



'Spinners', 'Madrassis' and 'Hindus': Jute Workers' Strikes in Titagarh in the Late 1930s

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On 14 November 1938, workers in the Standard Jute Mill in Titaghur (24-Parganas, Bengal) went on strike after the dismissal of six spinners. The strike was led by 'madrassi' workers, who were employed in the preparing and spinning departments. They demanded the re-instatement of the dismissed workers, and an increase in wages.¹ Within a matter of days, 'madrassi' workers in five other jute mills in Titagarh went on strike in support of the workers in the Standard Jute Mill, followed by protests in Jagatdal, Naihaty and Hooghly. The Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (BCMU), meanwhile, declared its support for the movement, and called for a general strike.²

By December, this scenario seemed increasingly likely. More than 50,000 workers were on strike in the industrial hinterland of Calcutta at this point.³ By the second half of the month, however, the labour conflict came to be overshadowed by communal riots that escalated in Titagarh between 'madrassi' and 'up-country' workers. Whereas the former were Hindus, the latter were in their majority Muslims. Communal tensions were reported from other areas as well, and the BCMU soon withdrew its support for a general strike. Instead, the union tried to stop the spread of the strike movement in order to prevent further riots. The strikes ended soon in most areas, but in Titagarh, workers stayed out until early January, when they were forced to resume work unconditionally.⁴

In the weeks after the strikes' end, the event remained a prominent theme in various reports. The managers of the Titaghur Jute Mills decided to implement punitive measures and dismissed all 'madrassi' wor-



kers from their mills. The managers of the Kelvin and the Empire Jute Mills pursued a similar course and dismissed large numbers of 'madrassi' workers in their mills as well. This amounted to the sudden dismissal of 2,500 workers and to the eviction of 8,000 people from the mills' coolie lines.⁵ A representative of the Titagarh Jute Mills justified this decision by explaining that 'madrassi' workers "have themselves to blame, as they have given a lot of trouble in the past years, and even during the present unrest they have been given a great deal more consideration than they deserve."⁶

While the eviction of 'madrassis' in Titagarh was going on, about 500 'madrassi' workers marched to Calcutta and addressed politicians and labour activists in order to force the mill authorities to reverse the decision. When they received no help, they eventually occupied the office of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee⁷, and "besieged" the residence of Subhas Chandra Bose, demanding that "employment should be found for them."⁸ By early February, however, the 'madrassi' jute workers of Titagarh had to give up their struggle, and their traces faded in the industrial hinterland of Calcutta.

The strikes in Titagarh were in many respects symptomatic of the situation in the jute belt of Bengal in the late 1930s. In 1936, an increasing number of strikes was reported which was followed by a general strike in 1937. In the next two years the situation in the jute industry was marked by a near-continuous series of local strikes in various mill districts—a trend which only seemed to come to an end with the onset of World War II.⁹

Spinners regularly played a leading role in these conflicts. The mills in Titagarh are, indeed, a good example of this trend, since virtually all strikes in the 1930s were started by spinners, as we shall see in more detail below. The particular patterns of employment in the jute industry, however, meant that strikes by spinners did not necessarily coincide with strikes by 'madrassi' workers. In the southern part of the jute belt, the majority of workers in spinning departments were categorised as 'locals'—or Bengali workers. In the northern parts of the jute belt spinning departments were dominated by 'madrassi' workers—who had originally migrated from today's Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (Cox 2013: 45). The increasing visibility of 'madrassi' workers in this period, in other words, signified an increased importance of spinners during labour conflicts.

In historiographical studies on the jute industry, this peculiar trend has been ignored. Instead, historians read the history of the jute



industry through the figure of the 'up-country' migrant worker. The presence of other groups is acknowledged when the composition and emergence of the workforce is discussed. In other words, this problem is always relegated to the 'background' of historians' narratives. However, it habitually disappears when analyses turn to the dynamics of change in the industry. Arjan de Haan, for instance, argues that "[o]ne of the central characteristics of the Bengal labour historiography is that it deals only with non-Bengali labour" (de Haan 2001: 123). He then goes on to equate 'non-Bengali' labour with 'up-country' workers (ibid.).

The result is that the prominent position of Bengali workers in labour conflicts has been taken note of. This seemed to be the result of an increased presence of trade unionists among Bengali workers. Their role in strikes, however, seemed to be dwarfed by the importance of 'up-country' weavers, who, accordingly, came to be seen as the driving force in labour conflicts (Chakrabarty 1989; Das Gupta 1994; Basu 2004; Ghosh 2000). The other aspect of this development—the increasing importance of 'madrassi' workers—has been missed out. These workers remained entirely invisible in historians' accounts of labour conflicts. Subho Basu's reading of the strike in Titagarh in November 1938 is symptomatic of this omission. Basu elides the victimisation of workers after the resumption of work, and ignores the previous history of labour conflicts in Titagarh. He examines the conflict solely in order to establish the escalation of communal tensions in the jute belt. He consequently ends up reading the strike in 1938 solely as a communal riot (Basu 2004: 259).

Closely related to this problem is that the protests of 'spinners' in this period are rendered marginal. The historical narratives that establish the initial employment of workers along ethnic lines as a mere background, also set out a more or less static field of force within which workers operated. Once the segmentation of workforces is established, the specificities of different departments does no further work in the analysis. Any account of how the organisation of individual departments—such as spinning—changed over time, and how these changes may have altered the bases for industrial action, is, in turn, omitted. Historical accounts miss out the importance of different groups of workers protesting simultaneously 'as spinners.' At this point, historians have turned to the role of Bengali trade unionists in order to account for the role of Bengali workers. 'Madrassi' workers, meanwhile, remain invisible.



