scholarly attention.[25] However, dockers formed only one section of the workforce, albeit an important one. The port was a complex industrial system with an extensive division of labour and a variety of skill levels and types. At the port, there were four main types of workers based on the kind of work they performed: the boatmen or marine workers, the artisans at the workshops, the dockers, and the railway workers.

Modern Calcutta port emerged in the late nineteenth century to serve the steamship trade of the British Empire. The landmark developments in its making were: the construction of the jetties from 1860s to 1870s; the setting up of semi-governmental Calcutta Port Trust in 1870; and construction of an oil wharf, a railway line, and the first wet docks—Kidderpore docks in 1880s and 1890s.[26] Aniruddha Bose analysed the the workers who constructed and worked at the docks and, using his study as a basis, it can be concluded that the labour employment systems at the port were relatively set by the turn of the century.[27] They were, however, to be transformed in the immediate aftermath of independence, as dock labour was decasualised across India.

The number of workers employed by the Port Trust and other contractors can only be estimated for the first half of the twentieth century, since somewhat accurate figures only became available during the two major all-India enquiries into the conditions of labour: the Whitley Commission (1929-1931) and the Labour Investigation Committee set up in 1944.[28] In the 1920s, the Port Trust directly employed around 6,745 workers:

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[25] Shubhankita Ojha, "Regulating the dockers: A study of the labour regime at the Calcutta port and docks" (Unpublished MPhil diss., University of Delhi, 2010); Mariam Dossal Panjwani, "*Godis, Tholis* and *Mathadis*: Dock workers of Bombay," in *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790-1970*, eds. Sam Davies, Colin J. Davis, David de Vries, Lex Heerma van Voss, Lidewij Hesselink, and Klaus Weinhauer (London: Routledge, 2000), I, 425-42; Mariam Dossal Panjwani, "Space as determinant: Neighbourhoods, clubs and other strategies of survival," in *Dock Workers*, eds. Davies et al., I, 746-761; Rasiklal Popatlal Cholia, *Dock Labourers in Bombay* (Calcutta: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1941).

[26] Aniruddha Bose, *Class Conflict and Modernization in India: The Raj and the Calcutta waterfront (1860-1910)* (London: Routledge, 2017), 144, 217.

[27] Ibid. Ch. 3. In this chapter, entitled, 'A Dangerous and Difficult Workplace,' Bose discuss the major infrastructure changes between the 1870s and 1890s, and their impacts on work-process.

[28] Benjamin Zachariah, "The creativity of destruction: Wartime imaginings of development and social policy, c. 1942–1946," in *The World in World Wars Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*, eds. Heike Liebau, Katrin Bromber, Katharina Lange, Dyala Hamzah, and Ravi Ahuja**, (**Leiden: Brill, 2010), 572.

1,745 dockworkers, 2,000 'seaman type' or marine workers, and 3,000 workers in the workshop.[29] A significant number of railway employees and clerical workers were also employed, but the numbers are not available for the interwar period.[30] As per the more complete estimate made in 1947, the total number of workers had risen to 18,000.[31] However, since the number of workers increased exponentially during the wars, the figure is not entirely indicative of figures or trends during the interwar period. The Port Trust maintained a complex mix of temporary and permanent workers, mostly men, even in its more skilled sections, such as in the workshops and the marine section. Most of the workers were temporarily employed; as late as 1946, it was noted that only 23.78% of workers were permanent.[32] In the 1920s, it is probable that even fewer permanent workers were employed, since the reorganisation of the Port during the war under the US military included employment of substantially more permanent workers.[33] However, the dividing lines between the temporary and permanent, the contracted-out and directly employed, the skilled and less skilled were not so defined before independence. For one, the ubiquitous *sirdar* of the Indian industrial scene or his equivalent on the dockyards, docks and ships – the *serang* – was found in almost every section. His importance at the workplace signified the presence of a casualised labour system. This is not surprising, since ports across the globe were known for their casual labour regimes until the implementation of decasualization schemes after the World War II.[34]

Dockers formed the single most numerous section of workers at the port in interwar Calucutta. They were responsible for loading and unloading, and were known as 'coolies,' a term denoting any type of 'unskilled' labour in colonial India.[35] They were largely employed through contractors, such as Bird and Co., the single largest contractor for those working as loading and unloading workers at the sheds, warehouses, boats, flats, and ghats

[29] Kolkata Port Trust Maritime Archives (hereafter: KPTMA), 7063/PI, Royal Commission on Labour in India, Reply of the Port Commissioners to the Secretary, Bengal Government.
[30] The Port Trust did not supply any information about the railway workers. They explained that conditions of railway workers at the Port were similar to railway workers in general. The Whitley commission had two separate volumes on railway workers, but not much information is available on Port workers in these volumes. Clerical workers were completely excluded from the Commission.
[31] Shantaram Ramkrishna Deshpande, *Report on an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour Employed in Ports* (Simla: Government of India Press, 1946), 11.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Prerna Agarwal, "The war at the workplace: Calcutta's dockworkers and changing labour regime, 1939-1945," *International Review of Social History*, 67, 3 (2022), 407-34.
[34] Lex Heerma Van Voss and Marcel Van Der Linden, "Dockers' configurations," in *Dock Workers*, eds. Davies et al., I, 762-80.
[35] Ravi Ahuja, "Networks of subordination, networks of the subordinated: The ordered spaces of South Asian maritime labour in the Age of Imperialism, c.1850 -1947," in *The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region*, eds. Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné (London: Routledge, 2008), 12.

on the Hooghly. Not all these workers found employment every day, although figures for unemployment levels are unavailable.[36] They were employed on a piece-rate basis, or what was known as the *khatta* system, earning an average between Rs. 20 and 25 per month.[37] Among them, a smaller number was employed as monthly men for skilled jobs, such as 'awkward cargo' and coal trimming.[38] The stevedores, who directly provided the labour to the shipping companies, employed roughly 15,000 workers, who worked on-board the ships, but half of them were unemployed at any point.[39] They were considered more skilled and their wage-levels were about double that of shore dockers, and are therefore discussed separately below. A sizeable section of 'coolies,' about 1745, were employed directly by the Port Trust in the inter-war period. Those employed by the port performed loading and unloading tasks that were more skilled, such as at the Calcutta Jetties (where imports arrived), and a small proportion were employed at the tea warehouses and the coal berths.[40] Called the 'Monthly Coolies,' they were 'monthly-rated,' but paid in accordance with the number of days they had worked.[41] In other words, by paying workers only for those days when work was available, the Port Trust had found a way of casualising the small section of directly-employed dockers, too. Except at the jetty, the 'monthly-rated' workers worked at the same sites as the contracted-out dockers. Officially, they worked between 7am in the morning to 5pm in the evening, with two breaks at 9am and 1pm.[42] The 'monthly-rated' earned a monthly wage of Rs. 17 or 18,[43] which was comparable to the average wage of a jute worker (just above Rs.20).[44] They earned marginally less than the contracted-out dockers, but were compensated for it, as they were paid a housing allowance or provided with an accommodation, had more regularity of work, and were paid overtime.[45]

