

ARTICLE

“Workers’ Way”: Moments of Labor in Late 1940s Calcutta

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“To articulate the past historically. . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. . . . Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

Abstract

The postwar situation in Calcutta was part of the picture of seething anticolonial popular and labor discontent in the Indian subcontinent; this was perhaps the most radical, the most potent, period for the subalterns in the country. However, this complex historical moment with varied, competing, shifting, overlapping tendencies has been reduced and flattened in the historiography. It is as if the twin events of partition and independence were inevitable. City workers, especially the port workers, emerged as a visible and powerful presence in the anticolonial movement. By reconstructing the arena of collective action—focusing on the context, the modalities, and the social content of the major strikes involving port labor or “moments” of radicalism, this article seeks to recover the role of workers in decolonization. It will show how workers contested and outstepped the politics of nationalist leadership(s) and communalism in significant ways multiple times, placing a politics of labor rights and entitlements, of struggles against exploitation and poverty on the postcolonial agenda. The article argues that a “workers’ way,” an alternative even if hazily defined pathway of decolonization, in which new citizens would not be divided on religious lines, was concretized and became a part of the political imagination of the time. The port strike of 1947, a swing-back from the deadliest episode of communal riots, in a matter of months, signifies the extreme fluidity of the political situation in the late 1940s, which is unsurprisingly missed in the conventional historiography. The article finally highlights the limits of postwar radicalism: the “historic” port workers’ strike was ultimately channelized as a legal industrial dispute by the communist leadership of port workers’ union. With their key demand of parity of wages and allowances with government employees, port workers staked their claim to labor institutions offered by the postcolonial state, which was to cordon large sections of them as a privileged layer from rest of the laboring classes in the city.

Introduction

Jolly Mohan Kaul, a communist activist at the Calcutta port, described a meeting called by a port workers' union just after the end of the war, in Manastala park in the dock neighborhood.¹ Not only did the small park fill up, but the crowds of workers gathered on all the streets leading to the park.² Unprepared for such numbers, party activists scrambled to arrange for loud speakers so all of the audience had a chance to hear the speeches.³ This was but an early glimpse of things to come; demonstrations and strikes of port workers would punctuate the next two years. Along with other workers in the city the port workers emerged as a visible presence in the anticolonial movement, travelling paths different from those of the nationalist leadership. Events in Calcutta were a link in a long chain of strikes across the subcontinent as labor unrest took on unprecedented dimensions during 1946 and 1947—in terms of number of strikers involved and the geographical spread of strikes.⁴

The article focuses on labor politics at the port of Calcutta, which was run by very heterogeneous working classes in terms of occupations, regional affiliation, and religious origins.⁵ By 1947, the Port Trust employed around twenty-two thousand workers. Contractors and stevedores employed another fifteen thousand dockers. A significant number of Muslim workers were employed, including the vast majority of the dockers employed through stevedores, who came from Darbhanga district of Bihar and the East Bengali mariners employed through the Port Trust. A few kilometers away from the imperial and commercial center of Calcutta, the port neighborhoods or the docklands constituted a proletarian center, with tea warehouses, hide godowns, textile mills, iron works, and coal depots. The docklands—Kidderpore, Mominpore, Watgang, Garden Reach, and Metiabruz—comprised an enormous conglomerate of industries and slums in the city, also forming one of the largest concentrations of working-class Muslims.⁶

A number of trade unions, communist organizations, and nationalist and Islamist parties were active in the docklands since the 1920s. Red-flag unions, were those known for their militancy and associated with various communist and nationalist groupings, and white-flag unions were pro-employer and associated with Muslim/Islamist parties, including the Muslim League. Separate unions existed for the Port Trust workers, contractual dockers, and stevedores' dockers. The most influential union, a red-flag union, was the Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association, founded as a trade union of clerical employees of the port in 1920. During the 1930s, the association was transformed into a militant workers union, also known as the Calcutta Port Shramik Union (hereafter, the Shramik Union), under the leadership of Nepal Bhattacharya and in association with a number of radical political groups—including the Workers' League and the Communist League. It was built on the basis of common interests of the various sections of workers across the religious and occupational divides, and it was essentially a union of workers directly employed by the Port Trust, even though it had some influence among the dockers employed through Bird and Company.⁷ Workers directly employed by the Port Trust are the key protagonists in the article and so is their main trade union, the Shramik Union, due to the availability of diverse and rich documentation, notably the archives of the Port Trust

administration. Another reason is that the port strike of 1947 was the best organized and most crucial strike in the docklands, with direct implications for dockers employed through contractors and stevedores.

Historians and Decolonization

Any writing about the role of labor on the eve of independence must draw upon wider literature that considers the interrelationship between subaltern militancy and the Indian anticolonial struggle. While a subject of rich debates, these have been had among only a small group of historians. Shahid Amin, in his fascinating work on Chauri Chaura, draws attention to nationalist narratives and nationalist history that inevitably suffer from “selective national amnesia.”⁸ He posits that events not fitting the grand national narratives are either completely forgotten, or even worse, with circular logic, are recounted only in ways that reinforce the validity of the same narratives.⁹ For instance, Karnik has argued about the post-war strikes: “But all these [strike] activities were carried on by them [workers] as members or followers of the nationalist movement. They [workers] *did not play any independent part* [emphasis added].”¹⁰ For one, the nationalist leadership was negotiating a transfer of power, and was actively against direct action on the streets; even hunger strikes were discouraged.¹¹ Workers’ strike action continued despite public warnings from leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, M.K. Gandhi, and Vallabhbhai Patel, and in the face of severe state repression, even if workers’ political languages, and perhaps outlook, remained nationalist, a subject on which little research has been done. This article will challenge conventional narratives in which the most radical period of Indian labor is subsumed in the story of the triumph of national independence.

Labor movements played a significant role in decolonization across the colonial world—in Vietnam, in West Africa, in Malay, to name a few—as the Second World War sharpened class conflict, more so in colonies than in the metropolitan countries.¹² In this respect, African decolonization has been best studied. Fred Cooper has drawn attention to how labor movements in French West Africa generalized citizenship offered by the French government. To hold on to power, they concretized the formal conception of equal citizenship to demand conditions of employment and living comparable to French workers. In doing so, African workers forced the French to rethink the feasibility of empire.¹³ Decolonization in the French empire or the British cannot be conceived of as a steady and linear march toward “nation-building” and as fully determined by the high politics of negotiations between the colonial and the nationalist elites. It cannot be understood as a proclamation signed in the imperial boardrooms; it was a *process* that was replete with contradictions and possibilities for the subalterns. This article brings the experiences, agency, and militancy of Indian dockworkers to the heart of debates about decolonization, labor, and empire.

Histories of Indian decolonization suffer gravely from a tendency to write history backward. Despite the depth of labor militancy that preceded August 15, 1947, and continued afterward up until 1949, analyses of these phenomena within the larger frame of the struggle for independence or decolonization have remained few and far between.¹⁴ The various possibilities that both labor as well as popular struggles

opened up and were consciously closed-off by contemporaries remain forgotten.¹⁵ Thus, historical writing often leaves us with the nationalist narrative of a peaceful “transfer of power” shaped by the politicians in New Delhi and London, and/or that of the devastating partition of India.¹⁶ In an ironical twist, subalterns only enter this historical stage as participants in communal carnage or victims of the partition. Apparently forgotten are events in the streets of industrial cities like Calcutta¹⁷ and Karachi,¹⁸ where the flags of Muslim League, Indian National Congress, and the Communist Party of India were hoisted aloft together in a number of popular demonstrations. Rarely explored are the meanings and the implications of participation by the subaltern in the shaping of independence beyond partition, and beyond politics of identity.

A complex historical moment with varied, competing, shifting, overlapping tendencies is thus reduced and flattened. In 1940s Bengal’s rich historiography, it is striking that the rise of communalism and its consequences on both sides of the religious divide remains the theme with rare exceptions.¹⁹ The tragedy of partition has led to a one-dimensional historiography, where every sphere of politics from Bhadrak, peasant, Dalit, and Muslim seems to be shaped and determined by communalism. Urban workers have largely been left out of such accounts; Suranjan Das has documented the participation of urban workers as “foot-soldiers” of the elites of their respective religious communities during the 1946 riots.²⁰

Such a historiography suggests that no alternate visions and practices of politics existed, especially after the Direct-Action Day. It is the present state of despair, and not the hope of the 1940s, that haunts the most recent works on the topic, which argue in the most categorical terms that “intercommunity relations gradually collapsed” and stress “freezing of [communal] identities into solid blocs.”²¹ In fact, between February and April of 1947, strikers numbered around fifty thousand each month in and around Calcutta.²² Two of the biggest strikes were sustained in Tramways and Calcutta Port, both of which employed Hindu and Muslim workers.²³ The same years that resulted in the deadliest communal riots and intensification of communal identity inspired some of the most powerful episodes of labor politics, where unity across religious lines was propagated and practiced. The swings between hope and despair, violence and solidarity were extremely sharp in these fluid years, something that historical narratives need to engage with. The lens of labor politics widens the historiography of the 1940s, by taking into account the divergent and thwarted political possibilities, which too shaped the process of decolonization and postcolonial state-making.