In the following paper I would like to address this problem, by tracing the history of 'madrassi' spinners, considering them 'simultaneously' as 'madrassi' workers and as spinners. The focus of this analysis will be on Titagarh. One obvious reason for this choice is that Titagarh played an important role in labour conflicts in this period. Another, no less important, reason, however, is that the majority of mills in Titagarh were run by managing agencies which left behind unusually copious documentation. Detailed reports have been preserved, in particular, for the Titaghur Jute Mills, which belonged to the Dundee-based Duff Company. These offer us important insights into changing workplace relations on the one hand and into patterns of unrest on the other hand.

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Until the second half of the nineteenth century, Titagarh was merely a small village on the banks of the Hooghly, about 20 kilometres to the north of Calcutta. The first jute mills had opened their gates in the 1850s in Serampore and Baranagore to the south of Titagarh, leaving the village unaffected by the early growth of the industry (de Haan 1994: 21). In the 1870s, the industry experienced its first significant boom, and new jute mills opened their gates at various spots in the hinterland of Calcutta (Wallace 1928: 53). This growth slowed in the following decade. The few new mills included the Titaghur Jute Mill, which opened its gates in 1884 (Leng 1896: 76).

In the mid-1890s, the industry entered a new phase of industrial growth, even surpassing the earlier boom. This development produced two important changes. Firstly, the expansion of the industry led to a higher density of jute mills in the hinterland of Calcutta. Villages like Titagarh turned rapidly into industrial towns, and into major labour centres. By 1913, five new mills had been built in the area. One of them, the Titaghur Jute Mill No. 2, was erected in the same compound as the town's first mill. The older mill was henceforth called Titaghur Jute Mill No. 1. These mills were among the largest on the river, employing more than 10,000 workers daily by the 1920s (Sailer 2015: 47). Additionally, the new town enjoyed a central position in the emerging jute belt. While mill towns sprang up all along the river, the northern parts of Calcutta developed into a particularly densely populated area, which contained by far the highest concentration of jute mills. In Barrackpore and Jagatdal to the north, 13 mills opened their gates in



the aftermath of the second industrial boom. To the south of Titagarh, jute towns emerged in Khardah and Kamarhatty (Wallace 1928: 96-7).

The second change concerned the sources of labour supply. Until the mid-1890s, mill managers relied nearly exclusively on local supplies of labour. Jute mills were, accordingly, populated by 'Bengali' workers from surrounding villages, who walked several miles each day to reach their workplace (Rungta 1985: 116). The expansion of the industry, however, meant that a locally limited supply of labour was not sufficient any more. In an attempt to solve this problem, managers increasingly hired migrant workers, thus widening the sources of labour supply (Das Gupta 1994: 209ff.). 'Up-country' workers were the first, and most prominent, group of migrant workers in the jute mills. These workers had originally migrated from Bihar and the United Provinces. They were usually men who left their wives and families behind in their rural homes. These "unsettled settlers", as Arjan de Haan called them, returned to their homes regularly. They relied on their rural base and the labour of their family back home. This was an important survival strategy for workers faced with low and irregular wages, as well as with poor living conditions in the mill towns (de Haan 1994: 15).

In the first decade of the twentieth century, a new group of migrant workers came to work in the jute belt: Telugu and Tamil speakers from the province of Madras, who were categorised as 'madrassi' (ibid.: 25). In contrast to 'up-country' migrant workers, they usually came to Bengal with their families, and returned home less often (ibid.: 15). Instead, their survival rested on the family income that was earned in Bengal. The parallel growth of other industries in the area—such as paper mills, cotton mills, and railway workshops—certainly contributed to the options of 'madrassi' workers (Basu 1993: 23) providing a secure source of employment for men, women and children in the hinterland of Calcutta. Odd jobs in local bazars were another source of income, in particular for children who were too young to work in the mill. For this purpose, 'madrassi' workers hired teachers, who taught their children rudimentary Bengali.¹⁰

The growing importance of migrant workers was a general trend in this period. Yet, in terms of the distribution of different groups of workers in the jute industry, this development was strikingly uneven. 'Up-country' workers took a prominent position in beaming and weaving departments throughout the Bengal jute belt. 'Madrassi' workers, in contrast, came to replace 'Bengali' workers in the preparing and spinning departments in the northern parts of the jute belt. In the south,



local workers continued to dominate the spinning departments (Cox 2013: 45). This specific pattern of workforce changes reflected very precise managerial strategies. It linked different requirements of the process of production with the uneven distribution of jute mills in the hinterland of Calcutta.

The beaming and weaving departments combined two features which, from the perspective of managers and managing agents, favoured a widening of labour supply. The size of these departments, first, generated a high demand for labour. This was particularly the case in the weaving department. Ranajit Das Gupta has estimated that about 25 per cent of the workforce was employed here, rendering this by far the largest department of the mill (Das Gupta 1994: 340).

