

---

## **Recent Trends in the Writings of Indian Labour Historiography**

*Aarushi Baloria*

*Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Jammu*

---

### **Abstract**

*This paper looks into the changing patterns of Indian Labour Historiography with new labour history being discussed at length. Historiography of Indian labour was changing with changing times. During the colonial period it was dominated by colonial official-scholars who blamed socio-cultural factors of Indians for their backwardness in the industrial field. Marxism was next to affect Indian Labour Historiography. Marxists projected the workers as militant and leading class. By 1990s new labour history was initiated, which questioned the earlier forms of history writing. Writers belonging to this period produced extensive material on working class based on their multiple identities viz. caste, gender, religion etc. However inspite of this new approach there are many areas relating to working class which are still demanding attention.*

**Key Words:** *Labour, Historiography, Marxist, Militant, Identities, Working Class.*

### **Introduction**

Labour History is a sub-field of social history which deals with the study of working classes and the Labour movement. It also includes the study of social and cultural history of industrial working class. If we look in the context of Indian Labour History, broadly four phases can be seen.<sup>1</sup> However, maintaining strict chronology while differentiating between these trends is not possible because several trends persist simultaneously. But there are certain characteristics which are specific to certain periods.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, the late colonial period, the labour history was initiated and certain foundational discourses on labour were formulated. This was the first phase in the labour history of India. In this Phase, the labour historiography depicted two main trends: Colonial and Indian. The colonial trend was developed with the writings of colonial official-scholars and appeared in many official reports. The second trend was evolved by Indian intellectuals in opposition to the colonial rule. Social and cultural factors were held responsible for backwardness of industrialization and restricting the mobility of labour by the colonial writers. On the other hand, the Nationalist writers held colonialism responsible for creating hurdles in the path of industrial development and inhibiting the growth of capitalism.

In The second phase from the turn of independence to the early 1970s, the Indian Labour Historiography was dominated by Marxism and Modernization theories. Marxist writing significantly changed the discourses on Labour. Workers were now considered as a leading and a militant class which could be organized to uproot the hegemony of landlords and capitalists. In the 1950s, on the other hand, modernization theories were applied to analyze and understand the causes for India's backwardness and to suggest remedial measures to

take it on the path of development. During the third phase in Indian Labour history, which stated in 1970s and continued up to 1980s, major rethinking on different aspects of labour history occurred. Here workers were placed along multiple axes of identity. There was detailed archival exploration and intensive investigation into specific industries of workers. Because of all this the foundations of earlier labour history were weakened and grounds for a new history were prepared. The fourth phase which began in late 1980s and early 1990s and is still current may be considered as the New Labour History. In this phase major studies on labour history were produced which led to the questioning of conventional labour history and several alternatives were proposed.

Starting from 1990s, a lot of books are available on the study of working class in India. But in 1989, Dipesh Chakrabarty published a book *Rethinking Working Class History*, which became a watershed in the course of Indian Labour History. According to Chakrabarty, culture was never given its due in the proceedings of Indian Labour history.<sup>ii</sup> He wanted to bring culture in the Centre of working class history. However, this perspective of Chakrabarty faced a lot of criticism. He was reprehended for his uncritical attitude towards culture. Moreover, he failed to take into account the role of political factors in shaping the contours of industrial labour and that of culture as well. Rajnarayan Chandarvarkar was very critical of Chakrabarty's cultural position. Culture was a non-existent category for him. He emphasized the role of economic and political factors in shaping the politics of labour. His outright rejection of culture and total dependence on economic and political factors create conditions for a different kind of determinism where the workers still have no agency<sup>iii</sup>.

Workers of the Kolar gold mines and of Bangalore city, in princely state of Mysore, were studied by Janaki Nair in a comparative perspective.<sup>iv</sup> She found that repression was common in both places and thus the growth of trade union was inhibited until the 1940s, while trade unions were legalized in 1926 in British India. She also points that despite the difficult conditions at the workplace, the Kolar mines workers did not feel any nostalgic attachment to their native places, as the discrimination and exploitation there was worse. So, mining industry provided these workers relatively more dignity and freedom, and better earnings.<sup>v</sup>

The relationship between gender and class, the long needed focus, has been provided by the works of Samita Sen and Leela Fernandes. The work of Samita Sen is very important for being a pioneering one on the female workers in the jute industry of Bengal. She shows that women were associated with lower skills, which relegated their work to the 'unskilled' level. In the post-war period, the construction of women as wives and mothers further reduced women's importance in the industry.<sup>vi</sup> As the wages moved up in the post-independence period, the so-called formal sector became more lucrative. The workers who were unionized were better placed to take advantage of the situation. Thus Sen remarks, 'From the 1950s, the unions played an active role in eliminating existing women and hindering women's recruitment.

