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Rajnarayan Chandavarkar
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1 Introduction

This book investigates the interplay between class relations and political discourse in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India. It seeks to develop and elaborate lines of enquiry which I had begun to pursue in earlier work on the social history of capitalism in India.[1] This work had suggested that the history of capitalism and of the working class in India could most fruitfully be investigated, not as an exception – neither as a case of 'pre-capitalist' development nor as a product of a peculiar and unique 'Indian culture'[2] – but firmly in relation to what are deemed to be the 'rules' or expectations of sociological discourse. An old, persistent and frequently re-activated 'Orientalist' tradition has long encouraged historians to deem Indian society an exception to every rule of social (and historical) explanation. In no aspect of the study of Indian society has this assumption of exceptionalism been more resolutely embedded and more subtly manifested than the investigation of the working classes. Yet to assume the exceptionalism of Indian society is to obscure and distort its character and to deepen its more intractable conundrums. Opened to the logics of explanation deployed elsewhere, its history offers a significant vantage point from which the theoretical apparatus of social analysis, conventional explanations and analytical expectations – developed primarily in relation to the unique historical experience of Britain – may be interrogated, re-assessed and revised. This book proceeds, therefore, in a spirit contrary to Kipling's maxim.

The principal aim of this book is to ground the investigation of social conflict and power relations in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India more firmly in their political (and intellectual) context.

[1] Especially in Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay Between the Wars', *MAS*, 15:3 (1981), special issue, *Profit, Power and Politics: Imperialism, Nationalism and Change in India, 1870–1940*, edited by Christopher Baker, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (reprinted below as ch. 4), and *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 1994).

[2] This argument has been most explicitly restated by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (Delhi, 1989).

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While the following chapters traverse the quotidian realms of society and culture, their aim is to retrieve the significance of politics from the solvents of 'popular culture' and 'everyday life' within which it has too often been submerged. The contention of this book is that the form and meaning of social relations, and not least the forms of knowledge, or the discourses by which they are constituted, are determined by political conflict and defined by the outcome of power relations. It is concerned, therefore, with how forces of resistance perceive dominant groups and institutions and how agencies of control imagine, define and sometimes actively respond to problems of order, how perceptions of interests and identities at particular moments can facilitate alignments of power which cut across class, and how political conflict and debate can lead, within a particular historical conjuncture, to the definition of class.

Furthermore, an attempt is made in this book to scrutinize the nature and meaning of certain concepts, which are central and recurrent in the subject – most extensively, 'industrialization', 'violence', 'crime', 'nationalism', 'world capitalism', and inevitably, of course, 'class' – and, in particular, to examine their construction within a given historical context. This scrutiny is primarily historical, not philosophical, in approach. The nature of these concepts is examined in their engagement with the historical evidence, frequently the awkwardness of the evidence with which scholarship, built on the conventional discourse of the social sciences, is copiously presented in the Indian archives and libraries. The conceptual and interpretative problems addressed in this book are not exhaustive and no attempt is made to provide or disinter a list of 'keywords'. Nor is this discussion offered as a methodological exercise, which has almost always given pleasure to those who attempt it strictly in proportion to the pain it causes to those upon whom it is inflicted.

However, close attention of this sort to the conceptual vocabulary of the historian, and its relationship to the meaning of these concepts in contemporary politics, does, indeed, serve a methodological purpose. It is, of course, a commonplace, often repeated, that the history of the powerless and the poor comes to us primarily in the voice, and perceptions, of their rulers and exploiters. Some historians have suggested that a path may be cut through such difficulties by reading the sources 'against the grain'. Others have taken the implication of this dictum a step further and recommended that we should read the sources for their 'silences', by shifting the emphasis from the text to its marginalia or even its omissions.[3]

[3] In Indian historiography, these exhortations have most frequently emanated from the so-called 'subaltern' historians. R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, vols. I–VI (Delhi, 1982–89); P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey (eds.), *Subaltern Studies* vol. VII (Delhi, 1992); D. Arnold and D. Hardiman (eds.), *Subaltern Studies*, vol. VIII (Delhi, 1994); S. Amin and D. Chakrabarty (eds.), *Subaltern Studies*, vol. XI (Delhi, 1996).