The process of production in these departments, meanwhile, required a comparatively high degree of skill. Competition for skilled weavers and beamers, thus, was a prime managerial concern from the earliest days of the industry (Rungta 1985: 118). The expansion of the industry after the mid-1890s increased these anxieties, as the industry's growth rested largely on the production of finer jute cloths (Cox 2013: 14-5). Managerial concerns about attracting skilled workers, however, were also reflected in the wage hierarchies in jute mills. Weavers earned by far the highest wages, followed by beamers.¹¹ A limited supply of workers at the moment of expansion, in this context, seemed to, inevitably, increase the 'risk' of further wage hikes (Bates 2000: 19).

In the preparing and spinning departments the situation was somewhat different. Here, the overall number of workers employed was much lower. Virtually all tasks were categorized as unskilled. The lower priority accorded to securing skilled workers was reflected in the low wages paid.¹² Further, the preparing and spinning departments employed the highest proportion of women and children. These sections of the workforce were nearly exclusively employed here, and their tasks were categorised as particularly simple (Sen 1999: 100-1). It was, instead, the stability of production which came to be at the heart of managerial concerns. Bengal jute mills combined the production of jute yarn and woven jute cloths in one industrial unit. This arrangement implied that a constant supply of yarn to the ever hungry weaving looms was a principal condition for the production of jute cloths. This problem was further accentuated by the uneven quality of raw jute, as well as by the resultant difficulties in producing a regular amount of yarn (Sailer 2015: 37). The combination of the processes of



spinning yarn and weaving cloths in one industrial unit, in other words, marked a delicate moment in the process of production.

The patterns of employment of Bengali and 'madrassi' workers demonstrate this preoccupation with the stability of production—or, more precisely—with the stability of the workforce. Bengali workers continued to dominate the spinning departments in the immediate aftermath of the boom of the mid-1890s. The rapid growth of jute towns in the northern parts of the jute belt, however, made it more and more difficult to rely on local sources of labour. Around the turn of the century, 'madrassi' workers came to replace them (Chaudhury 1921: 1983). In order to further bind these workers to jute mills, managers provided for additional houses in 'coolie lines' in mill compounds. Rents in these houses were considerably lower than those charged for other sections. This was the case with rents paid both inside and outside the mill compound.¹³ This situation only changed during the Great Depression, when managers altered this structure by increasing the rents of 'madrassi' workers disproportionately.¹⁴

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In the 1920s, the situation in the jute industry began to change significantly. After decades of impressive expansion, the mills on the Hooghly were increasingly faced with the problem of overproduction. The productive capacity far exceeded the global demand for jute goods. In order to sustain profit levels, the members of the Indian Jute Mills' Association (IJMA), implemented a series of short-time agreements, which lasted nearly continuously throughout the decade. The success enjoyed by these agreements meant that high profits could still be made from jute mills. Indian capitalists, thus, seized the chance to open new mills in Bengal, followed by other attempts to establish jute industries in different countries (Gupta 2005: 538).

Retrospectively, this was the beginning of a crisis that would haunt the industry and shape its future. In the 1920s contemporaries still hoped to divert the crisis. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, however, this option was not really feasible any more. Between 1930 and 1931, the mills on the Hooghly implemented massive wage cuts, reduced hours of work, and dismissed about 60,000 workers. In 1931, the manager of Titaghur Jute Mill No. 1 reported to his directors in Dundee that in the town of Titagarh "about 9,000-10,000" workers had been dismissed in one go. In his own mill alone, 1,471 workers had been "paid off."¹⁵ With some satisfaction, he reported an improved



labour supply situation, stating that "a better class of worker is available. A higher standard of work can be got from the operatives as they realise that there is a plentiful supply of labour in the Bazaar to replace them should their work prove unsatisfactory."¹⁶

The manager of the Titaghur Jute Mill No. 2 added in his report that every "effort has been made during the year to economise in all possible ways, and the number of workers has been reduced to the minimum consistent with the efficient working."¹⁷ Attempts to further rationalise the process of production would be an important theme in the years to come. Until the mid-1930s, the managers of both mills continued to reassure their directors that they had reduced the labour force further, and saved labour costs.¹⁸

Needless to say, these developments came to have an impact on 'madrassi' workers. In principle, this was of course true for other sections of the workforce as well. Yet, workers in the preparing and spinning departments were affected disproportionately by the reorganisation of work and the ensuing measures of rationalisation. This was, first of all, apparent in the problem of mass dismissals. Until the late 1920s, the majority of mills on the Hooghly had worked with a system of excess-employment. The number of workers deployed for specific tasks, in other words, always exceeded the number of workers actually required to run the machines. This system had been introduced in the nineteenth century, in order to compensate for temporary labour shortages (Sailer 2015: 35ff.).

The degree of excess employment, however, was not distributed evenly throughout the mill. It was by far the highest in the preparing and spinning departments. Contemporary observers estimated that between 10-25 per cent of the workforce in these departments was employed in excess to the requirements of the process of production. This concentration of 'additional' workers was an outcome of the same managerial concerns which had shaped employment strategies in the early twentieth century. The abolition of the system, in other words, implied that the stability of production, which had favoured the employment of 'madrassi' workers in the past, had ceased to be a central concern of managers at a time of massive unemployment in the jute belt (ibid.: 142ff.).