The dockworkers, as the Chairman noted, were socially very close to the 'casual section' of the city's workforce, which was also the largest section.[46] In the largest industry of the city, the jute mills, three types of workers were employed – *badli* (those

[36] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 1, 252.
[37] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 1, 254; RCLI, Vol. V. Part 2, 102.
[38] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 2, 252
[39] Ibid. 435-6.
[40] Ibid
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] KPTMA, 7063/PI, Royal Commission on Labour in India, Reply of the Port Commissioners to the Secretary, Bengal Government. Memoranda B- Unskilled Labour.
[44] Basu, *Does Class Matter?*, 44.
[45] Ibid., 254
[46] KPTMA, 7063/PI, Royal Commission on Labour in India, Reply of the Port Commissioners to the Secretary, Bengal Government. Memoranda B- Unskilled Labour.

employed on a daily basis), temporary, and permanent, and it was the *badli* workers who constituted the majority of workers, at least up until the 1950s.[47] It is not surprising that no direct evidence is available for the number or proportion of casual labourers in the city, but an estimation can be reached indirectly. The report of the Whitley Commission noted with no reservations that unemployment was not a problem in Indian industrial cities since the labour turnover was high.[48]

This still does not mean that that all casual workers were part of one and the same labour pool. Several labour pools, even if these intersected, existed. The shore docker belonged to the pool of 'general cargo carrying coolies' in the Calcutta industrial area. Up to now, historians – including Chakrabarty – have mostly focused on the role of *sirdar* in this context, giving an impression of a highly disorganised and fragmented sector of employment.[49] However, the supply of casual labour was monopolised by one of the biggest Calcutta managing agencies, Bird and Co., from the end of nineteenth century. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Cable, a senior manager, wrote, 'I suppose not a ton of goods leaves Calcutta which we have not touched once or twice.'[50] Apart from the port, they supplied labour for vessels and flats to the Inland Rivers and Steam Navigation Company and India General Navigation company at Armenian, Kulpi, Juggarnath and Nimtolla ghats, and Serajgunj, Khulna, Goalundo and Chandpur; and they supplied yards and wagons to the East India Railway at Howrah, Ramkristopur, and Sulkea, to Bengal and Assam Railway at Chandpur station, to Bengal Nagpur Railway at Shalimar goods station, and to the Government's salt golahas at Sulkea, jute presses, and Budge oil depots.[51] They employed between around 14,000 and 25,000 workers 'permanently,' mostly in Calcutta, others being casual.[52] According to a company representative, only 7,000 were 'permanent labourers' out of 14000 on the docks.[53] Since Bird and Co. were the main suppliers of labour involved in transportation of goods, the 'dockworker' probably had experience of working at multiple sites.[54] In effect, then, the

[47] Basu, *Does Class Matter?*, 58.
[48] RCLI, Report, 31-2. See also: S.G. Panandikar, Industrial Labour in India (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1933), 70.
[49] Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*.
[50] Godfrey Harrison, *Bird and Company of Calcutta: A history produced top mark the firm's centenary, 1864-1964* (Calcutta: Anna Art Press Private, 1964), 79.
[51] KPTMA, Committee of Industrial Unrest (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1921); Appendix to the letter from Bird & Co. to the Military Secretary, General Headquarters, India, New Delhi. 20 May 1943, Contract with Messrs Bird and Co. for handling general cargo and coal at the docks, 171/IX.
[52] Harrison, *Bird and Company*, 79.
[53] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 2, 108.
[54] Harrison, *Bird and Company*, 79. For a discussion of the emergence of massive labour contracting firms in late nineteenth century, see: Bose, *Class Conflict*, 240.

general cargo carrying worker, even while tied to a *sirdar*, had ample opportunities to gain experience of working in a wide variety of industries and locations. The geographical reach of these workers spanned the logistical pathways of the city, and as they were employed largely by Bird and Co., comparisons were more readily made. As will be seen, this had implications for labour militancy, as the coolie strikes of 1920 can be mapped on to the direction of jute traffic flows.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the dockers shared their habits of work with the casual workers of the city, including, their lack of 'commitment' to industrial work and even to city life. This led the port Chairman to label them 'nomadic.'[55] They tended to disappear for long periods of time, going back to their villages in the United Provinces (UP) and Bihar.[56] The Chairman noted that about 40% of their employees went back home for longer periods than their sanctioned leave within one or two years of service, as a result of which they were not eligible for paid leave and they were liable to lose their job.[57] Evidently, the incentive of earning paid leave, which was allowed after one year of continuous service or even keeping a semi-permanent job, was not attractive enough for workers to hold them in Calcutta for a period of even a year. As the Chairman noted, the workers were more 'contented' if they could spend long weeks away in their villages.[58] It has to be kept in mind that the majority of workers lived as single men in the city, since wages were not enough for a whole family to survive in Calcutta.[59] Similar was the case for Bird and Co. dockers, but the representative of the company, who dealt with the bulk of Calcutta coolies, put it in a more blasé manner: referring to Calcutta coolies in general, he said that the majority of the workers worked under the same *sirdar* for years as well as returned back home once or twice a year for a month or so (even if most of the workers were not paid for it).[60] This vague answer is indicative not only of his open admission that he did not have a clear idea of the holidays of his workers, but also that, for him, it was enough that these workers returned to the 'same sirdar year after year'.[61] In other words, the employers did not have much interest in maintaining a stable and 'committed' workforce at the port in the early twentieth century. The full extent of the employment of

[55] KPTMA, 7063/PI, Royal Commission on Labour in India, Reply of the Port Commissioners to the Secretary, Bengal Government. Memoranda B- Unskilled Labour
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 2, 248
[59] 'As late as 1946, a survey of family budgets showed that expenses exceeded income in 70 percent of working class households…' (Basu, *Does Class Matter*, 44).
[60] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 1, 252
[61] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 2, 101

a 'nomadic' workforce became clear during the Second World War, when it was the shore dockers among maritime labour who were most seriously and frequently affected by wartime conditions. Employers faced serious shortages due to periodic labour flights during periods of bomb-threats and because of the availability of better opportunities. In fact, Bird and Co. had to send special agents to their usual recruitment grounds in Bihar during the war, offering bonus incentives, and a switch to payment of daily wages.[62]