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Of course, to some extent, and with varying degrees of success, these 'methods' have long been deployed by even the most conventional historians. But the effects of spelling out the habit of an art into a methodological doctrine have not always been fruitful, least of all, ironically, in the hands of its advocates. To effectively transcend the discourse of the colonial rulers and the dominant classes, historians would not only have to read their sources 'against the grain' but also subject their own texts to the same vigorous and self-conscious process of deconstruction. Otherwise, despite their intention to provide a subversive reading, historians were liable, especially, for instance, in their analysis of violence, crime and popular culture, to replicate the assumptions and prejudices of the dominant discourse. Moreover, the strategy of reading the sources for their 'silences' and 'absences', of pouring over the record for what it does not contain, has sometimes served to blunt the sensitivity of historians to, perhaps dull their curiosity for, what they actually can and do tell us and to distract them from fully exploring the uses to which they may be put.

In earlier work, I had suggested that the pattern of capitalist development in India had been shaped largely by the role of the working classes. Business strategies and entrepreneurial choice in early twentieth-century India had been determined by the struggle to control and discipline labour. The social responses and political action of workers, both within and beyond the workplace, often defined the options available to capital.[4] Although historians and anthropologists have paid close attention, in studies of Indian capitalism, to trade and commerce, merchants and entrepreneurship, burghers and bazaars, they have continued to neglect the history of the working classes. In the light of the historiographical traditions and practices which have dominated the study of colonial India, this is not, perhaps, wholly surprising. It was not simply that, until recently, historians have largely focused their attention on governance and upon elites, but, more crucially, that the contours of the subject came to be mapped in relation to the process of imperial conquest and consolidation. The historical narrative of Indian society in the colonial period has turned upon the relationships and events which facilitated or impeded the entrenchment of British rule: conquest and mutiny, revenue extraction and judicial administration, rural organization and village society, indigenous tradition and customary practice, collaboration and nationalism, changing strategies to retain the empire and sacral conflicts which were deemed to have driven the partition of India. If Indian historiography could not fully escape the rigours of colonial knowledge, it was at least in part because the dominant categories of historical investi-

[4] Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*.

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gation emerged as an adjunct of the colonial task of managing and controlling Indian society.

In this historical narrative, the problem of labour, and the social formation of the working classes, remained no more than a minor, indeed, marginal motif. The clash between imperialism and nationalism provided the organizing principle of research in Indian history. Questions which could not be contained within these polarities were simply excluded. Even economic historians primarily debated the counter-factual question of whether British rule had modernized or retarded the Indian economy. Social history appeared to consist less of the study of the history of Indian society than of evaluating the extent of the 'Westernization' and 'modernization' of 'indigenous' society under the impact of colonialism. In this investigation of 'indigenous' tradition, scholars concentrated upon what were seen as its unique and exceptional features and embarked, accordingly, upon a cultural anthropology of the past. At a more general level, historians investigating particular social groups often took their unitary character for granted. Castes, religious and regional groups, occupations and even loosely banded social classes were readily hypostatized. Moreover, since Indian society was deemed to be essentially 'agrarian' and 'traditional', their attention was directed towards land revenue policies, 'the mode of production' in Indian agriculture or the rise of the rich peasant. Such a historiographical context, marked by its emphasis on magnates and elites, its consideration of governance at the expense of social process, its Orientalist attraction to the uniqueness of 'Indian culture', was scarcely conducive to the study of the urban working classes or, indeed, labour in general.

Yet when historians addressed the subject of the working classes, they did not always serve to liberate it from the dead-weight of traditional historiographical practice. Until recently, the focus of enquiry has rested upon the functionalist question of the role of labour in economic development: whether it could be recruited, trained and organized sufficiently to serve the needs of Indian industry. The recruitment and adaptation of workers, and the mechanisms for their control and discipline in the factories, provided the core around which research in Indian (and perhaps, much colonial) labour history has developed.[5] Similarly, studies of

[5] C. A. Myers, *Labour Problems in the Industrialization of India* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), M. D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965); D. Mazumdar, 'Labour Supply in Early Industrialization: The Case of the Bombay Textile Industry', *Economic History Review*, second series, 26:3 (August 1973), 477–96; B. Misra, 'Factory Labour During the Early Years of Industrialisation: An Appraisal in the Light of the Indian Factory Commission 1890', *IESHR*, 12:3 (1975) 203–28; C. P. Simmons, 'Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: The Case of the Coal

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the labour movement have, in different ways, turned upon how far and with what consequences, modern trade unions (and modern methods of management and collective bargaining) could replace the traditional leaders and practices of the working classes.[6] These lines of enquiry emanated from and embraced diverse traditions of scholarship, including those which were hostile to their functionalist inheritance. Frequently, the working classes have been represented in terms of 'cultural' characteristics attributed to particular economic categories or occupational states of being – 'migrant workers', 'the urban poor', 'landless labour' or 'factory operatives' – which in turn were overlaid with expectations produced by 'cultural' definition – of caste and religion, for instance – and generated by the discourse within which Indian society as a whole was objectified and characterized. In other words, historians 'read off' the attitudes, mentalities and social consciousness of these social groups from the categories within which they lumped them. In this way, the working classes entered Indian history over-burdened with the historians' or social scientists' expectations and, indeed, their tautologies. This has only made it seem more crucial to scrutinize both the language of historical analysis as well as the vocabulary of contemporary political discourse.