A second important reason for mass dismissals was measures of rationalisation, which implied the re-arrangement of the process of production, and the speeding up of machinery. The effects of rationalisation were most pronounced among workers whose jobs were consi-



dered particularly unskilled. In other words, workers in the preparing and spinning departments were, yet again, affected disproportionately by these changes. Managers thus regularly reported the progress of measures of rationalisation in these departments.¹⁹

The changing organisation of work in jute mills coincided with a second set of changes: the growing predominance of adult male employment and the declining employment of women in Indian industries. In the jute industry, this trend has been noted by Samita Sen, who has shown that women were increasingly pushed out of jute mills in this period (Sen 1999: 241-2). In the course of the reorganisation of work, women workers suffered considerable wage losses, even in relation to other sections of the workforce.²⁰ Managers and managing agents, meanwhile, seized the chance to dismiss children while reorganising work. Between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the number of children employed in jute mills dropped from 20,000 to less than 100.²¹ While the inspector of factories expressed contentment with this development, it seems likely that these children moved from the mill to the bazar, or to smaller industries not subject to the *Indian Factories Act*.²² The importance of a joint family income was, after all, intensified even further in a situation of mass-dismissals and wage-cuts.

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After the Great Depression, the situation in the jute industry improved only marginally. The demand for jute goods remained unexpectedly low—at least from the perspective of an industry whose productive capacity still exceeded the potential demand for its goods (Goswami 1991: 100-1; Stewart 1998: 239-40). The mills of the IJMA, consequently, entered into a new round of short-time agreements, keeping prices for jute goods comparatively high for the time being. This measure, however, only served to postpone an open competition between Bengal jute mills. The impression that this crisis could be overcome only if the productive capacity of the mills on the Hooghly was reduced—if, in other words, some jute mills in Bengal went bankrupt—was by now shared by many contemporaries. Disputes over short-time agreements between the IJMA and Indian mill owners contributed to the escalation of conflicts in the 1930s. The result was that the second half of the decade was marked by a fierce competition between jute mills, which Paul Benthall of the Bird Company described as a "survival of the fittest."²³

The second half of the 1930s was marked by fresh measures of rationalisation, and increasing pressure on workers. While this meant on one level a continuity of the earlier policy of managers and mana-



ging agents, it also involved an increased emphasis on measures which served to reduce long-run labour costs. The introduction of new machinery thus became an important theme in the following years. The introduction of high-speed spinning frames was a key tactic in managerial attempts to improve the process of production. High-speed spinning frames were first installed in 1935. They considerably reduced labour costs by increasing productivity.²⁴ Roving machines were another type of machines, which were connected to the spinning department, and came to be replaced by high-speed machines. By 1937, mills all along the river had installed some of these machines.²⁵

The introduction of high-speed spinning frames, needless to say, led to the dismissal of spinners. Fewer workers were required to produce a given amount of yarn. Yet the introduction of high-speed spinning frames also ended up making an important problem visible: the successive re-organisations of work in the spinning-department led to a process of skilling of spinners. Under the older system of excess-employment, workers could train themselves 'on the job', by working as 'additional' workers and sharing their work with experienced workers (Sailer 2015: 160). In the second half of the 1930s, managers and managing agents thus began to complain about short supplies of skilled workers in the spinning and weaving departments. In the late 1930s, the mills of the IJMA introduced a rudimentary system of apprenticeships in order to tackle the problem. This attempt, however, was not particularly successful, as the new apprentices received no wages, and were only given the option of graduating to 'badli' worker if they finished their apprenticeship.²⁶

The reorganisation of work, and the successive rounds of rationalisation in the jute industry, then, affected 'madrassi' workers in diverse ways. While they were affected disproportionately as families, they simultaneously enjoyed increased bargaining power as individuals due to the position of male adult workers at the point of production. The dismissal of children, meanwhile, points us in another direction: the importance of jobs in the informal economy, such as in local bazars. We have already seen, that (some) 'madrassi' children learned rudimentary Bengali in order to work in the mill towns. It is in this context not surprising, that several managers noticed new teachers in 'madrassi' lines, when older children, too, were dismissed.²⁷ Presumably the dismissal of children increased the networks that stretched from 'coolie lines' to urban neighbourhoods. The re-organisation of work in the jute industry, in other words, led to a peculiar coexistence



of strictly contrary impacts on 'madrassi' workers in the urban mill area and at the point of production.

3

In Titagarh, 'madrassi' workers came to play a dominant role in labour conflicts in the late 1920s. The abolition of the system of excess-employment in a growing number of jute mills seemed to lead to anxieties, among workers in Titagarh, that the system could be abolished in their mill as well. Communist trade unionists from the Bengal Jute Workers Union (later renamed the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union or BCMU) seemed to be aware of these anxieties. When the IJMA announced that their mills would increase the weekly hours of work from 54 to 60, Bankim Mukherjee and other members of the trade union distributed leaflets which suggested that the mills of the IJMA wanted to abolish the system of excess-employment at the same time.²⁸

A few months later, when weavers in Jagatdal had gone on strike against a cut in wages and an increase in hours of work, the BCMU addressed workers in Titagarh in order to induce them to join the general strike. The workers, however, were opposed to any strike action, and interrupted the members of the BCMU repeatedly, emphasising the sufferings that would be endured. Bankim Mukherjee asked: "Will not the authorities take advantage of the knowledge that you are not at all in a position to strike? To this Bankim got no direct answer, only there was a murmur among the audience and he tried to press home his point in the manner mentioned above."²⁹ Ten days later, workers in Titagarh joined the general strike, led by 'madrassi' workers.³⁰

In the following years, 'madrassi' workers played a leading role in seven out of eight strikes in Titagarh. Their grievances were remarkably consistent: they protested against dismissals, demanded the re-introduction of the old system of excess-employment, or, from the second half of the 1930s, the reversal of cuts made during the Great Depression.³¹ While the BCMU was not involved in most of these strikes, the workers' contacts with trade unionists, too, seem to have been fairly consistent. In April 1936, for instance, two rank-and-file members of the BCMU visited a group of 'madrassi' workers in Titagarh, who had become involved in the trade union during the general strike of 1929. The objective of this meeting was to discuss the possibility of a new general strike in the jute industry.³² The outcome of this discussion is not known.



