



War, Workers and the Colonial Metropolis of Calcutta

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Abstract

The commencement of the Second World War in 1939, created repercussions throughout the far-flung British Empire. Resources from the Indian colony were channelized to sustain the war effort. With Japan's entry into the war in 1941, hostilities reached India's doorstep. Initial Axis military successes, compounded with Imperial Japan's initial successes against the Allied forces, had threatened the very existence of the Raj in South Asia. The imperial city of Calcutta, with its strategic location and pre-existing industrial infrastructure now pivoted as an important nodal point in the Allied effort to counteract the Axis incursion. The city witnessed repetitive bombing raids from Japanese airplanes. The war-induced uncertainties produced a sharp hike in the prices of essential items and a famine ravaged the countryside of the Bengal province. The working class population of the city was hit hard and the plight of the people involved in informal sectors was the most perilous. Historical accounts have largely overlooked their desperate struggle for survival in the midst of wartime paranoia and economic devastation. By examining the daily struggles of cobblers, scavengers, bookbinders, and domestic workers, this article illustrates how these figures navigated and resisted the systemic negligence of a metropolis at war.

Keywords: Second World War, Working Class, Trade union movement, Calcutta, late-colonialism.

Introduction:

Since Calcutta's ascent as a cornerstone of the British Empire's Asian economy, the city acted as a powerful magnet for rural populations. Driven by the quest for a viable livelihood, a continuous stream of migrants from the Bengal countryside and North Indian provinces descended upon the metropolis. While the city's burgeoning industrial complexes absorbed many of these labourers, a vast number were left to navigate the informal sector, carving out a precarious existence on the margins of the organized economy.

From 1941, Imperial Japan's rapid expansion against Allied held territory in South Asia, amplified the strategic significance of Calcutta and its industrial suburbs. The fear of Japanese air-raids, prospect of an imminent Axis attack on Bengal, spiralling prices, and stagnating wages made the war increasingly unpopular among the city's inhabitants. As the safety and security of Calcutta and its industrial suburbs were prioritised by the colonial state, the bureaucracy chose to strike a fine balance between the policy of outright repression¹ and providing some measure of relief through 'war bonus' and 'Priority

Classes Scheme'. It ensured supply of food items to the workers employed in the industries vital for the war effort at a subsidised rate. Devoid of any economic cushion, workers employed in informal sectors were particularly hit hard. From the second half of 1941, as the hostilities with Japan spread to India's eastern frontier, rice import from Burma was stopped. In the meantime, the food situation in Gangetic delta deteriorated as the state initiated the policy of 'denial'. Stored paddies were confiscated and country boats were destroyed by the colonial government. The food crisis aggravated and turned into a full-blown famine which swept over the Bengal countryside in 1943-44 and 'affected an estimated 1.5 million to 3 million people'.² Famine stricken people flocked to Calcutta, only to die a slow and painful death on its streets. War induced uncertainties gave way to a thriving system of speculation and black-market. The state realised that a firm grip over the commercial enterprises was to be one of the keystones for its continued survival. Industries producing materials important for the war received official patronage. It has been observed: 'there was a sharp increase in Indian entrepreneurial investment in jute, iron and steel and mining industries in the war years. The commercial acumen of the Marwari businessmen of Calcutta got a further boost during this period.' While industrialists remained busy in wealth generation, 'galloping prices and stagnating wages adversely affected the purchasing capacity of the working class.'³ The political economy of the war played a key role in this background by shaping of the lives of the working class people in the city.

In the period from 1939 to 1942, emboldened with the emergency powers, intensified British repression made it impossible for the left backed unions to create any sustained working-class movements.⁴ After 1942, as left-wing groups became vocal supporters of the war effort, and other actors were curbed thoroughly, working class population of the metropolis were left badly affected by the uncertain times and an unsympathetic state machinery. They failed to mount a serious resistance against the challenges endangering their lives.

The situation of the Bengal workers during the last leg of colonial rule have received nuanced attention by some scholars. The increasing influence of 'formal politics' on them has formed the central theme of Nirban Basu's work.⁵ Siddhartha Guha Ray has specifically traced the prolonged struggle of tramway workers in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶ Sukomal Sen has documented the journey of working class movements in pan-Indian level.⁷ However, the plight of the labourers in informal sectors, and their fight for survival through unionization, as well as panic-driven responses of the beleaguered imperial state fearful of a coordinated working class upsurge, are mostly overlooked in favour of documenting the working class upsurges by their brethren employed in large industries. This paper will try to shed light on the domestic helps, the cobblers, the scavengers and other marginal workers involved in the informal sectors who had waged an uneven battle against an unsympathetic system for their survival in an inhospitable city.