The casual nature of work so prevalent in the docks as in the city itself meant that tens of thousands of 'semi-idle' or 'idle' workers could be found in the streets of Calcutta.[63] In fact, this 'idleness' was a common experience of dockworkers and others related to the shipping world – the seamen, the workshop workers, and the inland sailors. Although there are no exact figures, once again symptomatic of the laissez-faire attitude of the employers and the government, the most concentrated and highest level of unemployment in Calcutta was probably in and around the docklands. On an all-India scale, the report of Whitley Commission had noted that unemployment or underemployment was the biggest problem associated with the docks.[64] It was to be found in 'their [workers] lodgings, in the streets, and at the dock gates.'[65] In Calcutta, around 20,000 seamen were waiting to be employed, many of whom waited at the shipping office all day.[66] The crews employed by the inland navigation companies also complained of insecurity of services and unemployment.[67]

Low levels of mechanisation meant that dockers not only loaded and unloaded, they literally carried enormous loads of commodities on their heads. But this also made them a particularly mobile section of the workforce. In the course of work, dockers encountered other workers of the city, usually also involved in transportation work. Workers not only had experience of working in multiple sites, but they also had enhanced opportunities for connections and interactions with city's workers. A reconstruction of labour processes based on the internal correspondences of Brocklebank, a shipping firm involved in tea exports, provides a close-up of the networks of a docker. Tea was transported on steamers and flat-boats from the tea-producing regions of North-East India to Calcutta port. The two single files of men merged into one at the foot connecting the landing jetty with the

[62] KPTMA, 171/x, Contract with Messrs Bird and Co. for handling general cargo and coal at the docks.
[63] Given high labour turnover, underemployment was probably high, even if unemployment was not as was claimed in the report of Royal Commission. RCLI, Vol. V. Part 1, 3.
[64] RCLI, Report of the Royal Commission of Labour in India, 185-6.
[65] Ibid.
[66] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 2, 90
[67] Ibid., Part 1, 433

transit shed. From the transit shed, the tea boxes were *carried to* the warehouses. After allocations and inspections were done by clerical workers, the tea boxes were transported to the export sheds via railway wagons. The labour used on the rail and in the export-sheds was employed by the Port Commissioners.[68] The shore dockers were in contact with the boatmen, stevedores' labourers, clerical workers, and the railway workers as they handled exports. As they handled imports, dockers were additionally in touch with cartmen, lorry drivers, and rickshaw pullers, who carried the imported goods to the company warehouses.[69]According to one account, the port jetty even served as a *bazaar*, at which consignees sold the goods to others, widening the contacts of dock workers among the city dwellers.[70] The transit sheds, warehouses, ships, boats, railway terminal points, jetty and dockyards, were simultaneously transmission points for commodities from the world over and contact-points between workers of various occupations.

Thus, the docker, on whom one of the most important ports of the British Empire relied for the flows of its commodities, was wanting in commitment, was periodically idle with no facilities for recreation except for the streets of Calcutta, was surviving on wages just enough for a single man, and was working in small gangs headed by a sirdar of his own milieu. The conditions of dockers in ports the world over was casual and, in many ways, miserable, but at a colonial port like Calcutta, there was an added factor of instability: the 'coolies' of the port shared their working conditions with those employed within shipping industry and beyond, and they had experience of multiple workplaces. The networks of such workers, opaque as they were to outsiders, went beyond a single workplace and extended wide into the city.

SEGMENTS OF SKILLED WORKERS

Employers in almost every industry distinguished workers in terms of 'skilled' and 'unskilled,' although the definition of 'skill' was particular to an industry and did not necessarily refer to technical training or craftsmanship. Skilled workers included enginemen, pumpmen, carpenters, mechanics, electricians, and those who had long experience in coal mining; men employed in 'hot and heavy trades' in the metal and steel factory Ichapore; those involved in assorting and pressing operations in jute presses;

[68] Archives Centre at the Maritime Museum, Liverpool, Brocklebank collection, B/Broc/5/2/11, report by Mr E.C. Cottingham and Mr E.A. Newland on their visit to India and Ceylon, etc. 1948-49.
[69] Ibid.
[70] National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London (hereafter: NMM) Calcutta Liners Conference, 26 April 1920, Minutes.

weavers, joiners, mechanics and blacksmiths in jute mills; and pointsmen, signalmen, shunting porters, to name a few, in railways.[71] Contrary to the stereotype of the unskilled upcountry worker, skilled workers formed a higher proportion of workers who migrated from North Bihar and UP to Bengal.[72] Raising the question of skilled workers helps us to deepen understandings of the functioning of the casual-labour regime. Skilled workers were of particular importance to employers in engineering, ports, railways, and printing presses, and they deployed several strategies to maintain at least a core of such workers surrounded by casual workers, but the boundaries between these sets of workers were fluid, which had implications for labour militancy. During the First World War, the number and demand for skilled workers, especially in the engineering and metal trades, grew considerably, and shortages were experienced in certain sectors until the late 1920s.[73] In the post-war strikes discussed below, workers from industries with a greater dependence on a trained workforce spearheaded the movement. These workers certainly felt that they had a much greater bargaining power, especially during the post-war boom. A focus on skilled workers, which means a greater attention to labour processes, helps to develop arguments discussed above about the existence of multiple layers of sometimes intersecting labour pools. This enables an appreciation of patterns of cohesion resulting from an interconnected industrial economy.

The most 'modern' and vital sector of the colonial economy was not entirely dependent on casual labour but also on sections of skilled workers. The maritime labour market was characterised by segmentation in terms of religion, region, and caste. The shore dockers were predominantly recruited from UP and Bihar, the coal berths labour being exclusively recruited from Bilaspur, Benaras, Ghazipur, Patna, Gaya, Monghyr – the latter two districts also supplying workers for the coal mines. The lines of segmentation were sharper with respect to two categories of skilled workers – stevedores' labourers and mariners, perhaps because these workers were better able to guard entry into their occupation. They were recruited from even more specific rural 'catchment' areas up until the early 1950s. It is to these sections that this article now turns.

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[71] RCLI, Report of the Royal Commission of Labour in India, London, 1931, 202 (metal and steel factory, Ichapore), 298 (jute mills), 358 (mines), 78 (Jute Presses)

[72] Census of India, 1921, Vol. V, Bengal (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1921).

[73] The number of persons employed in metal industries increased from 71,045 in 1911 to 164,680 in 1921, and persons employed in metal, machinery, etc., workshops increased from 23,147 in 19.11 to 81,598 (Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Private Investment in India, 1900-1939* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 334-5. In 1918, the largest number of engineering workshops (including iron and brass foundries) were situated in Bengal. *List of large industrial establishments in Bengal* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1918).