Another consistent feature of labour conflicts in Titagarh was that the patterns of protest exhibited strong networks among 'madrassi' workers which came to be deployed at these moments. This was, first of all, apparent with regard to networks between different mills, and even between different mill towns. In March 1930, for instance, a strike started in three jute mills in Titagarh. Two days later, the manager of Titaghur Jute Mill No. 2 reported that

a crowd of about four hundred persons, mostly Spinners from other Mills, rushed into the Spinning Department shouting and setting of the frames. Some difficulty was experienced in clearing the department but this was successfully managed by the European Staff and when the crowd had been put out the Mill gates were closed and machinery restarted.³³

'Madrassis' in Titaghur No. 1 and No. 2 Mill, however, joined the strike the same day. After workers had left their workplace, they proceeded to Khardah, as the manager reported further. The Khardah Jute Mills joined the strike the next day, followed by a strike in mills in Jagatdal.³⁴

The patterns of strikes in Titagarh display, secondly, specific hierarchies among 'madrassi' workers. Most prominent among these were hierarchies between male and female workers. Strikes among 'madrassi' workers usually started in the spinning department. Instead of leaving the site of production, however, workers regularly marched to the preparing departments, where the female members of their families worked, in order to bring them out.³⁵ In contemporary reports, this practice was described as acts of violence against women workers.³⁶ Historians too followed a similar line of argument (Basu 2004: 212; Sen 1999: 224). Yet, it seems more likely that these practices were an articulation of family relations. Acts of 'intimidation' of women workers, then, were arguably not random acts of violence, but a precise expression of patriarchal familial relations between men and women. These relations were not restricted to the workplace, but were deployed at the site of production in particular ways at the moment of conflict. 'Madrassi' spinners could claim control over two departments of the jute mill thus increasing their bargaining power in labour conflicts. Gendered notions of male honour, meanwhile, may have increased the apparent necessity to exercise this control at moments of conflict.

Another level of hierarchy was apparent in a series of conflicts in 1937. After the general strike between February and April that year,



two successive strikes occurred in the Titaghur Jute Mills. After the general strike ended, a new strike broke out in the Titaghur Mills on 22 May. The main demand was an increase in the number of spinners employed per frame. The managers were willing to concede if the workers were willing to accept a reduction in wages. Displaying, yet again, the importance of networks among 'madrassi' workers, the spinners accepted this offer and resumed work on 24 May.³⁷

Three days later, however, 'madrassi' shifters demanded "an extra shifter per squad." Managers rejected this request. The shifters responded by going on strike the same day. The following events on that day demonstrated a crucial tension between spinners and shifters. Managers reported that

[m]eetings were held in the Bazar in the course of the evening and it was reported that a disagreement between the Spinners and the Shifters had taken place owing to the stoppage of work. News was received later on that evening that work would be resumed the following morning. Whistles were blown accordingly and a full start was made.³⁸

The general manager of the mills of the Duff Company reported further about the resumption of work: "Actually, they were in the department shortly after 5-30 a.m., and shifted all the Frames left over from the previous day, in redress for the 6 o'clock start."³⁹ It seems quite clear that the spinners were responsible for the shifters' unconditional resumption of work that night, and their early start the next morning. In this case, too, we arguably see family networks at work. The majority of shifters were 'young persons', and, thus, the sons of 'spinners' or other 'madrassi' workers. In either way, this incident demonstrated the considerable degree of control which 'madrassi' workers exercised at the site of production.

The situation in Titagarh, however, was not exceptional among labour conflicts in the jute belt at large, nor was the importance of spinners during labour conflicts restricted to 'madrassi' workers. While weavers played a dominant role in labour conflicts in this period as well, spinners regularly assumed a leading role in the subsequent chain of events. Symptomatic of this tendency was the general strike of 1937. Strikes started after the dismissal of four 'up-country' weavers. Initially, this only affected mills in Howrah, and workers demanded the re-instatement of the dismissed workers. By March, however, unrest had spread to the southern parts of the jute belt where it was



led by 'local' workers. Describing the events at the Birla Jute Mill, a police report stated further that:

About 500 strikers of Budge Budge side came in procession carrying red flags and shouting communist slogans on 2.3.37. They prepared at the mills gate and threatened the workers and on 4.3.37 a riot took place as the spinners of the mills came out in a body, joined the strikes and assaulted the European Engineer of Birla Mills and others.⁴⁰

Within a month, strike actions were reported from the northern parts of the jute belt as well. On 15 April the general manager of the Duff Company reported to Dundee: "[...] the Spinners at No. 1 Mill, particularly on the Sacking side, refused to start up their frames at 1-30 p.m., and eventually the Manager was forced to close down for the day."⁴¹

By the end of the month, more than 123,000 jute workers were on strike ("123,000 Jute Mill Workers Idle" 1937: 13). At this point the BCMU declared the end of the general strike after the members of the IJMA had agreed to consider the workers' demands favourably. By 8 May, the majority of workers had resumed work and the conflict was restricted to mills in Howrah where it had begun. In contrast to the situation in February, however, local workers were the ones to continue the strike. This led to increasing tensions between different sections of the workforce, as 'up-country' workers wanted to resume work. By mid-May, local workers, too, resumed their work and the strike ended (Basu 2004: 244).

