1   The study and its perspectives

I

The simultaneous and unprecedented expansion of the politics of class, community and nationalism marked a decisive transition in the history of the Indian subcontinent in the years between the two world wars. At the heart of this political transformation lay the emergence of 'mass' movements and widespread popular political action, the nature and terms of which form the central theme of this book. It illuminates how the popular classes inscribed their own space in, and thus also determined the direction of, caste, communal and nationalist movements. The focus is on the poor in towns, who have received little attention from historians compared with their rural counterparts. Yet, in the interwar years, various parts of the subcontinent underwent extensive urbanisation and urban demographic expansion,[1] and towns became central to political developments in the country, with the poor coming to play a pivotal role. Arguably, the urban poor contributed substantially to the transformation of Indian politics in this period, and our understanding of the nature of mass politics and political conflict in late-colonial India might be significantly modified by approaching the subject from this perspective.

The politics of the urban working classes have not, of course, been entirely ignored in Indian historiography.[2] Most works, however, give

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[1] For patterns of interwar urbanisation in southern India, see C. J. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy, 1880–1955: The Tamilnad Countryside*, Oxford, 1984.

[2] For example, M. D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947*, Berkeley, 1965; V. B. Karnik, *Indian Trade Unions: A Survey*, Bombay, 1966; V. B. Karnik, *Strikes in India*, Bombay, 1967; S. M. Pandey, *As Labour Organises: A Study of Unionism in the Kanpur Cotton Textile Industry*, Delhi, 1970; R. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918–29: A Study of Organisation in the Cotton Mills*, Canberra, 1981; M. Holmstrom, *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour*, Cambridge, 1984; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940*, Princeton, 1989; R. S. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*, Cambridge, 1994; Subho Basu, 'Workers Politics in Bengal, 1890–1929: Mill Towns, Strikes and Nationalist Agitations' Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1994.

only a partial picture. Studies usually concentrate on factory workers, and they deal largely with politics arising from the experience of work or workplace relations. However, urban workforces are not clearly differentiated between formal or organised sector factory-hands and the rest: casual, unorganised labour in the informal sector.[3] Workers move from one kind of work to another, and straddle both the so-called informal and formal sectors, as well as industry, trade, transport and construction. The various sectors are, thus, not rigidly compartmentalised, and the labour market is characterised by interchangeability and mobility of workers between sectors. Scholars have also realised that it is historically inaccurate to assume that the informal sector is merely a transitional stage for new urban migrant labour biding its time to graduate to skilled employment in the formal manufacturing sector. Instead, the informal sector has proved to be the overwhelming and enduring reality of Indian urban economies, both past and present.[4] In such a context, only a restricted vignette of the politics of the urban labouring poor is revealed when the politics of factory labour in the formal sector are isolated for analysis. This approach is even less adequate when workers' politics are considered to emanate largely, if not wholly, from the imperatives of workplace relations. This remains a problem even if studies of workers' political action is not confined to 'labour' unrest or trade unionism alone, but includes nationalist or caste and religious movements. Some recent studies have sought to surmount these lacunae by emphasising the need to step outside the workplace to understand working-class politics. These have drawn attention variously to the importance of the state, the social organisation of urban neighbourhoods, and a range of non-economic relations in shaping working-class politics. They have also pointed to forms of political action other than workplace-based politics.[5]

In tune with this emerging body of work, this book sketches urban popular politics on a broad canvas. It does not concentrate on labour in factories, but draws in manual workers in the *bazars* (market areas) and in a whole host of small-scale manufacturing units; artisans and crafts-

[3] Jan Breman, 'A Dualistic Labour System? A Critique of the "Informal Sector" Concept', *EPW*, Part I: XI, 48, 27 November 1976, pp. 1870–6; Part II: XI, 49, 4 December 1976, pp. 1905–8; Part III: XI, 50, 11 December 1976, pp. 1939–44; Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, pp. 72–123; Holmstrom, *Industry and Inequality*, pp. 76–9, 319–21.

[4] Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 5–7.