When Malcolm Darling toured the countryside in 1946, he observed that *azadi*, or freedom, “echoed all along our route from the Himalayas to Narbada,” even in the remotest of villages. It held various meanings for the peasants; for instance, freedom to travel in cars, to not pay taxes on wells, not wear purdah, etc.²⁴ Such aspirations, molded into popular movements, had social and political consequences. In an exploratory article, Sarkar has shown just how the most important episodes in labor militancy influenced the various turns in the imperial policy at this crucial stage, quickening the pace of British exit.²⁵ In a recent article, Ravi Ahuja has argued that the incoming Congress regime was threatened with the “labor question” right from the first day of the new order.²⁶ After all, the Indian National Congress split

the CPI-dominated AITUC to form its own trade union federation, the Indian National Trade Union Congress, in May 1947.²⁷ The political crisis of late 1940s shaped a catalytic moment in the history of labor: the largest number of strikes in the history of colonial India accelerated the enactment of extensive body of legislations to regulate conditions of employment and granting of state social welfare, which has remained the main framework for labor regulation ever since.²⁸

Even so, episodes of labor militancy have been seen mainly as a collection of industrial disputes without any historical or political content. Labor radicalism on the eve of independence did not assume a determinate political shape in a program or a sequence of events, on the scale of a city or the country, in such a scenario, the optimism and possibilities that this “moment of labor” on the eve of independence inspired and contained are easily forgotten and hard to narrativize. A micro historical approach is highly useful in piecing together fragmented dreams of independence that nevertheless spurred on workers to dramatic and daring collective action. It is by reconstructing the arena of collective action—by focusing on the context, the modalities, and the social content of the major strikes of port labor—that this article seeks to recover the radicalism of the time, as well as its limits. It will show how workers contested and *outstepped* the politics of nationalist leadership(s) and communalism in significant ways and multiple times, placing a politics of labor rights and entitlements, of struggles against exploitation and poverty, on the postcolonial agenda.

The article will show how port workers forced the question of daily bread—the social question—as a gnawing subject matter of Indian independence, which was not allowed to be reduced to a desideratum of two rival nation-states. In doing so, it will shed light on the unruly workplace and an alternative vision of politics, however hazy, that shaped Indian independence. Events include the general strike of 1946—the first of its kind in the city’s history—the deadliest communal riots in the history of the country, and the Calcutta port strike of 1947.

Labor Power in Calcutta’s Streets

The ferment among port labor became evident repeatedly in the postwar years. A wildcat strike took place on the issue of the dismissal of a clerk for pilferage. Port workers participated in the anticolonial demonstrations of November 1945 and February 1946. They planned their own strike across a wide variety of sections. They participated in the first ever general strike in the city, organized in solidarity with the countrywide strike of postal and telegraph workers. It is on the last event that this section will focus, as it helps contextualize port workers’ militancy in the broader context of the city’s politics.

The general strike of July 29, 1946, was called by the Bengal branch of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and became a city-wide proletarian event. The postal strike itself had severe consequences for the British administration across India.²⁹ This event threatened to demoralize British troops further than they already were as letters from home, so important for their morale, especially at this juncture, were delayed, for instance.³⁰ The solidarity strike involved “workers of all descriptions”: of commercial and banking firms, mills and factories, transportation—including those in sections of railways as well, and government institutions.³¹ Shopkeepers,

workers at cinemas and theatres, and even “dealers in foodstuff, including fish and vegetable sellers” stopped work.³² The main demonstration of the strike in Maidan (central square) was attended by over one hundred thousand people according to police figures,³³ and three hundred thousand according to the figures of the AITUC.³⁴ Elsewhere a few hundreds of thousands took part in the strike picketing outside their factories and workplaces.³⁵ The speeches and slogans of the day reflected the charged atmosphere on the eve of independence. According to one account, as workers from Kidderpore and Metiaburuz, marched toward Maidan, they were greeted with the shouts of “Fauji-mazdoor bhai-bhai” (“soldiers and workers are brothers!”) from the Indian soldiers; slogans from workers were “Hindustan ghulam hai, bhoolo mat, bhulo mat” (“Hindustan is enslaved, do not forget, do not forget!”).³⁶

Port workers and seamen were prominent participants. The scene in the dock neighborhoods was described thus by a contemporary:

Early in the morning—before the shift begins—we reached Metiaburz, one of the most crowded industrial pockets in Calcutta’s suburbs. The roads were filled with workers, but today there were no blacklegs...On the way to Kidderpore, we passed the King George’s Dock. At every gate, volunteers stood, and inside it was all empty, the lights were off, the giant cranes stood still, it was all like a deserted hive...Port Commissioner’s docks [were deserted]. As we entered, Kidderpore, a long procession of thousands of seamen, led by their own band, turned up. And shops on both sides were closed.³⁷

Workers picketed most of the entrances to the port. Even those sepoy employed by the Port’s Armed Police were on strike.³⁸ It seems that these workers did not fear being victimized for having participated in a “solidarity strike”; and in the event only three cases of victimization were reported afterward.³⁹ In fact, the Shramik Union later used the participation of workers in the general strike to claim that that the port chairman should understand from those events that “all employees of the port are ready to respond to the call of the association [sic].”⁴⁰

The strike was variously labelled as “a historic hartal,” “solidarity strike” in the press; *Hindusthan Standard* described it as: “unique hartal (general strike).”⁴¹ Such shifting terminology reflects the expanding terrain of labor politics, from the industrial districts and mills to the Maidan, or central park of Calcutta. In fact, a similar general strike in support of postal and telegraph workers was held a few days back in Bombay.⁴² Mrinal Kanti Bose, acting editor of the daily *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* and the president of the AITUC, was impressed to the extent of saying:

... a red-letter day in the history of the city. One wonders if any town or city in India had any experience of such a strike before. Well, “strike” is not the word for it. Truly speaking *it was a mass national demonstration on a colossal scale* [emphasis added].⁴³

Calcutta had witnessed strikes involving hundreds of thousands of workers when jute mills struck altogether. Since the early twentieth century, strikes that spread through

various industries have also been noted, but all these were organized at the scale of a group of mills, workshops, and at best, at the level of industry. The general strike was a novel event for the political landscape of Calcutta; it announced the power of organized labor and trade unions in the city, which proved their control over labor militancy, to some extent. A journalist commenting on the unprecedented scale of the strike, compared it to Congress hartal of 1921, to boycott the visit of the Prince of Wales.⁴⁴ The crucial difference was that workers were not following the demonstrations called by the nationalist parties. The general strike had been called by the AITUC, as a spectacle for the wider population to see, and to participate in demands that were specifically class demands—the so-called economic demands. The demonstrators “completely paralysed the life of the city” proclaiming their solidarity and sympathy to the postal strike in slogans, such as “postal workers’ demands are our demands,”⁴⁵ while Nehru advised postal strikers to take recourse to arbitration and rebuked them for forgetting the interests of the “masses of our people.”⁴⁶ Congress’s difficulties in arresting labor militancy were a matter of a wry comment in the employers’ weekly, *Capital*: “Pandit Nehru in his wisdom has described these strikes as boils and ulcers in the administration of the British government. He may well reflect that his and other Congress leader’s efforts have had as little effect in curing them . . .”⁴⁷