If historians of the Indian working classes thus approached their inquiries within the limits imposed either by the universalist teleologies of the

Mining Industry *c.* 1880–1939', *IESHR*, 13:4 (1976), 455–85; R. Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855–1946: Some Preliminary Findings', *IESHR*, 13:3 (1976), 277–328; L. Chakravarthy, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy – British India 1880–1920', *IESHR* 15:3 (1978), 249–327; R. Newman, 'Social Factors in the Recruitment of the Bombay Millhands', in K. N. Chaudhuri and C. J. Dewey (eds.), *Economy and Society: Essays in Indian Economy and Society* (Delhi, 1979); P. S. Gupta, 'Notes on the Origin and Structuring of the Industrial Labour Force in India – 1880 to 1920', in R. S. Sharma, (ed. with V. Jha), *Indian Society: Historical Probings: In Memory of D. D. Kosambi* (New Delhi, 1979), pp. 414–34; R. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay 1918–1929: A Study of Organisation in the Cotton Mills* (Canberra, 1981); Chitra Joshi, 'Kanpur Textile Labour: Some Structural Features of Formative Years', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16:44–6, (November 1981), special issue, 1823–38; Chitra Joshi, 'Bonds of Community, Ties of Religion: Kanpur Textile Workers in the Early Twentieth Century', *IESHR*, 22:3 (1985), 251–80; D. Arnold, 'Industrial Violence in Colonial India', Comparative *Studies in Society and History*, 22:2 (1980), 234–55; D. Chakrabarty, 'On Deifying and Defying Authority: Managers and Workers in the Jute Mills of Bengal, circa 1890–1940', *Past and Present*, 100 (August 1983), 124–46; Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*; Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–1874* (Delhi, 1995); I. J. Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850–1900* (Delhi, 1995), especially chs. 4–6.

[6] Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force*; Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay*; D. Kooiman, 'Jobbers and the Emergence of Trade Unions in Bombay City', *International Review of Social History*, 22:3 (1977), 313–28; E. A. Ramaswamy, *The Worker and His Union: A Study in South India* (New Delhi, 1977); Arnold, 'Industrial Violence in Colonial India', 234–55; E. D. Murphy, *Unions in Conflict: A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres 1918–1939* (New Delhi, 1981); Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*.

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social sciences, derived from both functionalism and Marxism, or alternatively, by the exceptionalism generated by an Orientalist and colonial discourse, they were also influenced by trends in British and European historiography. Here, the history of the working classes had long been studied as the history of the labour movement, and then, increasingly, the social conditions and social and cultural practices of its constituent groups. From nineteenth-century socialism, historians of the 'Western' working classes inherited the assumption that economic development determined the character of labour, its social organization and political consciousness. The pattern and pace of industrialization, it was supposed, shaped the character of the social struggle and its political forms. The notion of the stages of industrialization yielded a matching evolutionary scheme of the stages of class consciousness. The history and development of the labour movement was, thus, assumed to constitute the prelude to the rise and triumph of socialism. In this way, the history of the working class came to be studied as an inseparable part of the rise of socialism. For some, the point of interest in studying the history of the labour movement was to investigate how its historic mission, the achievement of socialism, could be advanced or even realized and to track its progress. For others, its interest lay in discovering how the antagonisms and conflicts embodied by the labour movement could be managed, contained and defused. More significant than these differences, which sometimes generated fierce debate, was the fact that their shared teleology defined the scope of historical inquiry.

