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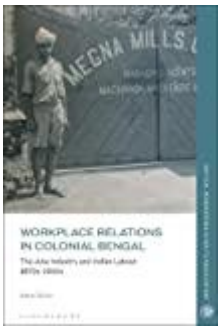
Anna Sailer. ***Workplace Relations in Colonial Bengal: The Jute Industry and Indian Labour 1870s-1930s.*** Critical Perspectives in South Asian History. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. xiii + 23 pp. $115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-23353-9.



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Published on H-Environment (January, 2023)

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The fertile soil of the Bengal delta was ideal for the production of jute, exported by the British East India Company to the "juteopolis" of Dundee, with its flourishing jute mills and mechanized jute spinning in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The importation of spinning machinery, however, led to the creation of a thriving jute industry in Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was also a period of heightened demand for burlap during the global trade expansion, industrial boom, and military conflicts of New Imperialism and the First World War. Anna Sailer's monograph ***Workplace Relations in Colonial Bengal*** examines the jute industry in colonial Bengal during its heyday between the 1870s and the 1930s.

As the largest producer and exporter of jute historically, and as a site of worker activism, the jute industry of Bengal has received significant scholarly attention. Colonial observers reporting on the conditions of labor in the Bengal jute mills emphasized how the "rhythm of work" in India was fundamentally different from the European routine of modern industrial work due to Indian workers' "premodern" "cultural habits," which were antithetical to capitalism (p. 2). Postcolonial South Asian labor historians, by contrast, read Indian workers' absenteeism and other "cultural habits" as a form of resistance to European managerial despotism, subversion of colonial-capitalist strategies of labor control, or as a result of mutual cultural incomprehension between workers and managers. Sailer's monograph attempts to evade what she identifies as a "deadlock in the development of capitalism" in the historiographical debates where "workers' deficiencies" have now been replaced by "managerial defects" (p. 13). By focusing on the changing relations in the workplace and the transformations in labor organization in the Bengal jute industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Sailer not only offers a way out of this impasse but also challenges the static view of the workplace in colonial writings, which have been ironically reproduced in postcolonial scholarship. She argues that contrary to common assumptions, the workplace considerably trans-

formed in this period through increased managerial regulation of workers within the mill space, the regulation and eventual abolition of work gangs, and the introduction of an individualized system of labor deployment. Managerial attempts to "rationalize the process of production," she argues, led to the formalization of labor relations in jute mills (p. 14).

Sailer's monograph is organized chronologically, beginning with the introduction of the multiple-shift system in the Bengal jute industry in the 1870s in chapter 1. The multiple-shift system involved a novel form of labor organization—the deployment of "work gangs," allowing some workers to leave the production site while still guaranteeing production by a reserve force of extra workers. In the 1890s, longer hours were necessitated by competition among the numerous jute mills that sprang up in Bengal, and made possible by electricity and the influx of migrant "up-country" workers along with a reliable supply of local Bengali workers. However, the excess laborers and uncontrolled worker substitution was soon blamed for the problem of overproduction. Chapter 2 discusses the modalities of mill work under the multiple-shift system, the practice of shared work among weavers, relay shifts among spinners, how workers and "extra workers" negotiated the terms of their substitution, and the role of sirdars at the site of production. The multiple-shift system was gradually replaced by a single-shift system, and the deployment of individuals rather than work gangs, in order to increase labor productivity. Chapter 3 focuses on the implications of the abolition of the multiple-shift system in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which was accompanied by mass dismissals of "excess" workers, suppression of shared work, and other restrictions on workers' autonomy, resulting in conflicts, strikes, and worker militancy against European overseers and *durwan*s. Weavers routinely complained of wage reduction due to the introduction of the single-shift system, although, in reality, Sailer argues, their wages increased after the transition.

The last two chapters focus on trade unionism in the Bengal jute industry. While the late 1920s witnessed worker militancy in various sectors such as the railway industry and oil industry, the strikes and unionism in the jute industry are attributed by Sailer, at least in part, to worker discontent due to the transition from the multiple-shift system to the single-shift system, which was accompanied by an increase in work from fifty-four hours to sixty hours per week, and the discontinuation of food allowance (*khoraki*). Chapter 4 analyzes working-class politics in the Bengal jute industry in the late 1920s by focusing on how labor activists built networks among workers across the Bengal jute belt so that local strikes could be channeled into a general strike under the leadership of a centralized trade union, the Bengal Jute Workers' Union (BJWU). The general strike in August 1929 was joined by over 240,000 jute workers, forcing the Indian Jute Mills' Association (IJMA) to meet several demands, including the restoration of bonuses and *khoraki*. The BJWU split after the general strike, but industrial unrest continued in the jute belt in the late 1930s, as explored in chapter 5. Mass retrenchment and reduction of hours and wages due to the reduced demand for jute packaging during the Great Depression demoralized the workforce. Mill managers used the economic crisis and threats of dismissal to impose new regulations to formalize the workplace and reduce production costs. After a short hiatus, labor militancy once again picked up from the mid-1930s in response to the "frenzy of rationalization" in the jute mills (p. 198).