The dockers who did the loading and unloading work on-board the ships, also known as stevedores' labourers, were considered skilled workers, and their wages were significantly higher than other dockworkers. Writing about Bombay docks, where those working on the ships were also employed through the stevedores and not the Port Trust, a contemporary, Burnett-Hurst, noted the following reasons:

> Cargo is frequently not homogeneous and varies in bulk, weight and nature of goods to be transported. The stevedores have to work out the method of storing cargo in given space so as to maintain the vessel on an even keel. Moreover, certain commodities must not be stored in proximity to others. otherwise the pungent odour of the one would damage the other. e.g. tea and cardamoms must not be stored together.[74]

There are, in fact, striking similarities between the recruitment and employment patterns of these workers in Bombay and those in Calcutta. In both cases, they were not drawn from the same social milieu as shore dockers. In Calcutta, 75% belonged to the Muslim residents of the riverine Darbhanga district in Bihar. According to one report, this was 'owing to their superior physique and brawn'; in Bombay too, a similar proportion were reported to be Muslims.[75] A small proportion of Hindus from Orissa were employed in Calcutta. It is remarkable that trade unions and demands of shore dockers and stevedores' labourers remained essentially separate throughout the first half of the twentieth century, even though these two sections of workers worked side-by-side and were sometimes used as strike-breakers against each other.[76] In fact, stevedores' labourers were one of the first sections to build their own trade unions, and they were also able to sustain multiple unions, including a communist one and one from the Muslim League.[77]

The site of work of stevedores' labourers, hatches of the ocean-going ships, opened a wider set of networks beyond Calcutta into the Indian ocean littoral and the rest of the world. They were in direct contact with the Indian seamen, as well as with seamen from China, Europe, and the USA. They also had links with dockers from across the Indian Ocean, such as those in Bombay, Madras, Karachi, and Rangoon, which were rendered visible as a strike for shorter working hours spread across these port cities between 1931-

[74] Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay*, 73.
[75] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 2.
[76] For instance: KPTMA, 6640/1, Strike of stevedore labourers 1922.
[77] Prerna Agarwal, "In the name of Islam and constitutionalism: The murky world of labour politics in Calcutta's docklands," in *In Defence of Freedom: Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and Strikebreaking, 1890-1930*, eds. Matteo Milan and Alessandro Saluppo (London: Routledge, 2020).

36.[78] Moreover, a Bombay docker played a crucial role in organising the 1934 dockers' strike in Calcutta and in setting up of the Dock Majdur Union. On several occasions, the most visionary and militant of the dockers' leaders happened to be seamen, who made a point of referring to their world-wide experiences about labour conditions and labour politics in their speeches.[79] In 1921 and again in 1937, strikes involving stevedores' labourers and the Calcutta seamen threatened widespread disorder in the docklands.[80] In the latter year, Aftab Ali, Indian Seamen's Union worked jointly with the Dock Majdur Union to agitate for a general shipping strike as Muslim League associated maritime unions threatened their respective bases. Stevedores' labourers and seamen were found side-by-side in street-fighting that resulted from trade union rivalries in the docklands in the late 1930s.[81] In forging links with the seamen (even if on somewhat tenuous grounds), the stevedores' dockers went beyond their rural milieu and extended their social networks based on shared experiences of working in the shipping industry and the dock neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, their connections with shore dockers are not visible at all, probably pointing to the social hierarchies within the port labour force that resulted from differences in skills.

The term 'seaman' usually refers to the sailors who worked on the British merchant ships or those of other European states. Interestingly, in the early twentieth century, seamen loosely referred to a wider variety of workers who were 'afloat' on the various vessels in use for river transportation across Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Orissa. This formed a vast network in eastern India, consisting of 50,000 workers for inland navigation companies and 50,000 as seafarers, with the Calcutta port as a nodal point.[82] The port directly employed 2,000 seaman-type – or more precisely marine workers – through the Deputy Conservator's department, 1,700 of whom worked on various vessels and around 300 worked ashore on the docks.[83] They manned the vessels of the Port Trust such as heave-up boats, hawser boats, anchor vessels, steam launches, and jolly boats, and they

[78] University of Gottingen Online Database: http://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/324221.html [Accessed: 4 Apr. 2018]. See: Monthly Reports: Conditions of labour, dockworkers' strike Karachi (Oct. 1929), 18-19;
Conditions of Labour, Burmese Dock Labourers' Strike, Rangoon (Apr. 1931), 35-6; Maritime Affairs a) Dock Workers Strike Bombay b) Dock Yard Workers' Strike, Madras (Mar. 1932), 77-9; Dock Workers Strike, Calcutta (Dec. 1934), 68-9; Conditions of Labour, Bombay Dock Workers strike (Nov. 1937), 26.
[79] West Bengal State Archives (hereafter: WBSA), File no. 438/37, Proposed action against the Red Union people for using abusive language against HM (Labour) and H.M.C., Meeting on 25 July 1937, Takthaghat Maidan
[80] NMM IPC/3/12, Calcutta Liners Conference, "Minutes of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the Calcutta Liners Conference," (Nov. 1920); Kokata Police Museum (hereafter: KPM) Shipping Strike, 8.
[81] KPM/SB/03128/05, Calcutta Dockers' Union, 1940; KPM/SB/03127/05, Dockers' Unions.
[82] RCLI, Vol. V, Part 1, Written evidence, 241-2.
[83] Ibid.

were crucial to the safe arrival of ocean-going ships into the docks.[84] They came from the same East Bengali districts, such as Chittagong, Jessore, and Noakhali, as the seamen working on the inland and ocean-faring ships.[85] It is likely that some of the unemployed seamen of both types found work at the port at least until the strike of 1927, when this particular section at the port was exclusively employed through the shipping broker's office.[86] Strikingly, the division of labour was organised and hierarchised along the same work titles across the various types of 'seamen' – *serangs*, seacunnies, tindals, firemen, *khalasis*, and coal-trimmers. After the strike of 1927, these workers were directly employed through the Port Trust, though they were still considered as distinct from the other sections of port workers. The 'seaman-type' preferred to learn from those going out to the seas and those working for inland steam navigation companies: the seamen and inland mariners both had strong traditions of trade unionism and labour politics. Indian Seamen's Union (ISU) was one of the first unions in the country, and the Bengal Mariners Union was formed in 1925 on the ISU's activists' template.[87] These two unions shared the same office in Ekbalpur lane in Khidirpur in the 1920s[88] and were under the leadership of Muhammad Daud, one of the earliest trade unionist seamen, who also led the strike of 1927 at the port.[89]