A highlight of the strike was the participation of clerical workers along with manual workers. Main entrances of “a large number” of business and administrative houses were shut, as the strike as a method of protest and resistance resonated beyond the factory and transportation workers.⁴⁸ Within the historiography of Bengal, clerical workers, also known as “babus,” are considered as part of the lower rungs of Bhadrakol, the respectable literate Bengalis.⁴⁹ Babus, even with their low pay and mundane office-work, have been seen as possessing and claiming a social status far superior to manual workers, who were largely non-Bengali speaking and illiterate migrants.⁵⁰ In 1946, clerical workers were marching in the same trade union demonstration as workers and the poor, adopting the vocabulary of the rights and strengths of labor and zealously, sometimes violently, guarding the picket lines.⁵¹ Dhoti-clad babus were the unusual subjects in an artwork titled *Demonstrators in Calcutta*, they were depicted marching with Congress, Communist, and League flags, determined in the face of military police. The novelty of the alliance between clerks and workers was celebrated in terms such as: “today as the babu has stood by the worker, an invisible energy as powerful as the atom bomb has been released.” The genteel babu was compared to “a soldier alert and on the march.”⁵²

The general strike involved large numbers of Muslim workers, a fact widely commented upon in the contemporary pro-nationalist newspapers. Unity in the face of colonial power, which had a long history, not-least in Congress-led mass movements, seemed to be regained in labor and popular demonstrations, even as negotiations between the Congress and the Muslim League leadership floundered. Mrinal Kanti Bose, for instance, commented about the strike: “it was a mass national demonstration on a colossal scale not on a political but economic front including Hindus and Muslims . . . who had made common cause” [emphasis added].⁵³ For many contemporaries, such demonstrations on the “economic front” were portentous of a different and a more desirable future. Such radical moments raised hopes in solidarities of



Figure 1. Demonstrators in Calcutta, Gopal Ghose, British Library, Papers of W.G. Archer, Indian Civil Service, Bihar 1931-1947, MSS EUR/F236/155

labor and politics of class, however vaguely defined, which appeared as an alternative pathway to the partition. Aruna Asaf Ali, a prominent Congress Left leader, too had remarked in the aftermath of the naval mutiny, it would be easier “to unite the Hindus and Muslims at the barricades than on the constitutional front.”⁵⁴ Workers voices in such events are hard to come by in the sources we do have, but these are not absent. Bazloo Mohlah, who worked as a mariner at the port and belonged to the milieu of East Bengali boatmen, deeply apprehensive of the perils of ongoing communalization, spoke in ultimative terms on the day of the strike: “We are all men, Hindus and Muslims, if they don’t unite, they are bound to perish.” With remarkable confidence and hope in the strength of labor, he added: “but today they are bound to unite for the mazdoor has become a ‘mugur’ [club], and the babu has become a ‘bamboo’ [meaning unclear].”⁵⁵

Calcutta Riots of 1946 and Port Workers

The fears of Bazloo Mohlah came true in a matter of weeks. The general strike was followed by the Direct-Action Day, which was the immediate cause of the deadliest urban communal riots in the subcontinent. August 16, 1946, was declared a “public holiday” by the then Muslim League Chief Minister of Bengal, H. S. Suhrawardy. Historians of Bengal agree that the rioting in which at least five thousand were killed was not spontaneous, but was well-prepared by political parties on both sides of the religious divide. The complex motivations of crowds, including large sections of

Muslim working classes who attended this event, have not been studied.⁵⁶ In fact, part of Suhrawardy's call was directly addressed to Muslim workers: they were to go on a strike. The memoir of Jolly Mohan Kaul, an activist at the port, gives us rare insight into the mood of workers. He describes a context where Muslim workers were sympathetic to Suhrawardy's demonstration, for a vaguely defined Pakistan, and in fact they were obstructed in attending it. CPI gave a call for all workers to cease work and Kaul even led a procession to the Maidan under the banner of the Shramik Union. It was only when the procession reached the destination that it became clear to them that riots had broken out.⁵⁷

Workers' participation in Direct-Action Day was the result of a decade-long intervention of the Muslim League and a number of Muslim political parties in the docklands. In fact, Suhrawardy himself was the president of Calcutta Dockers' Union, which was subsequently ran by his relative, Ziauddin Ahmed. Suhrawardy's men proliferated in the various white unions among boatmen, dockers, and seamen in the docklands, and were prominent in violent rivalries that beset the docklands. During the war, Kidderpore emerged as a central training ground for a range of Muslim volunteer groups or armed militias—Khaksar, the Muslim League, and Khilafat.⁵⁸ The Mayday rally in 1941 was funded and attended by a number of prominent Muslim politicians, both pro-League and the nationalist ones.⁵⁹ A systematic study on the subject remains to be done, but it is evident that separatist politics with its moto "Islam is in danger" was gaining ground in working-class milieus in the 1940s.

As it happened during the August riots of 1946, the working-class districts adjacent to the port—Kidderpore, Watgunge, and Metiaburuz—were the scenes of extensive rioting. The account of Kaul, an eyewitness, is ridden with contradictions about the subject. At pains to stress that unity of dock workers was maintained, he notes how a Muslim worker, Haroun, guarded the trade union office and escorted Hindu worker activists out of the neighborhood, which also tells us how dangerous crisscrossing the highly mixed neighborhoods had become during the riots. Kaul, a key leader of the CPI, left the party commune in Manastala to go back to his middle-class family residence the next day as the situation was "out of control," even so he concludes that worker unity was maintained in the "immediate vicinity" of the party commune.⁶⁰ The official report of the Port Trust administration, which policed the "dock area" extensively for ten days after the riots began with the professed aim of limiting the spill-over of riots from the adjacent neighborhoods, makes the picture clearer. The report stated 12 died, 158 were injured, and 1,400 were evacuated. Such figures were used as evidence that the dock area remained "comparatively immune" to the riots, compared to adjacent workers' neighborhoods, which saw "continuous murdering, burning and looting." Despite the heavy presence of police, military, tanks, and a curfew, details of the official report suggest serious rioting and deep tensions within the dock area: the dockyards, railway yards, warehouses, nearby factories, and employer-provided housing. Some vignettes include: attack on the Port Emergency hospital, burning and looting of Kidderpore market, "the trouble developing between the Hindus of Hide Road Cooly Lines and B.N.R. [Bengal Nagpur Railway] Muslims," and "50 Muslims armed with lathis were attacking Port commissioners' quarters."⁶¹ It is telling that the administration did not even mention an estimate of the number of their employees involved in rioting or very little attempt was

made to distinguish outsiders from dock workers; and this was a management which kept detailed and sophisticated records of its employees. The omission is significant, and probably points to the involvement of dock workers employed through the Port Trust on a significant scale.

Workers no longer lived in an atmosphere conducive to actions of collective resistance, especially if that required solidarities across religious lines. The fear of defending one's scant belongings and even one's life, temptations of looting, or revenge were paralyzing. Streets that had come so alive in the past year with solidarities of class and anticolonial demonstrations, with the hopes of a new future were now left to organized gangs of both communities.⁶² It was in such a context that the port strike, which was planned to start on September 1, 1946, had to be postponed.

An agitational leaflet produced by the Shramik Union titled "Don't forget your demands" in the aftermath of the riots, read against the grain, reveals how the riots weighed heavily on the prospects of the labor movement. The riots degraded the living conditions of poor Hindus and Muslims further. Mukherjee has noted the massive dislocation that ensued in the first two weeks of the violence: approximately 5 percent (or 189,015 people) of the city's population became riot refugees, losing their homes to the turf wars between Hindus and Muslims.⁶³ The leaflet discussed the destruction that resulted from such an extensive "exchange of population"—it was said thousands of workers lived in even more cramped conditions than before; in some places, twenty to twenty-five workers now lived in a single room.⁶⁴ It was risky to even go to work, to continue activities of daily life, and the prices of necessary goods rose even higher.⁶⁵ Nepal Bhattacharya, the most popular leader of dock workers, insisted that the "road to success for the Hindu and Mussalman labourers was the same."⁶⁶ He argued that riots were a "trap" set up by the capitalists and the government. A number of silences—on workers' participation in the Direct-Action Day and the riots, on the role of nationalist parties, such as Congress, the Muslim League, and Hindu Mahasabha, who were key to the organization of riots, and the burning question of Pakistan—can be read as the union attempting to walk on thin ice, of attempting to maintain unity of workers in a context of deepening hostilities and division among workers.