Sailer's monograph is based on a range of primary sources, from private papers and interviews with former jute mill managers to newspapers, government documents, and, particularly, various official reports from the IJMA, Bengal Chamber of Commerce, Indian Factory Labour Commission, Bengal Jute Enquiry Committee, and

Committee of Industrial Unrest in Bengal, among others. Readers would have benefited from a discussion by Sailer, perhaps in the introduction, of the archival sources and her insights on the project of recovering the history of the colonial workplace from colonial archives, which give us the perspectives of colonial state authorities and mill managers more than the perspectives of the workers and labor activists. The usage of certain colonial terms such as "work gangs" could have been clarified. Personally, I wanted some of the snippet stories of individual workers such as Shama Charan Samuth or Harilal or Noormahamad to be more fleshed out in order to better understand the daily lives of workers inside and outside the jute mills. I also wanted to learn more about how workers organized organically prior to the centralized trade union leadership, such as when the workers of the Gourepore Jute Mill came together to ensure support and compensation for the mother of Jagnarain Singh, a fellow worker violently assaulted and killed by a European overseer (chapter 3).

Taking a more intersectional approach to labor in the jute industry would have enhanced the monograph by allowing readers to learn how gender, caste, religion, language, and regionalism shaped the workspace and labor relations. The abolition of the multiple-shift system certainly had a gendered impact, as women workers were particularly dependent on work substitution for childcare, cooking, and other domestic duties. Sailer briefly touches upon gender in the conclusion, but integrating gender, caste, religious and linguistic politics throughout the study would have led to a richer analysis of workplace relations in the jute belt. At a time when trade unions were notoriously patriarchal, how did a woman like Prabhabati Das Gupta manage to get elected president of the BJWU in 1929? One of the points of negotiation between the BJWU and the IJMA during the 1929 general strike was the extension of maternity benefits. What role did women mill workers and women activists play in negotiating this? Regarding regional/linguistic politics, I wanted to know more about the tensions between Bengali workers and "up-country" and "Madrassi" workers (chapter 1), tensions between striking jute mill workers and Kabuli and Peshawari moneylenders (chapter 4), and how conflicts between spinners and weavers spiraled into communal riots against the backdrop of Hindu-Muslim tensions (chapter 5), which are only briefly mentioned. Leaders of the BJWU, such as Kalidas Bhattacharya, Prabhabati Das Gupta, Bankim Mukharji, and Kali Sen were mostly privileged caste (Savarna) Bengali Hindus, whereas many of the weavers, spinners, and mill workers were Muslims, dominated castes, and immigrants from outside Bengal. What role did caste politics play in the jute mill workers' organization and unrest in the 1920s and 30s? These are not criticisms, but questions and further avenues of exploration inspired by the richness of Sailer's monograph.

Workplace Relations is an important addition to the scholarship on labor history as well as modern South Asian history and British colonial history. The book's core strength lies in the meticulous detailing of the transformations in workplace culture in the late-colonial Bengal jute industry. Sailer persuasively demonstrates how, in order to maintain the global monopoly over jute production, mill managers tried to "rationalize the production process" not only through the gradual abolition of the multiple-shift system but through various interventions, such as the abolition of food allowance, prohibiting the entry of young children (of women workers) into mills, forcing male laborers to wear shorts instead of dhoti, registering attendance, collecting fingerprints and photographs of workers and sharing them with the police in order to facilitate arrests, et cetera, that impacted the daily lives of the workers. Sailer's graphic description of life inside the jute mill —the "cacophony of noise, machines humming," "a perpetual swirl of dust," and workers "carrying materials from one department to another," "leaving their individual tasks to take breaks," and oth-

ers wandering through the mill "in the hope of finding a job for the day" (p. 61)—really help to enliven the workspace in readers' imagination. Sailer's monograph is an important contribution to the workplace history of the world's largest jute industry and seems particularly relevant today, given the revival of interest in the potential of jute with the growing prohibitions on plastic globally and the search for more sustainable and eco-friendly alternatives.