[5] Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*. For working-class politics elsewhere, see G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982*, Cambridge, 1983; P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914*, Cambridge, 1991.

people; transport and construction workers; hawkers, street-vendors and pedlars; and service groups such as sweepers and municipal workers. These groups constituted the bulk of the urban labour force in most Indian towns, especially in those with few or no large industries, as was, and still is, often the case. The labouring population in these towns also clearly included occupational groups who were not permanently engaged in wage labour, for they were often involved in petty trade and service occupations. For many workers, wage labour thus coexisted with 'self-employment'. The appellation 'poor', rather than the 'working classes' or 'labour', is used to refer to all these groups, for the latter terms have connotations mainly of organised, formal sector industrial workers. The epithet 'poor' also avoids the suggestion of the existence of urban workers or labour as a distinct social class arising from a particular set of production relations, as the term 'working class' often implies. 'Poor' here also does not refer to any particular economic measure of poverty nor does it denote only the 'casual poor' or a residual under-class, supposedly existing on the margins of the industrial labour force, which has been the common use of the term in many other contexts, especially when discussing Victorian Britain. The term 'poor' then is deployed in a largely descriptive sense to encompass various urban occupational groups and to highlight the diversity and plurality of their employment relations and working conditions. The use of the term, however, does not arise from any assumption that the diverse groups of the poor were conscious of being a cohesive class with shared interests and plight. Indeed, this study makes the construction of their complex social identities the very subject of enquiry. Furthermore, by referring to the 'poor' instead of the 'working classes', this book seeks to draw attention to vital aspects of urban experience, other than work, that determined the nature of politics. Economic relations, conditions of labour or experience at the workplace alone did not constitute the entire universe of the urban poor. Non-economic modes of domination, exclusion and oppression, based on caste or religion for instance, contributed to the nature and forms of poverty. Municipal government and the regime of law and discipline were equally important in moulding the politics of the poor, as were the initiatives of urban elites to reform, improve and control them, or to harness them to projects of nation-building or construction of caste and religious community.

The term 'poor' is invoked in this book as an analytical category for another significant reason, which has to do with the emerging discursive practices and political rhetoric of the time. Administrative or state policies and middle-class perceptions in the interwar period increasingly tended to identify the labouring classes of the towns as a homogenised

category of the 'poor'. In contrast to the rural masses, the urban poor
were often seen as a distinct social segment, sharing undesirable traits
and posing a threat to moral and social order, public health and political
stability. At the same time, the expansion of representative and mass
politics after the First World War encouraged a rhetorical reference to
the 'poor' as the wider normative political constituency whom all parties
or political formations claimed to represent. The development of the
concept 'poor' as an elite construct lends further relevance to the use of
this term in analysing urban social contradictions in the interwar period.

Central to this study is the nature of the political consciousness and
identity of the labouring poor. It is now widely accepted that, among the
labouring classes, the development of class consciousness, narrowly
conceived in terms of material relations or economic exploitation alone,
is not inevitable. Nor is it the only or primary form of political identity
of the working classes. Class, in this limited sense, is only one of the
many ways in which the social order is understood and interpreted.[6]
Instead, the labouring classes variously interrogate or seek to subvert the
relations of power as well as contend with rivalries within their own
ranks, through a range of political action, organisation, ideologies and
identities, including nationalism or ethnicity. The prevalence of non-
economic forms of domination also ensures that political identity does
not take the form of class consciousness based only on economic
relations. It is evident from recent studies that class awareness is
expressed in languages other than that of economic antagonism. Con-
ceptions of class refer, for instance, to political exclusion or to a social
identity defined as 'the people' against unrepresentative and corrupt
systems.[7] Moreover, it has been recognised that classes develop by
inflecting other languages of politics, such as nationalism or ethnicity,
with their own meaning. It has also been argued, based on Bakhtin's
dialogic analysis of language, that 'class is revealed [in] . . . the ways in
which working people seek to create an oppositional vocabulary within

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[6] For discussions on 'class' as an analytical category, see P. Joyce (ed.), *Class: Oxford
Reader*, Oxford, 1995. For recent debates on the question of class, see L. R. Berlanstein
(ed.), *Rethinking Labour History*, Urbana, 1993; H. J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds.),
E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives, Cambridge, 1990. For a critique of the narrow
conceptualisation of class formation in the African context, see Frederick Cooper,
'Work, Class and Empire: An African Historian's Retrospective on E. P. Thompson',
Social History, 20, 2, 1995, pp. 235–41.