Even so, it is significant that the most influential and significant union among the port workers chose to make the case for not giving up the planned strike, and successfully so, as we shall see below. The Congress and the league were not mentioned, but the implication was that workers had different and more effective methods of fulfilling their aspirations and they need not follow the paths charted by their respective elites. It is remarkable that they were able to argue in such terms publicly a couple of months after the riots, probably because such ideas resonated on the ground. The idea that solidarities of class could overcome the deepest cut of communal divisions, which 1946 arguably was, found expression in popular literature, too. Sameresh Basu, a communist activist, wrote a short story "Adab," in the same year, which shot the author to prominence.⁶⁷ The choice of characters—a boatmen and a textile worker—was hardly incidental especially since the boatmen of the city, employed mainly at the docks, were popularly considered to be perpetrators of mindless violence.⁶⁸ The author was challenging the widespread view that the city's subaltern population simply served as "automatons" of communal violence. "Adab" paints the

chilling atmosphere of suspicion and violence, and at the same time captures the possibilities of crossing the religious barrier in the by-lanes of Calcutta amidst the communal violence. The two characters managed to build trust in each other, so much so that a Hindu worker decided to follow a Muslim boatman to reach a safe place. In the end, the mill worker was deeply shaken by the possibility of the boatman's death, as if it was his own brother. The story depicted the shared everyday experiences between workers and the poor of the city that tied their fate together, that evoked friendship and deepest solidarities across religious identities.

“Workers’ Way”

Even as rioting seems to leave no possibilities for any form of collective action except for community-based in the historiography, spaces of resistance were found in widespread strike action and peasant revolts. In the urban arena, the swing-back from the deadliest episode of communal riots to highly militant strike actions, in a matter of months, signifies the extreme fluidity of the political situation in the late 1940s, which is somehow missed in the conventional historiography. The field of political action had expanded with tremendous rapidity with the end of the war; its narrowing was neither quick nor without consequences.

The urgency of finding practical solutions to the problems of retrenchment, wages, and food, is palpable in the sources, for instance, Nepal Bhattacharya noted in a strike leaflet: “when our demands were just and fair before the disturbance [the riots], they have now become essential and *fulfilment of which is now compulsory* [sic] [emphasis added].”⁶⁹ The union had a well-known charter: an extensive list of demands, common to both Hindu and Muslim workers, and workers of diverse occupations, which had been prepared through various small and big struggles over the previous two decades. The demands were precise on the one hand, and wide in scope on the other.⁷⁰ The first and foremost demand was no retrenchment and absorption of all those retrenched. Following demands ranged from uniforms, promotion, leave, minimum wages, an improved scale of wages, permanency of staff, and railway passes.⁷¹

A close reading of the idiom of demands as presented to the chairman illuminates the grandeur of workers dreams at the time as well as an unmistakable pride in their cause.⁷² Many of these demands were legitimized by discussing the cases of workers who had won them elsewhere in the country. For example, a bonus for workers’ contribution to the war effort and higher dearness allowances.⁷³ Workers did not limit comparisons to Indian workplaces and they compared their lot to the workers of European countries.⁷⁴ A crucial demand was for better wages: a minimum wage of Rs.40 (per month) in addition to a minimum dearness allowance of Rs.50(per month) and a housing allowance of Rs.8(per month). The total minimum wage each month was to be at least Rs.98.⁷⁵ In reply to his argument that this was an “extravagant” demand, the chairman was told that according to one Dr. Ackroyd⁷⁶ the wages should be even higher to maintain the minimum nutritional standard of workers.⁷⁷ Workers demanded a forty-hour week (an eight hour day), on the basis that an eight hour day was in fashion in Europe, and workers in tropical countries should work even fewer hours.⁷⁸ By comparing themselves to “brain workers” they argued they should be allowed their conditions of leave (at least), since their work

(manual work) is more tiring.⁷⁹ The most detailed of all was the demand for housing, described in an appendix. It said that the quarters should be made so that families of workers could be accommodated. Family quarters should at least include two rooms since to call one room a family quarter was “manifestly absurd.” The rooms should have a minimum of two windows to allow for a draught even when the door was shut. The rooms should have electric lights and power points; a bathroom with a reservoir to collect water given the short supply of water in the city; open space that can be used as playground; and every block of quarters should have a common room for children to use as a “schoolroom” or a “common room.”⁸⁰

Such an expansive composition of demands reflected the strong and deep connections of the port workers’ unions with the wider labor movement in the country. Trade unionists at the port were constantly comparing the conditions of workers at the port with other ports and also industrial establishments of a similar nature—especially the Railways.⁸¹ They drew on the experiences of workers in various ongoing industrial disputes, of the policies of the government and the employers.⁸² It was discussed above how the all-India postal and telegraph workers’ strike echoed across the different sections of working classes in Calcutta, leading to the first general strike in the city’s history. Declarations of solidarity with the port strike were sent to the chairman from trade unions in Calcutta and dockers’ unions in Vishakhapatnam and Madras.⁸³ Trade unions had emerged as political actors on the scale of the country in the 1940s, capable of articulating and coordinating demands, negotiations, and powerful collective action across the country.

Trade union action was not limited to the so-called “economic demands”; for these activists, politics of labor had anticommunal vision. In fact, the union propaganda had called upon workers to strike not just for their own selves but to be exemplars to the whole country. Workers organized peace squads that were joined by a significant minority of workers “during and after riots.”⁸⁴ Such squads stood as a publicly visible example, on a limited scale, that workers would act together for common aims, in the most dangerous of circumstances. Within their own milieu, such peace squads were living proof to those who did not decide to participate that collective action across religious lines was possible. Recognizing this, Nepal Bhattacharya used the example of forty-five hundred workers who had united against rioters in defense of workers’ neighborhoods as he argued the necessity of the strike a couple of months after the riots.⁸⁵ This was not atypical: in the August 1946 riots, eight thousand tramway workers marched through the streets of Calcutta in their uniforms, carrying red and congress flags without being disrupted.⁸⁶ Such instances even entered the columns of the pro-British press, leading *The Statesman* to publish a letter from a reader who commented on the distinction of a “workers’ way” in dealing with riots, as they were able to form “peace committees” including both Hindus and Muslims, compared to the bourgeois way, in which “defence committees” of “guards” and “forces” on communal lines are formed, which are in fact used against the “rival community.”⁸⁷

Port Strike of 1947

The postponed port strike began on February 3, less than six months after the August riots.⁸⁸ Although at the beginning of the strike the Governor of Bengal casually

remarked that the strike probably involved only the Hindu workers, it was the first strike of its scale in any Indian port.⁸⁹ It spread across all sections of workers and even the Muslim cooks of managers refused to work.⁹⁰ The strike involved around twenty-two thousand⁹¹ to thirty thousand⁹² manual and clerical workers employed by the Port Trust, and continued for eighty-seven days, severely affecting the regional economy and aspects of national economy.⁹³ Although for shorter periods, employees of the largest contractor at the port, Bird and Company, and the more skilled stevedores' dockers also struck, which brought the total number of port workers on strike to just over thirty-five thousand⁹⁴—fifty thousand at its height.⁹⁵ Also, tens of thousands of seamen employed on ships going abroad threatened to strike.⁹⁶ This was remembered as a "historic strike," which produced worker activists who were central to the running of the union for decades.⁹⁷ A strike that laid the basis for the All India Port and Dock Workers' Federation (AIPDWF), with branches in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta.⁹⁸ Tens of thousands of workers decided to act together across religious and even "national" lines, a couple of months before the partition. Port workers included over two thousand East Bengali Muslim mariners who were to become "Pakistani" citizens in a matter of months, and who were witnessing escalating communal violence in their villages. The charged issue of Pakistan failed to disrupt their solidarity with the "Indian" workers for the duration of the strike.⁹⁹ The wider background included strikes of tramway, engineering, and sections of jute workers. *The Statesman* remained silent on the details of the strikes in most cases, but regularly reported number of "idle workers due to strikes and lockouts," which remained around fifty thousand between February and April.¹⁰⁰

The strike was presented as a legal industrial dispute to the employers, and even directed as such by the leadership.¹⁰¹ But the strike on the street was hardly a peaceful and orderly affair, it assumed a highly disruptive form. It exemplified the optimism generated by the hopes of independence and drew its energies from anticolonial struggles and solidarities of the time. Strikers were conscious and proud that they were resurrecting their own vision of politics and rejecting the politics of their respective communal elites. Second, workers took the opportunity to contest the control of one of the crucial imperial-industrial spaces of the British Raj, including those employed through contractors at the port. The stevedores' laborers and Bird and Company coolies had initially gone on their own strike and even when their strikes were over, the stevedores' laborers were reported to be on a go-slow.¹⁰² The chairman estimating the tremendous impetus for industrial action wrote to an employer organization, that it was the "unanimous view" of the commissioners that the "strike must be fought and that any compromise would only lead to further agitation."¹⁰³