Wartime vigilance:

The presence of widespread disaffection about the war effort created a state of perpetual fear among the colonial bureaucracy. With its potential to derail the war effort, workers were pivoted as threats to the colonial order. A plan for pre-emptive strikes against perceived 'trouble-makers' was set in motion. All factories and work-shops throughout India were graded according to their importance in the supply of war materials. Trade

unions and their political backers also came under police scanner. The Special Branch files of the Calcutta Police testified that the city police periodically reviewed and painstakingly maintained a list of trade unions in the city.⁸ While keeping the workers under constant supervision, steps were taken to ensure that no oppositional developments would take place in the field of labour by unleashing offensives against movements for higher pay, and better working conditions.

Thrust towards unionization:

The trend of unionization among previously unorganized sections of the working class could be traced to the beginning of the war years. In 1941 the All Bengal Motor Worker's Union was formed and this union held its first public meeting at Upper Circular Road in Calcutta.⁹ The spurt of unionization could be noticed in the informal sector at various branches of service and commodity production. As the city suffered from war-time rationing of petrol, Rickshaws became popular as a mode of transportation for shorter distances. It was reported that 'red' trade-unionists became active in this field to challenge the predominance of 'white' unions. In 1944, the Communist Party of India (henceforth CPI) dominated Calcutta Rickshaw Mazdoor Union demanded their recognition as opposed to the existing All Bengal Rickshaw Union. The former gained popularity by organising mass meetings and deputations. Trade unionist Md. Ismail played an instrumental role in the rise of this union. Within one year of its commencement, the union reportedly had a thousand rickshaw-pullers as members. In September 1945, this union orchestrated a strike for two days, demanding an end of the police excesses, increase of the fare and putting and a temporary halt of the process of issuing new licenses.¹⁰ Apart from the age-old issue of police excesses, their urge to restrict the number of fellow rickshaw-pullers pointed towards the stark reality of the urban destitution during Second World War. By 1945, the war was closing but its ramifications had violently disrupted the social fabric of Bengal villages and driven the victims to flock towards the city in search of food and shelter. Their influx into the informal sector created a volatile labour market, where an oversupply of rickshaw-pullers threatened to drive down already meagre earnings. Consequently, the strike of 1945 was not merely a protest against administrative harassment, but a desperate manoeuvre for economic survival in a city buckling under the weight of wartime inflation and famine-induced migration.

In the unorganised sector, another CPI dominated union came to the fore when the Book Binders and Press Workers Union was established with at least 150 members in August 1943. This union submitted a charter of demands to the owners of the book binding shops in Calcutta and its suburbs and threatened a stir if the demands remained unfulfilled. They asked for a 12% wage hike and claimed dearness allowances for the book binders. The union also pushed for permanent appointment as soon as a worker finished three months in his job. A Special Branch officer's note on the Book Binders Union showed that most of the demands were successfully realised in a meeting between the union and one Md. Latif, a representative of the owners of the book binding shops. It was decided that workers would receive a monthly wage of Rs. 20/-. Apart from that, it was also decided that the book-binders would be entitled to receive three rupees per month as war bonus from August 1943.¹¹ Another segment of the marginal workers who became restive in the war-time city were the cobblers. Shoe-making shops owned by the immigrant Chinese population in the city were their employers. In 1940, the cobblers claiming higher

wages stopped the work and brought the shoe-making industry to a halt. The Chinese Shoe Maker's Association on behalf of the shop-owners negotiated with the union and ultimately agreed to pay higher wages. Within one year, the burden of a deteriorating economic situation compelled the workers to demand another round of pay hike which was promptly rejected by the owners. Hence a showdown became inevitable and Chinese Shoe Maker's Association faced the second wave of the strike action later that year. The association appointed an advocate, Mr. D. Bannerjee to negotiate with the strikers. A 'confidential' Special Branch report dated 5 October 1941 revealed that almost 2000 shoemakers participated in the movement. This time, the Chinese shoe-shop owners were not prepared to concede defeat easily and refused to consider any prospect of a pay hike. As the strike dragged on, depleted economic condition coupled with the exhaustion of the resources drove the cobblers to desert the cause of the strike en masse. To survive in the city, some opted for other jobs while a larger section chose to return to their villages. Sensing that the strike had lost its momentum and a disastrous defeat of the movement would be waiting at the doorstep, leading strikers pressed for negotiation with the Chinese Shoemaker's Association. They put forward the name of Mr S. R. Dhadda, Honourary Secretary of the Harijan Uthhan Samiti in Calcutta to negotiate with the Association and the Labour Department of the Government. Ultimately the strike was called off on 28 October, 1941, as the shop-owners were agreed to a minor pay hike. The police report traced that only 650 of the approximately 2000 striking cobblers returned to their work, as 'other workers had already left the city for their homes'.¹² In the case of this strike, the degraded caste status of the workers in society may have played a role in their gradually weakening position while fighting the employers. Since they could not survive on existing pay, mass desertion from their profession seemed to only viable option left before them.