[7] Joyce, *Visions*; Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*; W. H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in
France: The Language of Labour from the Old Regime to 1848*, Cambridge, 1980;
R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950*, Oxford,
1990; C. Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism
during the Industrial Revolution*, Oxford, 1982; Paul Lubeck, *Islam and Urban Labor in
Northern Nigeria: The Making of a Muslim Working Class*, Cambridge, 1986.

the language of their oppressors'.[8] In other words, class struggle is understood to be conducted between opposing or contested visions and discourses *within* a shared political code.[9] Drawing upon these various analytical perspectives, this study examines the interaction and overlap of diverse forms of political action and social identities of the poor based on class, labour, caste, religion or nation. It concentrates, in particular, on the alternative or contested interpretations by the poor of the wider, elite-generated political ideologies and movements of nationalism, caste and religion.

Popular or subaltern politics in India have usually been approached in terms of the history of particular kinds of political movements, whether in the name of nation, caste or communalism. This in itself is not a problem, but becomes so when the emphasis on one kind of politics conveys the impression that a particular variety of politics and identity was paramount for the poor. A recent study of communalism, for instance, imparts a particular trajectory to popular politics, which appear inexorably to develop towards communal or religious consciousness. The study ultimately gives the impression that the social identity of the north Indian popular classes in the early twentieth century came to be overdetermined by conceptions of religious community.[10] Not only do such approaches subsume the history of the poor under histories of nationalism or communalism, they also obscure the interconnections between various forms of politics and identities of the poor by privileging only one form, and therefore produce a partial picture of popular politics. In contrast, this book simultaneously engages with various kinds of politics of the poor and highlights their interplay, in order to draw out the frequently acknowledged, but rarely investigated, point that no single identity is salient, that identities are multiple and interlinked, and that the politics of the poor, as indeed of other social groups, take varied and diverse, but overlapping and interconnected forms.

Four of the largest towns in the United Provinces (UP) – Allahabad, Benares, Kanpur and Lucknow – are covered in the discussions. These towns were the sites of concerted and pervasive political agitation and conflict in the interwar period. Widespread mass support for the nationalist movement in these towns made them the strongholds of the Congress. Some of the most ferocious communal riots occurred here and political, religious and social reform movements intensified among

[8] Marc W. Steinberg, 'Culturally Speaking: Finding a Commons between Post-structuralism and the Thompsonian Perspective', *Social History*, 21, 2, 1996, p. 206.
[9] Joyce, *Visions*, pp. 332–3.
[10] S. B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*, Berkeley, 1989.

low caste groups in these towns in the 1920s and 1930s. The political ferment in UP towns makes them an ideal focus for the study of popular politics and for the exploration of interconnections between various political movements. In addition, it was from this period onwards that political developments in UP gradually came to exercise a decisive influence in all-India politics – an influence that continues to this day.

II

The growing importance of urban mass politics in interwar north India as well as the central role of the poor in urban politics were underpinned by momentous changes in the towns themselves. The interwar years were significant for extensive urbanisation, with towns developing rapidly in north India, away from the colonial, industrial port cities or the presidency towns of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, which had experienced earlier growth spurts from the later nineteenth century. Urban development in the two decades after the First World War was stimulated by growth in manufacturing industries and the substantial migration from rural areas that took place as a result of both increasing demographic pressures in the countryside from the 1920s onwards and agrarian depression in the 1930s. Migration radically altered the demographic profile of the towns, with a large expansion in the ranks of the poor and their consequent emergence as a crucial social force. Their growing importance in urban society and polity, however, did not arise only from their more numerous presence in the towns. This was also a consequence of the transformation of the economy and shifts in the matrix of social relations in the towns after the First World War and during the depression, which, together, gave rise to an intensification of social conflict involving the poor. The organisation of production, the investment preferences of the commercial and mercantile classes, and the nature of trade, manufacturing, and employment patterns, all underwent substantial change and adjustment, and all had implications for the network of social and economic relations of the growing numbers of the urban poor. They faced new insecurities and vulnerabilities in employment and everyday urban life, but without the mitigation of patronage reciprocities in social relations, for these could not be sustained or instituted under the scale of the demographic pressure and the migration that was taking place. Most importantly, the development of urban trade and industry in the interwar period was characterised by the primacy of small-scale enterprise, which was to generate a fluid, shifting and fiercely (often violently) competitive labour market with high turnover and the proliferation of casual, and usually unskilled, work.