Localised labour conflicts were practically a continuous feature in the Bengal jute industry in the aftermath of the general strike in 1937. The dynamics of these conflicts reflected the grievances of spinners which were also addressed by trade unionists; as well as relations among 'madrassi' workers that demonstrated distinct networks and hierarchies. Members of the BCMU, for instance, told spinners regularly that new machines would be introduced in their mills—and throughout the industry—soon, leading to the dismissal of large numbers of workers. Workers started creating 'workers committees' at the site of production, while these committees were led by workers who had become members of the BCMU; the patterns of strikes bore close similarities to those which we have seen among 'madrassi' workers.⁴² This visibility of 'madrassi' workers, arguably, rested on their involvement in labour politics, on community networks across different mills, and on gender relations at the point of production.



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During the 1930s, 'madrassi' workers repeatedly exhibited their ability to enforce a complete closure of the mills. This, however, contributed to tensions within the workforce. The main line of conflict was, not surprisingly, between spinners and weavers. Until the 1920s, weavers occupied the highest position within the internal hierarchy among workers. They earned the highest wages and their work was the most skilled. But the developments of the 1930s seemed to reverse this hierarchy to some degree, as spinners began to exercise their capacity to stop work at random moments of the day. The conflict between spinners and weavers, however, was simultaneously a conflict between Hindu and Muslim workers. In the aftermath of the general strike of 1937, this second set of identities came to dominate the conflict between the two sections of the workforce, and it shaped the chain of events in Titagarh in 1938 significantly.

In the course of the general strike of 1929 conflicts within the workforce seem to have played a relatively marginal role. The only recorded conflict broke out over the question of whether wages should be drawn during the strike or not. Spinners seem to have been inclined to accept wages, whereas weavers rejected this on the grounds of honour.⁴³ It is not clear how the workers resolved this conflict, but at the same time it is apparent that the main question was how to act during a strike.

During the Great Depression, however, communal tensions became apparent. While 'madrassi' spinners started and led strikes, 'up-country' workers, often weavers, wanted to resume work instead. When 'madrassi' workers, then, started two new strikes in quick succession, the tensions between the two sections of the workforce intensified considerably. Both strikes, after all, revolved around demands which affected only workers in the spinning department, but forced the entire workforce to stop production. 'Up-country' weavers, in particular, seemed unwilling to support a new strike on behalf of 'madrassi' workers alone.⁴⁴

At the same time, communal tensions were rising throughout the industrial hinterland of Bengal. The new labour minister of Bengal, Shaheed Suhrawardy, contributed to this by addressing workers in Urdu during the general strike. Whereas Muslim workers responded favourably to Suhrawardy, 'madrassis' complained bitterly about these speeches, as they did not understand Urdu.⁴⁵ In the second half of 1937, Suhrawardy set up a moderate trade union, the Bengal National Chamber of Labour. This union was an attempt to weaken the more



radical Bengal Jute Workers' Union. To this end, the new union made "strident appeals to Muslim sentiments", as Subho Basu has pointed out (Basu 2004: 259). At the same time, the new union underlined its connections with the "state machinery", thus enabling Suhrawardy to "consolidate his position among Muslim workers" further (ibid.: 258-9).

The Duff Company contributed to the escalation of the conflict. In October 1938, the company directors employed a labour officer in order to improve relations between workers and managers.⁴⁶ The idea was not new as, for example, the Bird Company had recently employed a labour officer as well.⁴⁷ Further, in order to improve their connections with the newly elected government of Bengal, the directors of the Duff Company chose to employ Mr. Karim, a retired clerk, who stated that he was a friend of Suhrawardy.⁴⁸ When the strike in Titagarh began, the newly employed labour officer was sent to Titagarh to improve the strike situation. During the strike Karim was in touch with workers and tried to persuade them to resume work.⁴⁹ However, he seems to have barely spoken with Hindu workers addressing only Muslim workers.⁵⁰

When a new strike started in November 1938, the lines between a labour dispute and a communal conflict became blurred. Only four days after the strike in the Titaghur Mills had started, the general manager of the mills of the Duff Company described the subsequent events as follows:

You would observe from the special message sent yesterday that the situation in Titaghur Bazaar took a distinct turn for the worse on Wednesday night, and that matters were somewhat serious. I mentioned in Private Official of 16th instant that the Police Force then was really insufficient [...] and this, I am afraid, had been taken advantage of, as there were a number of clashes during the day and many more after night-fall, resulting in 3 deaths and many wounded.⁵¹

He also added that the strike had started shortly after the Durga Puja festival, for which the workers had been granted one week's leave. The Muslim workers, accordingly, felt "very bitter at again losing wages so soon after their enforced long holiday."⁵² Making matters worse, the strike also started just a few days before the end of Ramadan, which rendered the loss of wages even more problematic for the Muslim workers.⁵³

After the riots in November, strong police detachments and the Frontier Rifles were posted in Titagarh. In the following days the situa-



tion stayed calm, until the end of the strike in early January 1939.⁵⁴ Despite the end of open violence, the merger of communal conflict and labour conflict remained visible. The Special Branch of Police noted the presence of Arya Samajists and Muslim Leaguers among the workers in Titagarh, while local labour activists increasingly identified themselves with these groups.⁵⁵ Simultaneously, communist members of the BCMU became more and more involved, and discussed organising a general strike. Some members of the union started "intensive propaganda among the jute workers in Tittagarh and neighbouring areas", expressing the hope that "a general strike would help to remove communal differences by focussing attention on economic issues."⁵⁶ The increasing presence of communist trade unionists was presumably also an attempt to diminish the importance of the Arya Samaj and the Muslim League in the area. A general strike, thus, was called for 5 December 1938.