Most of the port mariners lived on-board the vessels they worked on. The rest were provided with 'free' accommodation on the docks.[90] They took leave, on average, for 2 months every other year.[91] The management were resigned to this fact, and the government representatives sought to develop a system that allowed workers to take long leaves, since getting them to take shorter leaves seemed unfeasible.[92] Their working hours were irregular and long, more than 12-hours a day.[93] They lived and worked on the same vessels and they were known for their camaraderie.[94] During strikes, they simply stayed on in their vessels, which was as much their home as the Port Commissioner's property, leading to dramatic clashes. Their networks of solidarity on the turbulent waters of

[84] Ibid., 240.
[85] Ravi Ahuja, "Mobility and containment: The voyages of South Asian seamen, c.1900–1960," *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006), 137.
[86] RCLI Bengal, Written evidence, 349
[87] Chattopadhyay, "Muzaffar Ahmad, Calcutta and Socialist Politics," 96.
[88] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 1, 432-3.
[89] Ibid., 240.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] KPTMA, 7063/PI, Royal Commission on Labour in India, Reply of the Port Commissioners to the Secretary, Bengal Government.
[93] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 1, 241.
[94] J. M. Kaul, *In Search of a Better World: Memoirs* (Kolkata: Samya, 2010), 82

Hooghly, although special, were comparable to the gangs of dock labour, who shared the experience of heavy and accident-prone manual work. Marine workers were a tightly-knit section of skilled workers, yet as we will see below, they too remained susceptible to taking strike action along with the rest of the port workers. Indeed, they may have transmitted the experience of labour politics learnt from the seamen.

In addition to seamen, the Port Trust employed about 3,000 engineering and metal workers in 1929, as 'skilled or semi-skilled' across their three workshops. Their employment was of a particularly intermittent character, with the number of workers required depending on the ships that needed repairs or overhaul.[95] Workers normally arrived at the gates of the workshops to look for employment and were liable to be dismissed at 24 hours-notice. This situation also meant that these workers were less tied to their employers, especially during periods of uptick in business activity. These workers circulated between several shipping and general engineering workshops located on the banks of Hooghly: those of the British India Steam Navigation (BISN), India General Navigation and Railway Company, Shalimar Works, Hooghly Docking and Engineering, Port Engineering, Ganges Engineering, Burn and Company, Jessop and Company, and Parry and Company, as well as possibly the specialised railway workshops at Kharagpur and Kanchrapara.[96] The circulatory and peripatetic nature of these workers was accepted as normal by employers. The Port Trust, for instance, had comparatively stringent rules for them when it came to employer concessions, as they had to be in continuous service for 3 years before being eligible for a provident fund.[97] The various categories of shipping workshop workers were: fitters, turners, boilermakers, blacksmiths, moulders, painters, drillers, coppersmiths, pattern-makers, blacksmiths, and masons, which were classed as 'skilled occupations,' as well as hammerman, khalasis and coolies which were classed as 'semi-skilled' or 'unskilled.'[98] Most workers at the workshops were considered to be skilled, and they came from strikingly diverse backgrounds – Bengal, UP, Orissa, South Bihar, and China. Caste backgrounds of skilled workers included Muhammadan Sheikhs, Chasikaibarttas, Jaliakarbarta, Kayastha, Namasudra, Pods, Lohars and Kamars.[99]

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[95] RCLI, Vol. V. Part 1.
[96] Dattatraya Vaman Rege, *Report on an Enquiry Into Conditions of Labour in Dockyards in India* (Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1946). Shipbuilding and engineering workshops were often mentioned together in industrial statistics.
[97] RCLI, Vol. V, Part 1, 247-8.
[98] Rege, *Report on an Enquiry*, Intro.
[99] Census of India, 1921, vol v Bengal (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1921). Based on census tables 1921 for engineering, shipping and railway workshops – the information is not very precise but provides a rough indication of social backgrounds.

The problem of precarious work raised difficulties for employers, who preferred to have a core of experienced workers.[100] Therefore, larger workshops directly employed a set of more regular workers on daily rates, who also had access to pensions or a provident fund, in addition to piece-rate contract workers. Given such a scenario, in most cases, these workers remained temporary even if they had worked 10 or 15 years in the same workshop. In fact, the turnover rate was high, over 60% of the workers had less than 5 years' service in 1944, even if 24% of workers had more than 10 years of service.[101] These conditions were repeatedly contested in the post-war period, usually by the piece-rate workers who resented material exclusions of various kinds.[102]

Even colonial officials and employers, who were never tired of reporting about the 'inefficiency' of Indian workers, were unable to deny the skills of workers employed in the workshops. A significant section came from hereditary craftsman castes, like carpenters or lohars (blacksmiths), which is also an indication that their 'traditional' skills were valued in certain niches of the 'modern' economy.[103] By the early 1920s, recruitment was being done outside of artisan castes as well, remarkably among men who were semi-literate and 'possess[ed] a reasonable degree of intelligence,' because literate men were apparently almost impossible to recruit for manual jobs. These workers were largely trained on the job by the more experienced workers, as the British found it difficult to train them in apprentice schools, which required higher levels of literacy.[104] Experience, therefore, engendered a certain level of control over the labour process. Moreover, government officials in the 1920s and 1940s were struck by the literacy standards and reading habits at workshops. Within the Royal Commission report, such standards were connected to 'professional attainment':

> Reading rooms, libraries and clubs, were rare exceptions in railway and shipping workshops, and engineering works, in which the standard of professional attainment in the artisan classes is relatively high.[105]

The workshops concentrated the skilled and semi-skilled. Their networks spanned the city, they possessed a certain pride and control over their work-process, and they had the opportunities and aspirations to educate themselves. Moreover, there were links between

[100] Contract workers were 73% of the workforce in 1944, Rege, *Report on an Enquiry*, 26.
[101] Rege, *Report on an Enquiry*, 27.
[102] Report, XXIV, XVI. Report, Committee on industrial unrest, *Times of India*, 21 Nov. 1919.
[103] RCLI, Vol. VIII, Part 1, Written evidence railways, 12-13.
[104] Ibid.; RCLI, Written evidence Bengal, Vol. V. Part 1, 202-3, 387, 391-2.
[105] RCLI, Written evidence Bengal, Vol. V, Part 1, 23.

the skilled nature of work and propensity towards political and collective action. For instance, in the police reports of the 1920s, there are reports of a rare professional association among the city's manual workers, a Lohar association organized by blacksmiths of Gaya working in Howrah, Kidderpore, and Calcutta, which was also a political organisation, with Gandhian objectives prominent during the non-cooperation movement.[106]