The effect of this teleology upon the interpretations of the working classes in general have been severely limiting, but in the case of India, in particular, they proved especially damaging. Economic backwardness, in this reasoning, made the very notion of a working class unthinkable, just as the peculiar cultural institutions of India seemed to place it in a special category of its own. The nature of the labour force, shaped by a low level of industrialization, could not be expected to develop a class consciousness or a socialist politics. Moreover, if the weight of the factory proletariat in a predominantly peasant economy was small, and its political potential correspondingly weak, the history of the working class appeared unimportant, or at any rate it became increasingly difficult to identify and assess its significance. So if the Indian working classes constituted either the antecedents of Western society or a special and unique case, its history was unlikely to release materials for thinking about class formation and class consciousness more generally.[7] Most crucially, this teleology im-

[7] It is ironical, therefore, that at least one recent attempt at 'rethinking working-class history' on the strength of the Indian 'case' has been predicated wholly and insistently on its cultural exceptionalism (and economic backwardness). Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*.

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posed upon the working classes an arbitrary and misleadingly narrow definition as an industrial labour force. In this sense, the industrial labour force was abstracted from its connections with other categories of labour who were proletarianized in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India by similar social processes and who were increasingly being subjected to the dominance of mercantile and industrial capital.

It was also implicit in this teleological view that industrialization constituted a universal, serial, technological process through which every society passed at an appropriate level of development. The nature of the Indian working class, it seemed, could scarcely be understood outside the context of the fact that the Indian economy was passing through an 'early stage' of industrialization. By making Indian society coeval with Britain (or Europe) in a previous and not its contemporaneous epoch,[8] scholars took the first major steps towards entrenching the myth of Indian exceptionalism or, alternatively, the parallel notion that the Indian case was a defective variant of the West.

In *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, I had sought to retrieve and delineate the wider context within which the working classes formed in India. The links between factory workers, casual labour and various streams of rural migrants, I had argued, were sufficiently intimate to strain the rigid definition of the 'working classes' as an 'industrial labour force' to the point of obliteration. This book seeks to develop the argument that the history of the working classes can only be grasped fully in the light of the powerful connections, which were established in the process of their social formation, between factory proletarians, casual workers, rural migrants, agrarian labour, artisans, 'tribals' and dalits. The Indian working class was largely composed of rural migrants who retained close connections with their village base. Indeed, they often migrated to earn the wages which would enable them to retain their village holdings, and as a result, they were frequently more militant in defending their jobs and earnings in the workplace. If the working classes were thus firmly rooted in the countryside, there was no clear line of demarcation between factory hands and the casual poor. No clear distinction can be sustained between them in their attitudes to work and politics, their lifestyles and job preferences, their response to the law and their propensity to violence. Yet, tautologically, these imputed behavioural characteristics have often provided the means of distinguishing between 'the casual poor' and 'the respectable working classes'. As an analytical concept and a heuristic category, the working class were never very clearly demarcated from 'the peasant' or 'the casual poor'.[9] Indeed, recruits to 'the working class' in India encompassed very diverse social formations, as tribals were inden-

[8] J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983).
[9] Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, chs. 3, 4 and 5.

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tured for the tea gardens or recruited for the coal mines, and dalits and landless peasants sought work as field labourers at harvest time or migrated to nearby towns for employment in the trades or the 'service sector'. Factory hands, who were deemed to constitute the working class in the narrowest and most traditional sense, could necessarily be described by several other labels. The conventional definition of 'the working class' in terms of an urban factory proletariat appeared particularly limited when it was measured against the historical evidence of labour force formation in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century India. Ironically, the commonplace that the working class derived its identity primarily from the relations of production – more specifically, from the factory and the production line – has held firm at the very moment at which 'the factory system' itself, in its most developed Fordist form, was finally being dissolved.

If, on conventional expectations, the very notion of a working class in India appeared unthinkable, a detailed investigation of workers' politics in Bombay between the wars suggested that these conventions may have to be revised. For Bombay not only witnessed a scale of industrial and political action which was rarely replicated in conditions of 'advanced capitalism' but workers' struggles, at particular historical conjunctures, disclosed a fiercely held 'class consciousness'. This exploration of the nature of workers' politics in Bombay, originally published in 1981, is reprinted below as chapter 4. The remaining chapters in this volume address problems and seek to develop perspectives which had first emerged in that essay.

The more closely 'the Indian case' was examined the more it cast into doubt the evolutionary assumptions which had held the subject together. Significantly, it became apparent that it was impossible to understand the central issues of labour force formation in the cotton mills without grasping its intricate, if inextricable, connections with the social organization of the neighbourhood. These connections between workplace and neighbourhood were vital not only to the recruitment and control of labour, but, as the mill committees of 1928–29 showed, also to the organization and conduct of collective action. The investigation of the history of the working class, it seemed, had been unduly restricted by its narrow and exclusive focus upon the workplace.