This step, however, was highly disputed within the BCMU. A considerable section of the union members feared that an escalation of communal violence would result from intervention at this juncture. The question of how to understand the strike in Titagarh—as a labour conflict with communal tensions, or as a communal conflict among jute workers—therefore triggered very fierce discussions within the union.⁵⁷ Anticipations of communal violence, however, were presumably part of the reason why 'madrassi' workers barely received any active support from the BCMU, against their dismissal after the strikes ended.

In December 1938 the communal riots and the resulting police presence ended up providing another important condition for the mass dismissal of 'madrassi' workers. When the strike started in November, the general manager of the Duff Company had not expressed any intention of dismissing all 'madrassi' workers. He had also rejected a plan to this effect by representatives of the Bird Company, as he feared that the mass dismissal of 'madrassis' could lead to riots and the destruction of mill machinery.⁵⁸ The presence of the police forces and Frontier Rifles after the communal riots, however, reduced this risk considerably. By the middle of December, then, when the manager of Titaghar Mill No. 2 started working again, 'madrassi' workers were not allowed to enter the mill any more. By the end of the month, the Titaghar Mill No. 1, too, started to work again, while not allowing 'madrassi' workers to enter the mill. When police forces gradually left the area in early January, the 'madrassi' workers in the Titagarh Jute Mills had already been dismissed and evicted.



The levels of production in the Titaghur Jute Mills declined in the aftermath of the strike. The main problem was that the mills' managers could not find enough experienced workers to replace the 'madrassi' workforce. This was most apparent with regard to the spinning department.⁵⁹ In 1940, when the levels of production had only improved marginally, managers began to hire 'madrassi' workers again.⁶⁰ The re-employment of 'madrassi' workers implied a limit to managerial control. This was an outcome of the earlier strategies, which had favoured the employment of 'madrassi' workers in preparing and spinning departments. While this strategy had been abandoned in the late 1920s, problems of skill and work experience meant that managers needed to rely on 'madrassi' workers at the point of production.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to trace the history of 'madrassi' spinners in the Titaghur Jute Mills. While this group of workers was a minority in the jute mill workforce, it was the dominant group in labour protests in Titagarh in the 1930s. This development rested on two distinct fields within which these conflicts emerged. The first was characterised by the changing position of 'madrassi' workers in a complex system of managerial employment strategies, as well as by the changing position of spinners, women, and children at the site of production. The second field involves the ways in which 'madrassi' workers appropriated the spaces of the factory and of the neighbourhood. It was, thus, marked by family based relations at the workplace, as well as community based solidarities in the wider area of Titagarh.

In the second half of the 1930s, these two fields came to be increasingly interwoven with trade union politics on the one hand, as well as communal politics on the other. While these interconnections can, in principle, be traced to the late 1920s, this feature acquired considerable importance in 1937. This had significant implications on the dynamics of labour conflicts in Titagarh, and it was central in creating a situation in which the managers of the Titaghur Jute Mills could afford to dismiss all their 'madrassi' workers.

Social identities in the jute belt, therefore, overlapped with the dynamics of work processes, family arrangements, neighbourhood structures, and labour politics. The fact that 'madrassis' were employed as families in different departments, shaped their power at the workplace. The family connections also sharpened neighbourhood dynamics, especially when women and children were dismissed from



the mill and had to find work elsewhere. Trade union agitation addressed the organisation of work in the mills—and since this was precisely the chief problem faced by 'madrassi' workers, it led to the solidifying of links which contributed to escalating labour protest in the late 1930s. This segmentation was also a prime mover in communal conflict. The overlapping of class, community and other social identities certainly did play an important role in shaping the history of the jute workforce. Yet, it needs to be stressed that it is by no means sufficient to analyse these registers principally through the lens of neighbourhood networks, as recent labour history has tended to do. Neither the effects of segmentation on the workforce, nor the dynamics of labour protest, can be understood with reference to an abstract and generically conceived workplace. If we are to understand the dynamics within working-class neighbourhoods, we also need to historicise the workplace itself.

Endnotes

- ¹ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 14. Nov. 1938.
- ² Advance. Titaghur Jute Strike, archives of the Special Branch of Police, Calcutta, SW-595-38, 4. Dec. 1938.
- ³ Advance. Titaghur Jute Strike, Archives of the Special Branch of Police, Calcutta, SW-595-38, 7. Dec. 1938.
- ⁴ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1938, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/9/4.
- ⁵ C. 187-Titaghar Jute Strike, archives of the Special Branch of Police, Calcutta, 10. Jan. 1939.
- ⁶ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 19. Dec. 1938.
- ⁷ Trades-Unions: 17-1-39. Titaghur Jute Strike, archives of the Special Branch of Police, Calcutta, SW-595-38, 17. Jan. 1939.
- ⁸ C.L. 74 – 8-11-38. General Jute Strike, archives of the Special Branch of Police, Calcutta, SW-595-38, 8. Nov. 1938.
- ⁹ Managers' Reports to the Directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1940, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/11/4.
- ¹⁰ Royal Commission of Labour in 1929 (Whitley Commission), Volume 11 – Supplementary. Government of India. London: 1931, pp 356f.
- ¹¹ Dundee Courier, 23 July 1894; annual report on the working of the Indian Factories Act in Bengal and Assam, 1930.
- ¹² Ibid.