DISORDER IN THE CITY: THE MASS STRIKES OF 1920-21

Historians of labour have noted the phenomena of 'strike waves,' referring to a series of strikes over several months or even a year or two in India, that spread across the city, touching its various industries during the early twentieth century. The timeline of a strike-wave sometimes could be as short as a few days. They were usually associated with spikes in nationalist activity: for instance, the swadeshi movement,[107] the Rowlatt agitation, and the and non-cooperation movement,[108] but not necessarily so. The strikes of the late 1890s[109], 1927 – 1929[110] and 1937 have been widely discussed, even if usually with a reference to the jute mills. The post-war strikes of 1945-1947 are also beginning to draw further attention. Cataclysmic events, such as the plague in 1898, also brought the city's workers onto the streets.[111] For the strikes in the aftermath of the First World War, there is a tendency to assess them in terms of the relationship (or the lack of it) between the nationalists and subaltern classes, even though the most intense phase of strikes preceded nationalist mobilisation and the setting up of trade unions. By contrast, Luxemburg's concept of 'mass strikes' allows for an approach that accounts for the notable 'chaotic', 'elementary', 'spontaneous,' and 'economic' features. Although it would be fruitful to study the several episodes of both political and economic 'mass strikes' in India in the first half of the twentieth century in a single frame and track the shifting form and content of class struggle, the remainder of this article instead focuses on one particularly intense period – July-December 1920 – within one mass strike – that which followed the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movement (1919-22) – to demonstrate its potentiality. During this event, the city's workers took the opportunity to settle their long-standing accounts

[106] Ray, *Urban Roots*, 90.
[107] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010).
[108] Sarkar, "The conditions and nature."
[109] Basu, *Does Class Matter?*; Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class*.
[110] Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal, 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); Tanika Sarkar, "Dirty work, filthy caste – a history of Calcutta scavengers in the 1920s" in *Working Lives*, ed. Ahuja, 209-18.
[111] Basu, *Does Class Matter?*

emerging from the harsh experiences of First World War. In the 9 months following July 1920, 137 strikes involving 244,180 workers took place, and in 1922, 91 strikes involving 160,000 were reported.[112] Strikes were concentrated in the months of October to December 1920. Significantly, the largest number of strikes happened in engineering, foundry, and metal works (33), Jute Mills (27), and 'transportation and storage of merchandise in the port and city of Calcutta' (19).[113] Given that the number of workers employed both in transportation work and in the engineering workshops was significantly fewer than in the jute mills, the statistics give us a sense of the great intensity of strikes in the former industries, which have rarely been studied.[114] In fact, in the case of Bengal (and less so in Bombay), 'general strikes' are generally studied as they ripped through the jute mills, but strikes crossing multiple industries have received less scholarly attention. There is enough evidence to suggest, however, that mass strikes became a key feature of the labour movements in first half of the twentieth century – a phenomenon that is directly linked to the casual labour regimes of the colonial economy.

Starting with the beginning of the strikes, workers of government printing presses in Barisal, Sealdah, and Calcutta were among the first to stop work. Their actions were linked with strikes of printing workers as far as Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Shimla, who were dissatisfied with the government's new proposal regarding the pay of piece workers. They made abolition of the piece-rate system one of their key demands, and they were joined by the salaried workers.[115] Firemen at port railways were among the first among dock workers to announce their strike. They sent a petition with demands that included a wage rise, free quarters, regular privilege leave, sick leave, and extra pay on Sundays. They won significant concessions: free quarters, a pay rise from Rs. 15 to Rs. 17 and regular leave.[116]

There was a brief lull of a few weeks, in which short strikes related to arrests or dismissal of workers took place. The strikes gathered pace from the end of September onward. Major strikes took place at the tailoring firms in Calcutta (10,000), Calcutta Tramways (2500), Bengal Nagpur Railway Kharagpur railway workshop (13,000), Oriental Gas company, and Sealdah (1,100) workers.[117] The gas workers' strike plunged the city into darkness during the Durga Puja season, raising fears of urban crime for some

[112] Sarkar, "The conditions and nature," 292-3.
[113] Report of the Committee on Industrial unrest in Bengal (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1921)
[114] There are some exceptions: Gourlay, "Trade unionism in Bengal;" Sarkar, "The conditions and nature.".
[115] Committee of Industrial Unrest, pp. iv-v; *The Pioneer Mail and Indian Weekly News*, 23 July 1920, 30 July 1920.
[116] Committee of Industrial Unrest, p. v.
[117] Committee of Industrial Unrest, pp. viii-xii.

and marking a visible presence of labour in the life of the city.[118] The strike of railway workers at Kharagpur and general unrest among railway workers, appears to have inspired about a 1,000 Port Trust railway workers to also go on strike. They won their demand for a pay rise to the same level as at Bengal Nagpur railways in Eastern Bengal, housing allowance, holiday allowances, privilege leave, and free uniform. They were then joined by the crane workers at the jetties, who worked in close proximity.[119]

By the middle of October, work stopped at several engineering and shipping workshops. At first the strikes spread through the recently built motor workshops including, Breakwell and Co. (200), Russa Engineering works (2,000), Messrs Stuart and Co., Coach Builders and Engineering (450). The strikers' demanded 25-30% rise in wages and won Hindu and Muslim holidays for workers in workshops affiliated to the Society of Motor Trades.[120] They were followed by major strikes involving 3750-5000 workers at the two largest shipping workshops in Howrah of the BISN. This strike was initiated by temporary workers, who had experience of and contacts in many of the mechanical workshops in and around the city. Immediately afterwards, work stopped at the machine shop of the workshops, Hooghly Dock and Engineering Co. (800).[121] The workshop strikes had repercussions on various kinds of workers connected with the shipping industry.

Within a week, most sections of port workers were out, and the docklands emerged as one of the centres of strikes, from where strikes travelled back outwards to Howrah, the other centre of labour militancy. Given that the workshops were hardly in the vicinity of the docks, it is likely that the boatmen employed at the BISN workshops and on the river for plying commodities up and down the river were the carriers of the strike. In any case, they won a pay rise of 25% from Hoare Miller and Mcneill and Co.[122] Mariners employed by the Port Trust, who belonged to the milieu of boatmen, went out with 'exorbitant' demands: 75% wage rise, sheds and latrines on the banks of the river, pensions, and allowances for casualties, wounded, and sick workmen.[123] Stevedore labourers and sirdars, a whole section of whom were employed by BISN, stopped work and were found attending the meetings of workshop workers.[124] They elaborated a separate schedule of

[118] *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 19 Oct. 1920.
[119] *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 20 Oct. 1920.
[120] Committee of Industrial Unrest, xii-xvi.
[121] Committee of Industrial Unrest, xvi, xx.
[122] *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 1920 (unknown date).
[123] WBSA, File no 31/1920, Association, Port Commissioners
[124] Ibid.

ten demands that were entirely related to their particular occupational conditions – higher wages, shorter working hours, employment of two gangs per hook, and an attendance allowance.[125] They were credited with causing the biggest disruption in shipping in Calcutta since the setting up of the docks.