This largely explains why the urban poor would be perceived by the propertied and middle classes as a footloose and volatile mass, threatening the moral and social well-being of 'respectable' people and undermining political progress. To contend with this perceived problem, numerous policy and administrative measures were adopted in the towns variously by the government, local authorities and the police. The policy-makers dealt with scarce municipal resources and infrastructure, public health, housing, law and order, and crime control – all of which were seen to be jeopardised by population growth in general, and more particularly by the increasingly prominent 'floating' population of the poor. The consequent administrative measures made the poor the major targets of governance and ensured a far greater presence of an interventionist state and local authorities in the lives of the poor than ever before. State and local policies further aggravated social conflict in the towns, sharpened class tensions, generated antagonisms among the poor against the state and local institutions, and deepened or created extensive divisions and rivalries among various groups of the poor themselves. Some of these rivalries overlapped with, reinforced or even precipitated caste or religious differences among the poor and gave such divisions new contextual significance and immediacy, further expanding the arena and forms of conflict and political action. The urban poor in the interwar period, therefore, came to inhabit a more bitterly divided and conflictual world; there were now larger numbers of them in the towns and under greater pressure than ever before. Ironically, the administrative policies and forms of political control employed, while generating internal rifts among the poor, at the same time discursively created a homogenised category of the 'poor', laden with negative connotations. It was in response to both the conflict-ridden urban milieu and the negative characterisation faced by the poor that their political initiatives were to emerge. All these developments formed the background and the material context of popular politics in the interwar period, and underpinned the emergence of urban mass politics, helping to fuel caste, religious and nationalist movements. The overtly conflictual world in which the poor found themselves also often drove them towards fierce strife, thus precipitating urban mass violence.

The fact of the emergence of the urban poor as a major social force and their deepening experience of deprivation, conflict or fragmentation did not, however, automatically catapult them into political action. The context for their political action was also crucially set, first of all, by the significant reconfiguration of the institutions and organisations of politics in the interwar period, and, secondly, by the development or further elaboration of a multiplicity of political 'languages' and ideologies,

referring variously to nation, class or community. The First World War
was a landmark in Indian politics.[11] Although the British government
had gradually devolved power from the 1880s, decisive steps in this
direction were taken during and after the war. The consequent expan-
sion of representative politics and its flip-side, the need for popular
political mobilisation, changed the entire nature of Indian politics.[12]
This is a familiar story and the implications of these developments for
the elite – who had access to political institutions and a stake in
constitutional negotiations – have been amply documented. This well-
known story, however, requires recapitulation here in order to highlight
the fact that the significant reconfiguration of politics in this period not
only transformed elite politics, but also had considerable significance for
popular politics. The imperatives of representative politics necessitated
effective mass mobilisation, which, in turn, meant that 'politics' pene-
trated the lives of far wider social groups than ever before. As the elites
galvanised themselves into action to compete for office and influence,
they needed to make those whom they sought to represent a part of the
political process. This, in turn, spurred on the formation of new
organisations and the evolution of new modes of political action and
discourse. It led to the expansion of the 'public sphere' and the innova-
tion of political rituals and practices to forge political collectivities.[13] All
these trends had already begun to emerge in the closing years of the
nineteenth century, but their scale and pace accelerated immeasurably
in the interwar years, and inevitably informed the development of the
politics of the poor. The latter found new arenas and forms of action
which they could inflect with their own political meaning and purpose.
This is not to say that the 'passive' poor were 'mobilised' at the behest of
the elites, but rather that the emerging forms of action and organisation
opened up vast new avenues and terrain for the politics of the poor. In
the process, the 'public sphere' itself became an increasingly contested
domain, with the popular classes seeking either to appropriate it or to

[11] B. R. Tomlinson, *The Indian National Congress and the Raj, 1929–1942: The Penultimate
Phase*, London, 1976, pp. 9–15; J. M. Brown, 'War and the Colonial Relationship:
Britain, India and the War of 1914–18', in M. R. D. Foot (ed.), *War and Society:
Historical Essays in Honour and Memory of J. R. Western, 1928–71*, London, 1973,
pp. 85–106.
[12] A. Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', in J. Gallagher, G. Johnson and
A. Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870–1940*,
Cambridge, 1973, pp. 1–27, reprinted from *MAS*, 7, 3, 1973.
[13] On the 'public sphere' and aspects of the 'public' in colonial India, see *South Asia*, 14,
1, 1991: Special Issue edited by S. B. Freitag. See also, D. Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual
in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852–1928*, Delhi, 1992;
first published Berkeley, 1991.

develop alternative or oppositional arenas.[14] Insight into these processes of contestation lies at the heart of this book.