The strike lasted for almost three months with significant economic and administrative costs but the interim government, now formally run by the Congress under Nehru, intervened very cautiously.¹⁰⁴ By taking advantage of a port that had been fortified during the Second World War by special armed guards under the command of a military headquarters stationed within its perimeter, in addition to the already existing Port Police, the Port Trust administration attempted to carry on essential and minimum services.¹⁰⁵ As a result, the strikers had to defend their strike with extraordinary strategic planning, physical presence, and extensive campaigning for public support. As Jolly Mohan Kaul noted only eight full-timers of the CPI were involved

in the strike, a number too small to ensure stoppage of work across eighty miles of waterfront.¹⁰⁶ The strike was defended by workers in their own sections and areas, and the work of the sections was coordinated through “section committees,” which had organized their own “volunteer corps.”¹⁰⁷ The section leaders met almost daily to coordinate the activities of defending the strike.¹⁰⁸

Workers not only challenged strike-breakers from entering and working in the port, they also obstructed the mobility of management. Numerous cases of violence against the managers, supervisors (who were mainly British), police, and army personnel were reported.¹⁰⁹ Putting aside this vague label of violence, we see that workers wielded enough collective strength to take revenge against the most-hated managers and to control which of them could enter the port and for what purposes. An instance is the case of Engineer-in-Charge at the Jetty Engine House. He reported that he had boarded a bus with the electrical foreman from near their office. Some strikers boarded the bus along with them.¹¹⁰ He reported that

They were shouting at and abusing me and demanded from other passengers in the bus to throw me out of the bus to quench their thirst for blood. The language they used was very abusive. *The sympathy of other passengers of the bus was in general with them and nobody wanted to hear my arguments* [emphasis added].¹¹¹

The strikers allegedly assaulted him and hit him on his face, but still nobody came to his help. Finally, he got down at a bus stop and escaped—but the strikers told him that “we know your house how long will you stay here.”¹¹² He requested that he be provided with an armed guard at his house and an armed escort for traveling to work. Managers and supervisors did not feel safe enough to travel to work anymore, let alone, to carry on the running of the port.

This point is better made with another example. One Mr. Baker, superintendent (transportation), “had accompanied an engine” out of a railway yard.¹¹³ As he was leaving in his car about fifty workers, who had been “abusing the workers in the engine,” starting throwing stones at him.¹¹⁴ He complained that one constable and two head constables did not intervene in the incident. Mr. Baker had to be sent to the hospital and the top of his car was ripped apart. Why was Mr. Baker stoned after he had completed his job and was leaving? Undoubtedly, he was a target of the anger of the strikers, and he was being warned of the dangers of continuing the port operations during the strike in the future.

The balance of forces was tilted in the favor of workers to the extent that even the loyalties of the military officials and soldiers stationed at the port was suspect. One Captain Fyfe Smith reported that he saw a military lorry carrying “outside labourers” or “volunteers” from the North Workshop to Chowringhee being stoned in the dock area by a group of twenty-five to thirty strikers.¹¹⁵ Moreover, in the captain’s version the truck driver drove away leaving behind two armed sepoy, who, instead of protecting the volunteers, absconded.¹¹⁶ This last allegation became an important issue at the Military Headquarters. Upon investigation it was found that the allegation that armed sepoy had run away was untrue, however, since the lorry driver had stopped the truck right in front of the strikers he was found to “be in league with the strikers.”¹¹⁷

It may be Captain Smith was mistaken about the allegiances the armed sepoys had with the strikers but it is significant that Captain Smith conceived of such a possibility. In fact, there was general uncertainty over the loyalties of the armed sepoys. In response to Captain Smith's complaint a statement was published by the military establishment of the port expressing concern over the effects of "irresponsible statements" like that of Captain Smith and its adverse effects on the morale of not just the ordinary sepoys but their officers, too, and a written apology was demanded from Smith.¹¹⁸ At this time police strikes had broken out in various parts of the country, and it is likely that impacted the port armed guards, too.¹¹⁹

As comes through in the examples given above, the port workers asserted their collective presence, against their managers and supervisors, and even made the military personnel apprehensive about their actions. Port authorities' strike preparation rules allowed "peaceful picketing" with up to five workers, here thirty to fifty workers were found defending their strike by means they judged opportune. It was this aspect that was commented on in an anti-strike letter-to-the-editor in *The Statesman*. The author "Alright" wondered how strikers who claimed to have such low wages carried on strikes that lasted over a couple of months. He concluded that the "real reason" for the strike: "is that a spirit of lawlessness and challenge is abroad."¹²⁰ Undoubtedly, job losses and low wages were urgent concerns of strikers as reflected in the demand charter discussed above. But it was as much the "spirit of lawlessness," of challenging the existing order that explains the intensity, determination, scope, and violence of the struggle. In fact, a similar feature was noted of a wildcat "sympathy" strike a year ago in 1946, when five hundred cranemen, loading workers, contractual workers, and clerical workers stopped work to demand the immediate release of an arrested shed clerk on pilferage charges, trade union leaders declaring that the police of 1940s cannot be like that of the 1920s, since "the days of dictatorship are over."¹²¹ The management's most urgent concern, then too, was that workers were taking "law and order" into their own hands. It is this spirit of rebelliousness, so palpable for the contemporaries, but which leaves rare historical traces, that characterizes the moment of labor on the eve of independence.

Strikers relied on wide anticolonial solidarities, in moral and material terms, including in the army and in the police, as described above. In fact, the only jeep in the possession of the union relied on secret supplies of petrol from the Watgunge (local) police station.¹²² The strike's organizing body, the Council of Action, ensured somewhat favorable propaganda about the strike through a nationalist daily, the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*,¹²³ and through various public meetings.¹²⁴ Squads of workers went around Calcutta, and even into the districts of Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, with collection boxes bearing a union seal to collect money for the survival of the strikers and the conduct of the strike.¹²⁵ According to one account, such squads were able to travel free of charge on the trains.¹²⁶ Within Calcutta such squads consisted of Muslim and Hindu workers,¹²⁷ this was probably a matter of practical necessity, as it ensured that they would be less likely to be attacked by gangs of either communities.¹²⁸ Letters proclaiming solidarity with workers were sent to the port authorities from the trade union at the Madras Port, and locally in Kidderpore, from Brooke Bond and Cox and King's workers. The resolution forwarded by Madras port workers declared:

This meeting of the Executive Committee of the Madras Harbour Union sends its fraternal greetings to the 22,000 strong Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association... This meeting [...] is of the opinion that the demands of the Calcutta workers are the demands of the workers in all Harbours and Ports of India and that therefore the impending historic struggle of the Harbour workers of Calcutta is for fundamental and very elementary human rights . . .¹²⁹

Gaining the support of, and respect from, a variety of trade unions contributed to the sense of power and ambition that striking workers felt as part of the labor movement. In fact, ever since the beginning of the strike, the strikers' representatives¹³¹ repeatedly rejected the adjudication proposed by the central government.¹³² Through adjudication, Congress promised workers a "fair" deal, if workers left it in the hands of the government to secure it. Its rejection, on the other hand, implied a significant level of distrust in the promises of the Congress leadership in the founding moment of the nation.¹³³ Over two months into the strike, workers still refused the proposal of India's first Labour Minister, Jagjivan Ram, who promised to "send" the Pay Commission's report to the port authorities. The report would lay down the broad guidelines to be followed regarding the pay and allowances of port workers in line with those of central government employees.¹³⁴ In a telling instance of the insistence on working-class autonomy in workplace matters, the strikers argued that they preferred a "direct settlement" with management "on the basis of their organised strength."¹³⁵

Ultimately, port workers secured their demand of the applicability of First Pay Commission as well as, in principle, their demands for no retrenchment and no victimization.¹³⁶ Even so, this victory signified the narrowing terrain of labor politics, it opened doors for the channeling of labor militancy through specific institutions of the post-independent state, reserved for privileged sections of working poor. The division of labor into a formal sector, highly regulated by the state, with considerably better working conditions, and the unregulated informal sector was one of the main strategies of stabilization adopted by the state in the late 1940s.¹³⁷ The major ports would go on to become some of the most regulated postwar workplaces in the country, as part of the formal sector. The casual labor regime, characteristic of port labor throughout the colonial rule, was extensively reformed, including through partially successful governmental "decasualization" schemes.