The success of the BISN workshop workers – a hike in wages, a rise in pension, khoraki and bonus, and half-pay for the strike period – catapulted the fitters, turners, riveters, carpenters and khalasis of the two port workshops to strike, who refused the increased wages offered and demanded a 33 1/2% wage rise. They also compared themselves to Port Commissioners' clerks, who had received a 25% wage rise and demanded strike pay quoting the case of BISN workshop workers.[126] The workshop strikes raised hopes among the hydraulic crane drivers, who probably could not work their cranes anyway, as they required a functioning hydraulic pump station attached to one of the workshops. They demanded an initial pay of Rs. 35 (to be incremented by Rs 1 for next 15 years), free quarters, warm clothing, one month's privilege leave, and sick leave on half pay.[127] Some of these demands had recently been won by the railway section of the Port, who now staked new claims, as they demanded the same terms as in the railways, in addition to free passes for going home during leave periods.[128] The strike of the railwaymen did not come through and the crane drivers did not succeed.

Strikes spread from Kidderpore towards Sibpur in Howrah, which was the next centre, along several possible pathways. The strikes swept through all the shipping workshops in Bengal, echoing as far away as in the steamer workshops of the India Steam and Navigation Co. and General Steam Navigation Co. Barisal.[129] In Howrah, work stopped in Messrs Parry Engineering works, Shalimar Works and Bally Engineering works. The largest of these strikes was at Shalimar Works, where the management tried to avoid trouble by paying a section of skilled workers but failed to do so. Over 2,000 workers went out, demanding a 20% wage rise, Rs 50 for Bonus and Ans. 4 as khoraki for night work – similar to at the BISN.[130] The case of the BISN was explicitly quoted by workers at Bally Engineering works, who demanded the same concessions.[131]

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[125] NMM IPC/3/12, Calcutta Liners Conference, 'Minutes of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the Calcutta Liners Conference', 8 November 1920.
[126] Committee of Industrial Unrest, xx-xxi.
[127] Committee of Industrial Unrest, xxii.
[128] *Indian Daily News*, 13 Nov. 2020.
[129] Committee of Industrial Unrest, xxii.
[130] ABP, 20 Nov 1920.
[131] Committee of Industrial Unrest.

With the major engineering works in Howrah on strike, a widely attended meeting was covered in unusual details in the local Amrita Bazaar Patrika. An artisan, Aditya Mitter and copper-smith Mistri Rakhal Chandra Dauli of Shalimar Works, organised the meeting in which they invited the well-known liberal nationalist lawyer I.B. Sen to speak to workers. Interestingly, Sen chose to address workers in terms of 'skilled' and 'unskilled' workers with no reference to the Shalimar works or engineering workshops as such, perhaps indicating an audience including workers from various workshops and mills in Howrah. The unity between skilled and unskilled workers was the main theme of his speech:

> Skilled and unskilled workers should combine and put pressure upon the capitalists to attend to the legitimate demands of labour. Here the duty to combine and to put pressure was principally that of skilled labourers, who could easily hold out against the capitalists. It was not easy to replace large numbers of skilled workers at a short notice. Labour should make use of this fundamental truth…[132]

The news article mentioned that Sen, among other nationalist politicians who spoke, was listened to most attentively. One of the reasons was that Sen articulated one of the main dynamics and tensions of the strikes: their beginning in workplaces with a large proportion of skilled workers, and the subsequent spread towards a wide array of industries. There was no linear relation between the level of skills and strike activity. In fact, within the printing workshops and in BISN, the temporary piece rate workers initiated the strikes and made sure that the more permanent workers joined, sometimes with violent interventions. Moreover, in the meeting organised by workers of Shalimar works, Sen directly addressed 'unskilled' workers, who 'must not starve [from] his social-intellectual and religious faculties' and 'not [be] brutalised by overwork and unemployment.' Notwithstanding the moralistic nature of the speech, this shows that 'unskilled' workers were present in the audience.

It is difficult to ascertain how such divisions were understood and categorised among workers, but it is clear that interactions and militant connections between 'skilled' and 'unskilled,' piece-rate and permanent workers within and across workplaces were central to the intensity and generality of the strikes. Even before the meeting at which Sen spoke took place, coolies or 'general labourers' had started to move across the North-

[132] ABP, 25 November 1920

South axis from Cossipore and Chitpur to Howrah and Kidderpore, a distance of approximately 6 miles.[133] At first, 'carrying coolies' from 19 out of 20 large Jute presses in the northern part of the city, Chitpur and Cossipur, stopped work. They were followed by 'preparing coolies' and then 'coolie-workers' employed by Bird and Co. in Chitpur. The strike then moved south along the river, spreading to all the major sections of coolies employed by Bird and Co., taking the reverse course to that of raw jute supplies into Calcutta from the river. It reached the coolies who worked at the jute godowns of river steamer agencies at Nimtollah, Armenian ghats, Juggernath and Kulpi ghats.[134] It then spread to workers of spice godowns in Aheertolla and across the river to the government salt warehouses in Sulkea and railway warehouses on the Howrah side, and then towards kidderpore docks, where workers from North Terminal ghats were reported to be 'instigating' the dock workers.[135]

'Coolie workers' had the most extensive network in geographical terms. First, their work made them particularly mobile, they carried goods from one place to another and they had experience of working at multiple sites, given that most of them were employed directly or indirectly through Bird and Co., which moved workers to multiple sites in accordance to labour market requirements. As the description of strikes above shows, this labour pool sometimes served as a conduit for the spread of strikes, in this case along the pathway of the flow of jute traffic. In fact, faint traces are left in the archives of the existence of a visionary Calcutta Labour Association, a union of coolies of Bird and Co. and other contractors. This was certainly an unusual union at the time, when most unions and labour associations were organised by clerical workers among relatively small groups of crafts or trades, or among a particular community. By contrast, this union successfully mobilised coolie labour on the scale of the city.