The wider institutional context of politics had another crucial implication for popular politics. While the colonial government extended representation and devolved power in the interwar period, it was also concerned to tighten the reins of state control through other means, especially through policing and the repression of collective political action. These attempts at political control were further elaborated as the colonial state increasingly faced a crisis of legitimacy and authority, with the growth of nationalism and other forms of political protest from the 1920s onwards.[15] The extensive measures for control, discipline and repression affected the poorer sections of society more directly than ever before. They became the focus of policing as their increasing prominence in urban society unleashed fears of public disorder and social anomie, and because they were imagined to be ideal raw material for crafting into explosive political actors by rabble-rousers. All this made the state a more concrete and intrusive presence in the everyday lives of the poor. Inevitably, this shaped their perceptions of the state and conditioned their political ideas and agenda.[16]

The historians of the 'Subaltern' school, in their efforts to rescue the autonomy of the subaltern classes, have often tended to underplay, although not altogether deny, the analytical significance of these wider developments in the realm of state institutions and elite practices in informing popular politics or imparting particular directions and forms.[17] The present study takes the view that subaltern autonomy, self-determination and agency are not completely isolated or independent from elite politics or state structures, or untainted by supposedly 'bourgeois' ideologies of democracy, citizenship or individualism. Subaltern politics do not spring entirely from their own 'pure' culture and subjectivity. This book interprets the autonomy of subaltern politics in terms of their 'distinctiveness of practice',[18] that is, their ability to appropriate, refashion and mould, for their own purpose, the organisations, institutions and ideologies of elite politics. It deals with this interface between the emerging forms of elite institutional and

[14] For the 'proletarian public sphere' in the European context, see Geoff Eley, 'Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture: The Making of a Working-class Public, 1780–1850', in Kaye and McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson*, pp. 12–49.

[15] G. Kudaisya, 'State Power and the Erosion of Colonial Authority in Uttar Pradesh, India, 1930–42', Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1992.

[16] Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, pp. 410–11.

[17] For the writings of the 'Subaltern' historians, see the various volumes of essays entitled, *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*.

[18] R. O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and the histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', *MAS*, 22, 1, 1988, p. 197.

organisational politics, on the one hand, and the initiatives of the poor on the other, and concentrates on their differential perceptions, oppositional practices and contested self-constructions.

The transformation of political institutions and organisations in the interwar period was not the only wider development that influenced the politics of the poor. Equally crucial were a vast range of political ideologies and new political 'vocabularies' that emerged out of the imperatives of representative and mobilisational politics early in the twentieth century. These too proved to be highly significant in popular politics. Manifestly, social experience does not directly translate into political action, but the nature and forms of the latter are mediated through various ideologies and 'languages' or 'discourses' of politics which help to order, interrogate and understand social experiences. Prevalent discursive practices thus influence the nature of engagement in political action, as stressed in recent historiography. The poor hardly ever adopt the political discourses of the elite without modification; they interpret and deploy them in the light of their own social contexts, traditions and histories. This study emphasises the plural interpretations and contested meanings given by the poor to the political discourses which they shared with, or even derived from, the elites. It should be clarified here that political discourses and 'languages' in this book are seen to be embedded in social structures and power relations. The 'linguistic turn' in social history has stressed the valid point that social identities cannot be reduced to material contexts and should not be taken to derive directly from the structural position of individuals or groups in the economy and society. There has, however, been an accompanying tendency to interpret the construction of social identities *entirely* in terms of discursive practices or the 'social imaginary', leading to an overwhelming emphasis on 'self-constitution, randomness and the reflexivity of subjects'.[19] Identities are considered to have little or no external social referent, and to be subjective products of discursive and linguistic constructions. This perspective fails to explain why a particular identity or ideology becomes important out of a range of discursive formations available at any particular time, unless it is acknowledged that the dominant form has some bearing on reality. The social context is thus not only relevant, but also crucially influences the adoption or popularity of particular discourses. This study is informed by a recognition of the 'reciprocal relations of conceptual systems and social relations in a given historical moment'.[20]

In interwar north India, a range of ideologies and languages of politics

[19] P. Joyce, 'The End of Social History?', *Social History*, 20, 1, 1995, p. 90.
[20] R. Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, Oxford, 1988, p. 45.