Conclusion

Independence was not reduced to partition or Pakistan in the industrial spaces of the country in 1947. The postwar moment of fervent anticolonialism dynamized labor movements like never before. In the postwar period, port workers wielded the strike weapon powerfully and repeatedly, sometimes along with large sections of the city's workers, despite the warnings of the Congress party. Here, to-be-citizens demanded their rights as labor, and that, to them, also meant independence. The nationalist leadership demanded order and stability, advising arbitration and negotiations and promising slow reforms, and workers responded by enthusiastically participating in general strikes and shutting down a major port for three months. They relied on the anticolonial sentiments of wider layers of the population. Workers' militancy

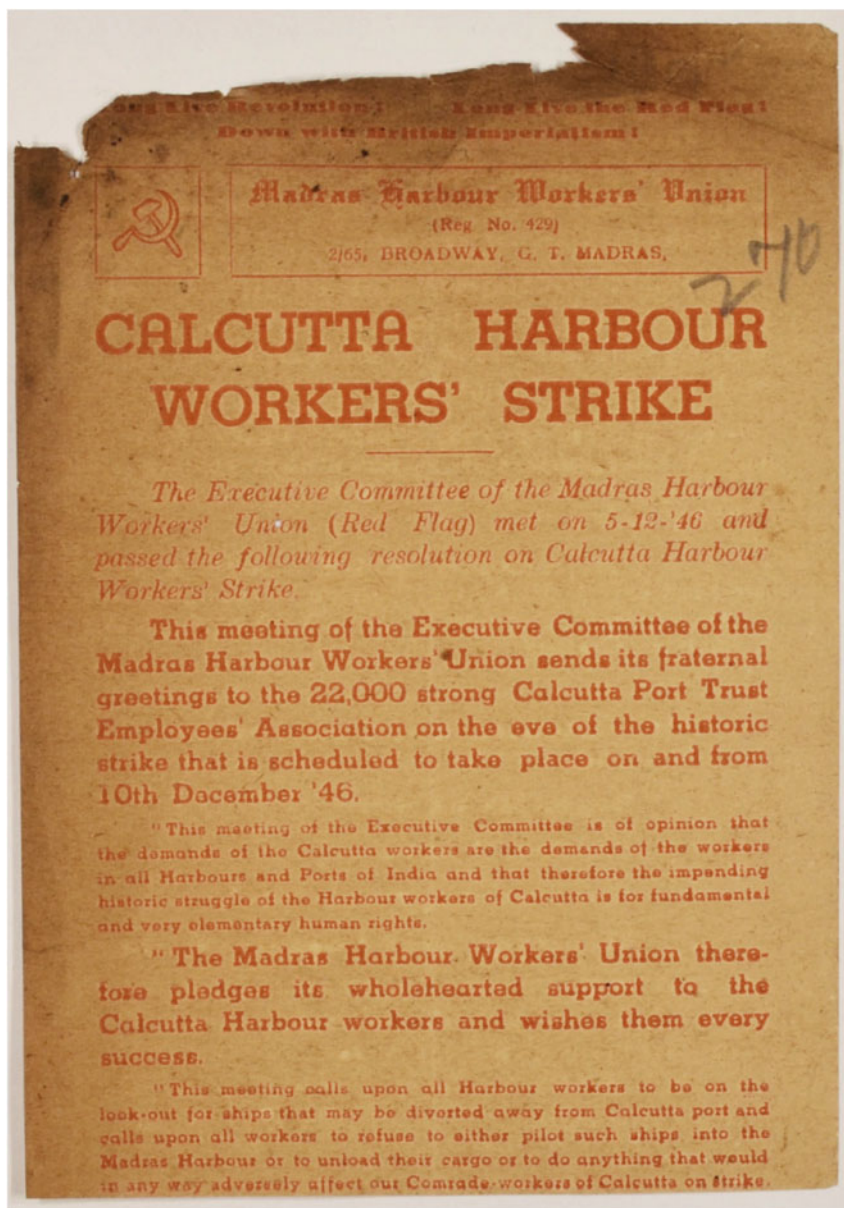


Figure 2. Madras Port Workers Resolution¹³⁰

emerged powerfully and existed in deep tension with the imperatives of new so-called nation-states (India and Pakistan), right from the first day of the new order.

As the subcontinent was being partitioned into two rival states on the basis of religion, communalism weighed heavily on the labor movement, too. Workers, even those under the leadership of the Communist Party of India, participated in the

Direct-Action Day, and Calcutta's docklands were grounds of massive rioting and bloodshed. Solidarities of labor were scarred by the deadliest riots in city's history, but is important for us to note that these were not ripped apart. Workers' way, an alternative pathway and a future in which new citizens would not be divided on communal lines but united in their struggles against material hardships and poverty, was part of the imagination of the time, as several accounts show. The port strike of 1947, six months after the Calcutta riots, shows that workers' politics had gained a certain degree of autonomy and resilience, and trade unions had gained considerable organizational strength. Labor politics was thus imprinted on the agenda of decolonization.

Victories of communal politics are often construed to be total in the historiography of Bengal. As a result, postcolonial histories of Bengal focus largely on the impacts and implications of partition, wherein "refugees" emerge as the most crucial category of political identification and claim-making, even in the histories of the Left. This article inserts the determined contestations based in categories of class and labor in the processes of decolonization, allowing us to complicate the political landscape of late and postcolonial Bengal and India.

Postwar labor militancy has been largely forgotten but it defined the place as well as the content of labor question on the postcolonial agenda. A crucial mechanism of forgetting has been to deny strikers historical agency, they were merely fighting for "economic" demands. In fact, the rights of labor were elaborated upon in remarkably expansive and, at the same time, concise terms in the period, and considerable concessions were gained with highly disruptive, even violent, collective actions at the workplace and on the streets. However, the strike was directed as an industrial dispute against its leadership and the key demand put forward was that workers' wages and conditions be in line with those of Central Government workers. The terrain of this highly militant strike was defined in rather narrow terms, right from the beginning. The goal of the strike was to ensure a privileged status for port workers, which by definition would set them apart from the rest of the city's workers. Such a goal dovetailed with state priority, which was to establish a certain order and stability, the formal sector was conceived of to do that. The achievement of the strike was that it ensured regularization and advancement of port labor conditions, widening horizons of expectations beyond the port industry for casual workers. At the same time, it was an early sign of and the basis for the fast-approaching institutionalization of labor politics geared to the imperatives of nation-building and state-making. The late 1940s are crucial to understanding the contradictory tendencies and trajectories of labor politics that radicalism, on the eve of independence, unleashed.

Notes

1. Jolly Mohan Kaul, *In Search of a Better World: Memoirs* (Kolkata, 2010), 84.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. 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. doi:10.1017/S0026749X17001007.

About two million workers were involved in strikes and lockouts in 1946 and 1947. The annual number of recorded strikes and lockouts spiked to around nineteen hundred in the same years (the maximum reached during interwar years was four hundred).

5. Prerna Agarwal, PhD thesis, Kings College London.

6. Janam Mukherjee, "Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of the Empire, 1939-1946" (doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 2011). "While the industrial districts of Calcutta and surrounding municipalities had a significant proportion of Muslims, parts of the docklands were home to a particularly greater proportion. In the Garden Reach area, there were as many Muslims as there were Hindus." Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (Cambridge, 2007), 162.
7. For a detailed study of trade unions and labor politics at the port in the late colonial period, Prerna Agarwal, "Planting the red-flag: Early communists and the politics of labour at the port of Calcutta, 1920s-1940s," unpublished PhD dissertation, Kings College London.
8. Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA, 1995).
9. *Ibid.*
10. The older labor history produced in the 1950s-1970s did discuss the large number of strikes in this period but without assessing their wider meanings. V. B. Karnik, *Indian Trade Unions; a Survey*, (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966), 142. Also see, Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1970* (Calcutta, 1977).
11. Ahuja, "Produce and Perish," 16. Also, Sumit Sarkar, "Popular Movements and National Leadership, 1945-47," *Economic and Political Weekly* 17 (1982); Indivar Kamtekar, "The End of the Colonial State in India, 1942-47," PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1988.
12. Fredrick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven, CT, 1987). Fredrick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); Gareth Curless, "The Triumph of the State: Singapore's Dockworkers and the Limits of Global History, c. 1920-1965," *The Historical Journal* 60: 1097-123; "'The people need civil liberties': trade unions and contested decolonisation in Singapore," *Labor History* 57 (1): 53-70.
13. For a summary view of the ideas developed over a longer period, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), ch. 7.
14. Exceptions include: Sarkar "Popular Movements..."; Amit Kumar Gupta, *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47* (New Delhi, 1987); Anirudh Deshpande, "Sailors and the Crowd, Popular Protest in Karachi, 1946," in Sekhara Bandyopadhyaya, *Nationalist Movement in India: A Reader* (Delhi, 2009); Gautam Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution" in *Essays in Honour of S C Sarkar* (New Delhi, 1976); Siddhartha Guha Ray, "Protest and Politics: Story of Calcutta Tramway Workers 1940-47," *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades* (New Delhi, 2015), 151-76.
15. The framework has been elaborated by Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, African Studies Series (Cambridge, 1996). Frederick Cooper, "Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present," *New Approaches to African History* (Cambridge, 2002).
16. Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit* (London, 1961) provides the "transfer of power" argument, for instance. H.V. Brasted and C. Bridge "15 August 1946: Labour's parting gift to India" in *India: Creating a Modern Nation*, ed. J. Masselos (New Delhi, 1990), 1-35. Beyond this, literature on the partition and its consequences is immense, especially so for the case of Bengal. For instance, Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (New York); Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York, 2007); Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge South Asian Studies (Cambridge, 1994); Joya. Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society series (Cambridge, 2007); Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947: Contour of Freedom*, Routledge Curzon Studies in South Asia series (London, 2004); Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee, Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge, 2018).
17. Sarkar, "Popular Movements...," 679ii.
18. See Anirudh Deshpande, "Sailors and the Crowd," 343.
19. See for the case of Bengal, Anwesha Roy, *Making Peace, Making Riots: Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940-1947* (Cambridge, 2020). Joya Chatterji, *Hindu Communalism and Partition of Bengal, 1932-1947* (Cambridge, 2010); Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947* (Delhi, and New York, 1991); Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (London, 2014); Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*, shows the growing affinities between the politics of depressed castes and Hindu communalism.
20. Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots*.