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- ¹³ Managers' reports to the directors, Shamnuggur Company Limited. South Mill, Nos. 1 & 2 Mills, 1936, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/6/3.
- ¹⁴ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghurh Jute Mill No. 1, 1931, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/2/3.
- ¹⁵ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1931, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/2/3.
- ¹⁶ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1931, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/2/4.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1932, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/3/4; managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1933, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/4/4; managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1933, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/5/4; managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1935, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/6/4.
- ¹⁹ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1933, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/4/3; managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1933, Dundee University Archives.
- ²⁰ Annual report on the working of the Indian Factories Act in Bengal and Assam, 1930.
- ²¹ Annual report on the working of the Indian Factories Act in Bengal and Assam, 1925-1931.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Letter from E. Benthall, 31 December 1928, Centre of South Asian Studies (University of Cambridge), Benthall Papers, Box 1, File 2.
- ²⁴ It is difficult to estimate the exact impact of the new spinning frames on labour costs and productivity. One crucial problem here is that the installation of these machines necessitated alterations in other sections of the preparing and spinning departments, in order to adjust the process of production to the increased speed, and, in turn, to secure an even quality of yarn. These alterations differed according to the type of spinning-frame to be installed. Giving an indication of the 'combined' savings, the manager of the Union North Mill estimated that in their spinning department the increase in productivity would be worth about Rs. 2500, whereby labour costs would be reduced by Rs 500. / Enclosure 4 (Union North Re-Construction Proposal), 2 August 1935, Centre of South Asian Studies (University of Cambridge), Benthall Papers, Box 8.
- ²⁵ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 21. Apr. 1938.
- ²⁶ Managers' reports to the directors. Victoria Jute Company Ltd., 1940, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/11/6.
- ²⁷ Managers' reports to the directors. Samnuggur North Mill, 1931, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/2/1; Managers' reports to the directors. Titaghur No. II Mill, 1931, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/2/4.
- ²⁸ Local government reports, Bengal, July 1929, India Office Library and Records: L/P & J /12/686.
- ²⁹ Report of D.I.B. Officer, 28. July 1929, Intelligence Bureau (West Bengal State Archives): 25/-29.
- ³⁰ Director's minute Books Samnuggur Jute Factory, Vol. 22, 11 March 1930, Dundee University Archives, MS 86 1/1/19.



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- ³¹ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1930-1938, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/1-9/4; managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1930-1938, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/1-9/5.
- ³² H.O. 21 dated 7.4.1936, archives of the special branch of Police, Calcutta, SW/521-A/35, 7. Apr. 1936.
- ³³ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1930, Dundee University Archives.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Royal Commission of Labour in 1929 (Whitley Commission), Volume 5, Part 1. Bengal (excluding coalfields and the Dooars), 1931, pp 76; Royal Commission of Labour in 1929 (Whitley Commission), Volume 11 – Supplementary. Government of India. London: 1931, pp 356f.
- ³⁶ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1938, Dundee University Archives, 1938, MS 86/V/8/9/4 (managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1938, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/9/5.
- ³⁷ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1937, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/8/5.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/5, 3. June 1937.
- ⁴⁰ Report by Rai Bhdr. P.C. Ray, 18. Jan. 1938, Intelligence Bureau (West Bengal State Archives): 59-38.
- ⁴¹ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/5, 15. Apr. 1937.
- ⁴² Labour Matter (Unrest), Intelligence Bureau Branch (West Bengal State Archives): 59-38.
- ⁴³ Reports on labour situation in 24-Parganas, 15. Aug. 1929, Intelligence Bureau (West Bengal State Archives), 25/-29.
- ⁴⁴ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1937, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/8/5.
- ⁴⁵ No. 52/2-20 dated the 24th April 1937, West Bengal State Archives: Home Department (Confidential): Political Branch, 128/37, 24. Apr. 1937.
- ⁴⁶ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 19. Oct. 1938.
- ⁴⁷ Letter to E. Benthall, 20. September 1937, Centre of South Asian Studies (University of Cambridge), Benthall Papers, Box 11.
- ⁴⁸ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 17. Apr. 1939.
- ⁴⁹ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 19. Dec. 1938.
- ⁵⁰ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 22. Aug. 1939.
- ⁵¹ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 18. Nov. 1938.
- ⁵² Ibid.



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- ⁵³ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 21. Nov. 1938.
- ⁵⁴ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 18. Nov. 1938.
- ⁵⁵ Extract from statement of C.B. 12 dated 9.11.1938, Archives of the Special Branch of Police, Calcutta, SW-595-38, 9. Nov. 1938.
- ⁵⁶ C.L. 100, archives of the Special Branch of Police, Calcutta, SW-595-38, 1. Dec. 1938.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Private official letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 18. Nov. 1938.
- ⁵⁹ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1939, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/10/4; managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1939, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/10/5.
- ⁶⁰ Managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 1 Mill, 1940, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/11/4; managers' reports to the directors, Titaghur Jute Company Limited. No. 2 Mill, 1940, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/8/11/5.

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