Trade unions with diverse political affiliations made steady progresses in sectors indispensable to the urban milieu. In Calcutta Electric Supply it was reported in 1943 that the Congress-led union was almost defunct as their leader Suresh Bannerji was interned in Faridpur. Communist trade unionists quickly utilised the situation in their favour as a new left backed union emerged under Bankim Mukherjee and Sakina Begum.¹³ As one of the leading women trade unionists in contemporary Calcutta¹⁴ Sakina Begum was a key player in the successive scavengers strikes which shook the city in 1940. The first phase of strike started on 26th March and continued up to 2nd April. 'It was during the strike that Sakina became the unchallenged leader of the Calcutta scavengers.'¹⁵ Scavengers withdrew their strike after the Muslim League led Calcutta Corporation assured them to pay a monthly salary of Rs. 30 along with the Dearness Allowance of Rs. 1. The success of the strike action was such that a new union of the corporation workers- United Calcutta Corporation Workers Union came into being. However this success was short-lived as the corporation broke its promise and the scavengers were forced to hit the streets again. On 26 August, 1940 the next phase of strike began. This time the colonial government armed with wartime emergency powers came down heavily on the strikers. Sakina Begum along with other leading members of the union was arrested. On 5 September 1940 with almost 1200 members languishing in jail the union finally withdrew the strike and pressed for a settlement. After languishing a month in prison Sakina Begum was released only to be interned in Kurseong.¹⁶ While the ideology of the hammer and sickle guided many initiatives in the informal sector, 'white' trade-unionists were not sitting idle. These pro-

state actors active in the labour field paved the way for the establishment of a union among the Domestic Workers in 1941. Special Branch files indicate that the Calcutta Domestic Workers Union held their first meeting at Harish Park in Bhawanipur where demands were made for issuing licenses to the domestic help in Calcutta and a resolution was taken 'supporting the Labour Minister of Bengal.'¹⁷ In 1941, the government initiated Bengal Shop Assistant's Act, under which the state took steps to ensure implementation of prevalent labour laws for the workers involved in the shops and laundry houses. This act made it mandatory for business ventures to stay open for seven days a week. The Act created an adverse reaction from the workers and the owners alike. All Bengal Laundry Owner's Association was launched in Calcutta to request the government for the exemption of the Dyeing and Cleaning shops from the operation of the Bengal Shop Assistant's Act'.¹⁸In the case of the working class, promulgation of this Act initiated a rift within the established union. All Bengal Worker's and Dhobi's Union supported the Government move, because it entitled the workers to come under the ambit of prevalent labour laws.¹⁹A rival union, Laundry Employee's Association, primarily backed by the left made its presence felt by organising strikes in several laundry shops by demanding a pay hike and the continuation of mandatory leave each Sunday which was to be curtailed if the act remained in force.²⁰

Conclusion:

Preceding passages documented the measures taken by some of the most marginalised segments of the urban poor to get through the war-induced economic and social distress. All-encompassing economic uncertainty, accompanied by rampant black-marketing and job insecurity, prodded the toiling masses of the city to make a desperate attempt at survival. It was the wartime socio-economic condition which formed the backdrop for the sudden spurt of unionization traced in this paper. At the same time, national and international political currents touched the urban poor; the colonial categorization of 'white' and 'red' trade unions testified to that trend. The trajectory of the war also played a significant role in shaping the experience of the toiling masses. Following the German attack on Soviet Russia in 1941, Indian communists chose to support the war effort. In return, the colonial government, desperate to find some kind of political legitimacy, withdrew the ban on the CPI. Its cadres then played instrumental roles in organizing trade unions amongst previously untouched informal sectors including book-binders, rickshaw-pullers and scavengers. However, eager to maintain its pro-war posture left-wing groups actively avoided large-scale working class actions. The conspicuous absence of established political forces in the movement of cobblers also pointed towards the continuation of age-old biases. Along with these factors, the ruthless government machinery, armed with wartime emergency laws, came together to worsen the situation of city's working class population. The conclusion of the war in 1945, ended the lull in trade union movements. Workers would eventually assert themselves, as economic stagnation coupled with raging pro-independence sentiment snowballed into successive waves of anti-colonial outbursts spearheaded by Calcutta's working class.

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