21. Ishan Mukherjee, "Agitation, Riots and the Transitional State in Calcutta, 1945-50," PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2017, 193; Anwasha Roy, *Making Peace, Making Riots*, 21.
22. *The Statesman*, for instance, February 19, 1947, February 21, 1947, March 22, 1947, April 12, 1947, April 23, 1947.
23. Siddhartha Guha Roy, "Protest and Politics: Story of Calcutta Tram Workers 1940-47," in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Tanika Sarkar, eds. (New Delhi, 2015).
24. Malcolm Darling, *At Freedom's Door* (Oxford, 1949), preface.
25. Sarkar, "Popular Movements...," 679ii-683.
26. Ahuja, "Produce or Perish."
27. For a whole year, Congress attempted to challenge the dominant position of CPI in AITUC. As part of the drive, tens of thousands of communists were arrested and anticommunist propaganda was widespread in these years. On the formation of INTUC, an official dispatch to the Cabinet office in London noted "[this was] a recognition by the right-wing opinion, hitherto preoccupied with political issues, of the growth of Communist influence through the trade unions and the need to take steps to consider it in that field." The same dispatch identified Sardar Patel as the "leading spirit" behind the creation of the new federation, whose "aversion for the Communists amounts to something like a phobia." BL, IOR: L/E/8/6231, Collaboration between Government of India and Trade Unions, Dispatch No. 43, May 16, 1947. For the impacts of such a split in the case of Bombay textile workers, see Rajanarayan Chandavarkar, "The War on the Shopfloor," *International Review of Social History* 51 (2006): 263-77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0020859006002689>.
28. Ahuja, "Produce or Perish."
29. Sarkar, ed., *Towards Freedom*, "Frantic bid to keep up delivery service." *Free Press Journal*, 12.07.1946, 486; BL, IOR, L/P&J/5/153, Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of July 1946, 1.
30. BL, IOR, C&O 365/46, Captain C.P. King, Corps of Military Police (India), Assam to Major P.A. Jones, MP, North Herts. Division, August 1, 1946.
31. BL, IOR, L/P&J/5/153, Secret Report on the Political Situation, 1; *Hindusthan Standard*, August 1, 1946.
32. *Hindusthan Standard*, Impressions of a City Hartal.
33. BL, IOR, L/P&J/5/153, Secret Report for Political Situation in Bengal for second half of July 1946, 2.
34. Sarkar, ed., *Towards Freedom*, three lakhs Attend Rally in Calcutta, "Unprecedented rally of over 3 lakhs in Calcutta," *People's Age*, August 11, 1946, 521.
35. Sarkar, ed., *Towards Freedom*, sixteen Lakhs Participate in the July 29 Strike in Calcutta, "Biggest ever Hartal in our National Movement" *People's Age*, August 11, 1946, 522.
36. *People's Age*, August 11, 1946
37. Sarkar, ed., *Towards Freedom*, sixteen Lakhs Participate in the July 29 Strike in Calcutta, "Biggest ever Hartal in our National Movement," *People's Age*, August 11, 1946, 522.
38. Sarkar, ed., *Towards Freedom*, sixteen Lakhs Participate in the July 29 Strike in Calcutta, "Biggest ever Hartal in our National Movement," *People's Age*, August 11, 1946, 522
39. Kolkata Port Trust Maritime Archive (KPTMA), 6612/2/VI, Miscellaneous correspondences with CPTEA, Makhan Chatterjee, Joint secretary of CPTEA to the Chairman, August 13, 1947.
40. KPTMA, 6612/2/VI, Miscellaneous correspondences with CPTEA, Makhan Chatterjee, Joint secretary of CPTEA to the Chairman, August 5, 1947.
41. ABP July 30, 1946, *Hindusthan Standard*, August 1, 1946, *People's Age*, August 11, 1946.
42. *Hindusthan Standard*, August 1, 1946
43. *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, July 30, 1946.
44. *Hindusthan Standard*, August 1, 1946
45. *Hindusthan Standard*, July 29, 1946.
46. *Hindusthan Standard*, July 27, 1946 (to be checked).
47. *Capital*, August 8, 1946.
48. *Ibid.*, August 1, 1946.
49. Sumit Sarkar, "The City Imagined," *Writing Social History* (Delhi), 175-77.
50. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Princeton, NJ, 1989)153-54; for strikes among clerks in early twentieth century, see Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 181-83.
51. *Capital*, August 1, 1946; *Hindusthan Standard*, August 1, 1946.
52. *People's Age*, August 11, 1946.
53. *ABP*, July 30, 1946.

54. Aruna Asaf Ali, quoted in Sumit Sarkar, "Popular movements and nationalist leadership," *EPW*, 682.
55. *People's Age*, August 11, 1946. The meaning of "bamboo," perhaps an erroneous transliteration of a Bengali word, is not clear here.
56. Exceptions include Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*.
57. Kaul, *In Search*.
58. Prerna Agarwal, "In the Name of Islam and Constitutionalism: The Murky World of Labour Politics in Calcutta's Docklands, 1930s," in *In Defence of Freedom: Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and Strikebreaking, 1890-1930*, Matteo Milan and Alessandro Saluppo, eds. (London, 2020).
59. KPM/SB/00119/05, Mayday 1941, Urdu Mayday leaflet titled "The annual festival of the workers of the world."
60. Kaul, *In Search*, 98–100.
61. KPTMA, 6923/1, Riots in Calcutta, Emergency Measures.
62. Das, *Communal Riots*, 184–86. Das discusses how the goondas took charge once the riots had "gained its own momentum."
63. Mukherjee, "Hungry Bengal," 334.
64. KPTMA, Miscellaneous correspondences with Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association 1946, 6612/2/VI, leaflet titled "Do not forget your demands" signed by CPTEA President, Nepal Bhattacharjee, undated leaflet attached to a newspaper article in *Swaddhinata* dated November 19, 1946. Presumably, printed in November 1946. The account from the union leaflet about the consequences of the riots on the poor are corroborated by: Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots*, 188–89.
65. *Ibid.*
66. KPTMA, "Do not forget your demands."
67. *Farewell* by Samaresh Basu; translation from Bengali by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson in Stewart Frank and Kumar Sukrita *Crossing Over: Partition Literature from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh*, Paul Mānoa, ed. (Honolulu, 2007). Among many adaptations, Gulzar adapted it for a national TV series, *Kirdaar*, in 1993–1994.
68. Mukherjee, "Hungry Bengal," 345.
69. KPTMA, "Do not forget your demands."
70. KPTMA, Miscellaneous correspondences with Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association 1946, 6612/2/VI, Letter from the Secretary of the CPTEA, Nepal Bhattacharya, to the Chairman, July 24, 1946.
71. *Ibid.*
72. The demands are available in English as presented to the chairman. We do not have access to the demands in Hindi/Urdu/Bengali, which is how they would have been discussed and popularized among workers.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*
76. Dr. W.R. Ackroyd was an Irish nutritionist who worked in India for nine years at National Research Laboratories, Coonoor (1935–1946) and headed the Nutrition Division of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (1946–1960). "Obituary Notice," *British Journal of Nutrition* 43, 2 (1980).
77. KPTMA, Miscellaneous correspondences with Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association 1946, 6612/2/VI,
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Ibid.* The demands were being articulated as housing for industrial workers emerged as a national governmental issue in postwar years. In 1946, the National Planning Commission envisaged a ten-year housing program focused on providing housing to industrial workers. The report of the Housing priority sub-Committee declared "housing [for industrial workers] as a public utility of national importance" and envisaged providing housing at subsidized rents to workers. ILO monthly reports, July 1946.
81. *Ibid.*
82. KPTMA, 6612/2/VI, Miscellaneous Correspondences with Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association, 1946.
83. KPTMA, 6612/2/VI, Miscellaneous Correspondences and KPTMA, 6640/5/II, Strike 1947, Secretary [Madras Harbour Workers' Union] to the Chairman [Calcutta and Madras Port], April 19, 1947; Secretary [Madras Harbour Workers' Union] to the Labour Minister, The Labour Member, Interim