The work of Leela Fernandes is an ethnographic study based on jute mill of Calcutta. In this work the role of gender in the formation of the working class is discussed.<sup>vii</sup> She points out that class identity is privileged greatly over any other identity, be it gender, caste or religion.

So in her discourse she tried to move away from this unitary conception based on class identity only, and to view class in its interrelationship with other identities, specifically gender. According to her, trade unions, mill authorities and male workers wanted to exclude women from industrial work place and confined them to household work so that they could produce a patriarchal form of family.

The study of Kanpur workers by Chitra Joshi is a fine specimen of work in the new Labour history. Covering both the colonial and the post-independence period for over a century it comfortably moves across the political divide.<sup>viii</sup> Her study is quite important from the perspective of understanding both continuities and contrasts. She depicts significantly the disintegrating world of industrial Labour since 1980s onwards in the wake of the industrial reconstitution strategy of global capitalism. Her work covers many economic aspects of the workers relating to migration; the daily lives of the workers and their work in the mills.

The contours of Indian Labour History have been significantly changed by these works. However, the main focus of the new Labour history has been mostly on large scale industry, mining and plantations, if not entirely. Therefore, scholars are exploring new areas which may have important bearings on the future development of Indian Labour History.

**Informal Labour:** Workers outside the organized industry have not received due attention from the historians. Labour in the organized sector throughout the colonial period was never more than 10-12 per cent of the total workforce. Moreover, there were no formal and informal lines separating the labour market. So in a way, a very large span of worker's existence was covered by informality. Thus it is very necessary that conditions of informality are intensively researched.

**Agrarian Labour:** Conventionally, they have mostly been a part of the economic history on a broad level. But now it is time for historians to bring this area into their own ambit. Agrarian Labour, associated with small peasantry as well as landless workers, constitutes the largest component of Indian workers.

**Women Labour:** It is important to see the labour history from a gendered perspective. There has been relatively less work on women workers than is required. Moreover, an enforced domesticity has been imposed in them due to their increasing exclusion from the urban Labour market.

**Emigrant Labour:** Studies on emigrant labour to overseas colonies like the Fiji, Mauritius, and West Indies, Sri Lanka have always reflected the concerns of the Nationalists, who protested against the inhuman conditions of their transportation and employment there. Study of this type of Labour involves a comparative study of two or more administrative systems and cultures.

### **Conclusion**

We can conclude this paper by saying that while writing the history of working class, emphasis should be on their multiple identities relating to caste, gender, religion and nation. And these identities should not be hierarchized but should be seen in their interrelationship. In the new labour history dualities of formal-informal, free-unfree, industrial-agricultural

Labour have become obsolete. Historians now believe that not only such divisions do not exist in practice but they could be problematic as well. By removing these distinctions, it is possible to study various labour forms existing simultaneously and interpenetrating each other. This all will enhance the scope and area of research making the work of the historian much more challenging.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. <sup>i</sup>Bhattacharya S. Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography. New Delhi; ICHR and Primus Books; 2011. p.87.
2. <sup>ii</sup>Ibid., p. 100.
3. <sup>iii</sup> Upadhyay SB. Historiography in the Modern World: Western and Indian Perspective. New Delhi, Oxford University Press; 2016, p. 598.
4. <sup>iv</sup> Nair J. Miners and Millhands.
5. <sup>v</sup> Ibid, pp. 296-97.
6. <sup>vi</sup> Sen S. Women and Labour in Colonial India. p. 143.
7. <sup>vii</sup> Fernandes L. Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills, New Delhi, 1997.
8. <sup>viii</sup> Joshi C, Histories of Indian Labour: Predicaments and Possibilities. 2008.