The investigation of the interplay between the social relations of the workplace and the social organization of the neighbourhood had numerous implications for our understanding of class formation. First, it was customarily supposed that it was the caste, kinship and religious loyalties of workers which constituted an insuperable obstacle to the growth of class consciousness. Until further industrialization dissolved these 'primordial ties', class consciousness would not develop. Yet it was precisely within the social organization of the neighbourhood that the solidarities

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of collective action were forged and their informing ideologies shaped. Second, the neighbourhood was not only an arena in which the political solidarities of the working classes were forged, but also the site in which its differences and divisions were seen to become manifest. From the vantage point of the neighbourhood, the segmentation of the labour market as well as the rivalries of the workplace were laid bare. The aggregation of workers within the factory or the mill did not necessarily sharpen their sense of common interest; indeed, it could serve to expose the whole spectrum of their differences. Third, as the workers' politics were defined in terms of the inter-relationship between the spheres of workplace and neighbourhood, so their development could be more fully explained in terms of the playing out of diverse sets of power relations rather than simply as an effect of their relationship to the means of production. Social consciousness and social being were shaped in a political domain, extending from the daily social relations of workplace and neighbourhood to more public conflicts and confrontations with the state. The political consciousness of the working classes appeared to be shaped crucially by their experience of, and their relationship with, the state. Their solidarities were not the natural outcome of popular culture or a reflex of the specific character of production relations, but, rather, they were politically constituted, and as such they were contingent, sometimes transient and even evanescent. The politics of the working classes had therefore to be situated in the wider context of the social and political alignments which shaped them. In studies of the bubonic plague epidemic and the discourse of violence in workers' politics, strategies of policing and law enforcement and the appeal of the Congress among the urban working classes, I have sought, therefore, to investigate the power relations, entailed, described and determined by these alignments, and the distorting prisms through which the state and the dominant classes and those who challenged and resisted them viewed each other.

From this perspective, the working class could not be grasped as a unitary formation, with a real essence and a single homogeneous identity. Its social formation was the outcome of processes and relationships which were contingent; it encompassed identities which were varied, conflicting and labile. The social groups which comprised the working class could be disassembled by diverse and contradictory criteria into numerous fragments, variously constituted. Their broadly similar relationship to the means of production did not yield objective interests in common, overriding their sectionalism. If sectional difference, based on gender and occupation, caste and kinship, religion and ideology, came to be negotiated into alliances and unities at specific historical conjunctures, then it became yet more pressing to explain why these solidarities could be forged at all. Perceptions of mutual interests, indeed the language for their

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description, were the product of a specific intellectual and political context. Similarly, the interests of these elements which made up the working class depended upon, and were defined within, specific historical circumstances, which were themselves constantly in flux. As they changed, they served to redefine the interests of their constituent social groups and to reconstitute their social identities. The sectionalism of the working classes was integral to the process of its social formation; it was not the product of its unique culture or its backward economy. As historians of the Western working classes paid closer attention to the competing and conflicting identities of ethnicity and religion, kinship and gender, neighbourhood and nation, they began to focus attention upon the very issues which had led them previously to regard the Indian case as unique and exceptional in the first place. Yet to describe these divisions within the working class as a process of sectionalism is to lend a certain coherence to its 'sections' and the interests which made them up, as if they were impervious to change and resistant to further decomposition and reconstitution in a different form under changed circumstances. In fact, if the formation of the working classes is seen as primarily a political process, contingent upon given historical conditions, it should follow that its constituent elements could equally plausibly be defined in terms of several other social identities.

Once the significance of the relationship between workplace and neighbourhood for class formation and the economy of labour had been admitted, it severely undermined the commonplace that the working class discovered its identity exclusively, or even primarily, at the point of production. Nor could the connection between the level of economic development and the nature of social conflict and the forms of their political expression be readily taken for granted. Yet it was precisely the belief that there was an immediate and intimate analytical connection between the economic history of the labour movement and its political expressions which had long underpinned Whiggish and diffusionist notions of industrialization.

If these evolutionary assumptions about class formation could not easily be sustained, it became clear that conventional models of industrialization as a social process would have to be re-examined. The definition of the working class in terms of a factory proletariat seemed intimately related to an understanding of industrialization as a serial, technologically determined process which lay beyond the realm of social choice or political conflict. Such a definition could only be justified by, and, indeed, it may be reduced to a usage of, modernization theory. To challenge this usage is also to demand the rethinking of the social meaning of its informing process: 'industrialization'. Chapter 2 – first published as an essay in

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