Government, February 16, 1947; KPTMA, 6640/5/II, Strike 1947, Secretary [Brooke Bond Workers' Union] to the Chairman, Port Trust, March 19, 1947.

84. KPTMA, "Do not forget your demands."

85. Ibid.

86. SOAS, OA3, India – A People Partitioned, Andrew Whitehead, Interview [digital audio], Ajit Bose.

87. *The Statesman*, letter from Mohini Mohan Sen, Calcutta, April 2, 1947.

88. Mukherjee, "Hungry Bengal," 367–68. As Mukherjee has discussed the August riots were most intense, but riots on smaller scale continued throughout 1946 and 1947.

89. BL, IOR, L/PJ/5/154, Bengal Governor Reports 1947, F.J Burrows to Wavell, 7.02.1947.

90. KPTMA, 6640/5/II, Strike, letter from officer-in-charge Encroachments & Port Surveys Party, to the River Surveyor. 18.02.47.

91. *The Statesman*, 7 February 1947 and 10 February 1947

92. Kaul, *In search*, 103. Calcutta Port Trust Shramik Union Commemorative Volume, 15 December 1975, From the pages of the history of the Trade Union movement in Calcutta port, by Deb Kumar Ganguly.

93. KPMTA, Strike, 6640/5/II

94. *The Statesman*, February 7, 1947, and February 10, 1947.

95. Calcutta Port Trust Shramik Union Commemorative Volume, December 15, 1975, From the pages of the history of the Trade Union movement in Calcutta port, by Deb Kumar Ganguly.

96. KPTMA, Strike, 6640/5/II.

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid.

99. In fact, mariners from East Bengal had been known to be an insular occupational section and keep aloof from Shramik Union until the 1940s. It was during the war and in the postwar period that these workers came into the fold of the union in significant numbers and then participated in the strike. They would be in an increasingly insecure position post-partition and were replaced by Hindu refugees by the 1960s. They are an interesting case study to understand the contradictory pulls of class politics and communal identities. Kaul, *In search*, and Michael Bogaert, *Trade unionism in Indian ports: A case study at Calcutta and Bombay* (New Delhi, 1970).

100. *The Statesman*, for instance, February 19, 1947, February 21, 1947, March 22, 1947, April 12, 1947, April 23, 1947.

101. Kaul, *In Search*, 103.

102. KPTMA, Strike, 6640/5/II, Letter from the GOI, Transport Department, to the Chairman, March 14, 1947.

103. KPTMA, Strike, 6640/5/II, Chairman to the Secretary, Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, March 3, 1947.

104. The strike was a "subject" under the consideration of the central government (governor's reports, 1947) and the records are unavailable. The central government demanded that the port prioritize the transport of grain imports, apart from that the government simply let the strike go on for as long as three months. KPTMA, Strike, 6640/5/II, letter from GOI, Transport dept., to the Chairman.

105. KPTMA, Strike, 6640/5/II.

106. Kaul, *In Search* . . . , 105.

107. Ibid., 105. KPTMA, Miscellaneous correspondences with Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association 1946, 6612/2/VI, Makhan Chatterjee to the Port Chairman, August 5, 1946.

108. Ibid., 105.

109. KPTMA, Strike, 6640/5/II.

110. Ibid.

111. Ibid.

112. Ibid.

113. Ibid. Copy of report on assault on Mr. Baker, March 4, 1947.

114. Ibid.

115. Ibid. Statement of Captain Smith and letter from L/N Dil Bahd. Chetty to the officer commanding, Group Headquarters, March 4, 1947.

116. Ibid. Statement of Captain Smith and Finding [Official].

117. Ibid. Finding [Official] and the statements of S. Witten Baker, Mr. Ansell [volunteer worker] and letter from Dil Bahd.

118. KPTMA, Strike, 6640/5/II, A. Sengupta, Army Headquarters to Secretary, Port Commissioners, March 14, 1947
119. In 1948, a major strike of the one thousand Port Watch and Ward armed guards broke out. They demanded equality in pay and conditions with the rest of the workers. They confined themselves to their barracks and initially refused to hand over their rifles and only gave in after forced evacuation. Ganguli, "From the Pages," Commemorative Volume.
120. *The Statesman*, March 27, 1947.
121. KPTMA, 6640/5/I, Temporary strike of Port commissioners labor and clerical staff.
122. Kaul, *In Search . . .*, 105.
123. For instance, *ABP* published "Port Workers' Reply to BPCC President's Appeal." Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee's President had urged port workers to call off their strike in "the larger interests of Bengal" through the columns of the same newspaper the previous day. The "Port Workers' Reply" explained the reasons that they will continue the strike, given that verbal promises offered by the central government were not satisfactory. They also publicly rebuked the Congress president for misleading the public, and suggested that he should use his influence to get the Port Commissioners to "give up their uncompromising attitude and come to terms with the workers." *ABP*, 24 March 1947.
124. Kaul, *In Search*, 105–06.
125. *Ibid.*
126. *Ibid.*, 106.
127. *Ibid.*
128. *Ibid.*, 106–07.
129. KPTMA, 6612/2/VI, Miscellaneous Correspondences with Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association, 1946.
130. *Ibid.*
131. The strike was led by a workers' joint council of action, whose prominent figures were Nepal Bhattacharya (of Workers' League) and Jolly Mohan Kaul (of CPI). They were General Secretary and President of the Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association, respectively. The joint council also included Ahmedullah of the rival National Union of Port Trust Employees (NUPTE). NUPTE, a rival and a "moderate" union had initially opposed the strike, but joined under popular pressure. This was also the time that Congress took over the leadership position in the union.
132. In a strike leaflet published in November 1946, Nepal Bhattacharya stated that the adjudication offer had been unanimously rejected on his initiative. He explained that: "Adjudication will naturally be executed by a government official and it is not difficult to understand that the decision will only be reached in the favour of the chairman." KPTMA, "Do not forget your demands."
133. The policy of referring industrial disputes to adjudication through labor tribunals was a key element of the crucial Industrial Disputes Act (IDA), which was passed in March 1947. With its antecedents in Trade Disputes Act (1929) and Defence of India Rules (81A), IDA, it was the main policy tool of Congress for ensuring some amount of industrial peace and stability in the post-war period, while promising workers a "fair-deal" under a state institution. As Prabhu Mohapatra has argued "Under the ID Act, the government acquired enormous discretionary power to declare industries as public utilities, forcing industrial disputes for conciliation and adjudication and prohibiting strikes and lockouts during the conciliation and adjudication process and in the binding period for tribunal awards." Prabhu Mohapatra, "Unravelling the puzzle," *The Seminar*, Reforming Labour Laws, May 2015. Available at: http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/669/669_prabhu_mohapatra.htm (accessed on August 12, 2020).
134. *The Statesman*, April 11, 1947.
135. *The Statesman*, April 12, 1947.
136. KPTMA, 4056, Calling of a strike by the Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association, Attachment to a letter from the Deputy Chairman to the Deputy Conservator, May 5, 1947, Terms of Settlement.
137. Ahuja, "Produce and Perish", 43–45, and Karuna Wielenga Dietrich, "The Emergence of the Informal Sector: Labour Legislation and Politics in South India, 1940–60," *Modern Asian Studies* 54, 4 (2020): 1113–148, traces how some of these laws were determining in the denial of legal protection for workers in small unorganized industries in South India.