The joint-secretary of this short-lived union was Ram-Charitra Dubey, a dismissed gunner from Port Trust railway and coolie sub-contractor, who called himself the Sergeant-Major of Salvation Army.[136] His self-identification suggests that he held his position as part of Salvation Army Porter Coolie Corps, a non-combatant regiment employed for loading and unloading work in the Mesopotamia and Persian Gulf during

[133] "Description of Calcutta: The Capital of India," *Christian Watchman (1819-1848)*, 4, 37 (1823), 146. 2
[134] For an excellent description of jute traffic flows see: E. P. Richards, *The Condition, Improvement and Town Planning of the City of Calcutta and Contiguous Areas: The Richards Report* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 138-45.
[135] Reconstruction based on: Committee of Industrial Unrest, pp. xxiv-xxxix.
[136] Ray, *Urban Roots*, 97.

the First World War, and perhaps that he was proud of it.[137] That someone like Dubey, a dismissed railway gunner became a sub-contractor of coolie as well as the secretary of their union, indicates the intermeshing of working and militant lives of skilled and unskilled workers, and of dock workers and workers in other industries. Links that middle-class nationalist such as Sen made in their speeches were realised on the ground by those like Dubey, an unemployed skilled worker who had been in a position of authority in a military corps during the First World War, and this was key to such activism. The case of Dubey also reveals how dockworkers, who had opportunities for greater global exposure, especially during the World Wars, carried influence and had ambitions in labour politics beyond their own workplace.

Strikes in the docks resonated in Howrah along another pathway: through the networks of weavers of an 'isolated' Hooghly jute mill in Kidderpore. The demand for a 25 % wage increase in this mill became the cause for a general strike engulfing mills of Howrah City industrial group in quick succession – Howrah jute mills, Ganges jute mill, Fort William jute mill, involving 25-30,000 workers. Demands included payment of 6 days for 5 days of work. The responses of some weavers additionally suggest that strikers in the engineering workshops helped to propagate a general strike, and that they were being listened to: information was being circulated that all of Bengal was to be shutdown unless engineering workers received a 37.5% raise.[138] By the last week of November, Howrah had emerged as another centre, and with large sections of workers on strike, a riotous situation resulted. Shops were looted in Sibpur Bazaar and trams were halted. New hands, who were recruited at the Parry Engineering workshop, were beaten up in front of the police, Europeans mistaken for mill officers were stoned, and the workshop superintendent at the Port Trust was severely beaten by a group of 50 workers.[139]

Strikes carried on with a slightly lower intensity into the next year and in the year after. In 1922, labour unrest assumed an explicitly anti-colonial form. Solidarity strikes with tea plantation workers spread through Bengal-Assam railway workers and inland steamer workers. The unrest spilled into the docklands and even seamen threatened to

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[137] Salvation Army Rare Pamphlets Collection, Pam/R.41 "The War Cry, India," in *The World Our Field: Gatherings – press items concerning the work of the Salvation Army* (1917), 6. 'The Salvation Army in India, in response to a request by the military authorities, raised two non-combatant regiments for service in Persian Gulf, Mesopotamia. Each regiment is 800 strong, and is known as "Salvation Army Porter Coolie Corps." They are employed in loading and unloading vessels. They are each in charge of three British Salvation Army Officers, holding rank of Second Lieutenant, with two Indian Salvationist Officers, known as Sardars, and are enrolled for service during the war.'

[138] Committee of Industrial Unrest, xxvii.

[139] *Indian Daily News and Pioneer Mail,* 3 Dec. 1920.

strike. During those days, dock labour struck for their right to wear Gandhi caps while at work onboard the European ships.

CONCLUSION

By focussing on the first and most intense phase of strike action in the post-war period, this article draws attention to the role of casual employment patterns, workplace relationships, and interconnected industrial processes across the city as integral to an understanding of worker militancy in early-twentieth-century India. Taking the docklands as one of the centres of labour unrest in July-December 1920, it tracks the pathways of mass strikes from industries employing a greater proportion of skilled workers towards a wide array of industries – including jute mills, jute presses, warehouse workers, and coal miners. In the existing literature, the casual nature of work has been related to a lack of political capacities of workers, and it has been even argued that in the case of Bengal, personalized violence was the characteristic mode of protest reflecting the 'feudal' mentalities of workers.[140] Somewhat inverting such arguments, this article demonstrates that casual work enabled mass strikes that periodically disrupted the movements of capital and opened possibilities for challenging the social order.

The arguments in this article rely on deepening our understanding of casual work and locating it concretely in the industrial economy of Calcutta. Casual labour was pervasive in this colonial economy, as several historians have noted. However, it is important to note the existence of segments of skilled workers, more crucial in technically advanced industries, such as those at the ports, on the railways, and in engineering. Docks with a wide variety of workers – from highly skilled to coolie workers – provide a fine vantage point for this analysis. Here, skill levels and occupations were crucial in defining the boundaries of several labour pools – of coolie workers, of artisans and craftsmen employed in engineering and shipping workshops, of mariners, seamen, and boatmen. The reserve army of labour was present in the form of intersecting labour pools, which gave workers networks and mobility crisscrossing the city beyond one workplace and one industry. It was thus that the docklands, at the centre of the flow of commodities, emerged as an epicentre for the strikes.

The role of skilled workers has been considerably underplayed in the existing historiography, but each industry employed a core of skilled workers with slightly better pay and working conditions. However, one of the results of the casual nature of work was

[140] Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, Ch.5.

that the boundaries between skilled and unskilled workers – in terms of living conditions and the nature of work and labour militancy – were highly fluid. This article locates the main dynamic of the first phase of post-war strikes in the multiple level of interactions between more skilled workers and the less skilled ones, inside and in-between workplaces. Skilled workers more easily wrenched concessions, which were then generalised through the efforts, wider networks, and militancy of rest of the workforce. This was a moment in which public meetings of skilled workers were attended by workers of all kinds. Moreover, the case of Dubey, the secretary of Calcutta Labour Union, suggests that these solidarities between skilled and unskilled workers were built consciously over a longer time frame.

Nevertheless, the boundaries of solidarities can be discerned fairly precisely. The docklands, with its variety of occupational groups and connections among workers in the city and beyond, emerged as a crucial centre that turned individual strikes into a mass strike. Yet, mariners, stevedore workers, coolie-workers, artisans, and craftsman of the workshops, acted as part of occupational groups or labour pools, which were clearly reflected in the nature of demands: demands were mostly presented separately even if they were sometimes shared. In short, a focus on the casual nature of work in the context of wider industrial processes that connected workplaces in a complex web, goes some way to explaining the nature of the mass strikes, deprivileging the role of nationalist outsiders, and making visible the multiple networks rooted in workplace relations and the roles of subaltern labour leaders.