

The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India

*Business strategies and the working classes in
Bombay, 1900–1940*

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1 Problems and perspectives

Among the dominant themes of modern history has been the social organization and political action of peasants and workers in the Third World. The changing relationship between the West and the Third World has been vitally affected by perceptions of their political attitudes and social aspirations. At the same time, assumptions about their social character and expectations about their political behaviour have informed the strategies of political leaders, activists and parties in the Third World. Yet these perceptions of the working classes and their political threat have been frequently generalized from a particular understanding of the historical experience of the West, either by contrasting it with Third World societies taken as a whole, suggesting thereby that they need their own culturally specific explanatory frameworks, or by positing it as a model towards which other societies are assumed to be moving.

The study of Indian society, conceptualized in these ways, has posed intractable problems. On the one hand, it is often treated as an exception in the discourse of social theory. Yet rules which require such gigantic exceptions to sustain themselves can only have the most limited power to explain. On the other hand, thus excluded from the dominant discourse of social theory, it is placed and examined with the category of 'developing' or 'Third World' societies. This has depended upon lumping together, within the general category of the Third World, societies which are as fundamentally different from each other as they may bear broad similarities with the West.¹ In addition, generalizations arising out of the empirical investigations of Indian society have fitted awkwardly within the comparative frameworks offered by 'the sociology of development'. The aim of this book is to examine the social formation of the working classes, both as it was influenced by and as it shaped the nature and development of industrial capitalism in colonial India. The issues it considers are familiar and recurrent in the analysis of industrialization and its social consequences everywhere.

¹ For an interesting critique of the category of the Third World, see Carl E. Pletsch, 'The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labour, circa 1950–1975', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXIII, 4 (1981), 519–38.

Problems

If the 1970s witnessed 'the return of the peasant to South Asian history',² the urban poor and the working classes have remained largely in exile. The character of the Indian economy has been widely perceived as essentially 'agrarian' and historiographical concerns have largely reflected this perception. Historians have continued to be predominantly concerned with land revenue systems, agrarian production and the rural social order and, more recently, with capturing the authentic experience, specifying the consciousness and distilling the 'popular culture' of the Indian peasant.³ Indeed, this concentration upon the agrarian economy has often excluded its interplay with the urban and industrial economy. Its serious and often restrictive effect on the discussion of Indian society and politics has been to build into the analysis of its economy, especially in the colonial period, an implicit and natural dualism. By focussing upon the economy of labour in Bombay City, this book seeks to redress the resulting imbalance in the subject. It also attempts to cross the town–country divide and examine, among other questions, the interplay between the rural base and urban context, between the nature and experience of work in large-scale industry and of the casual-labour market, between the social relationships of the workplace and the urban neighbourhoods. The purpose of this study is to investigate the social processes underlying the economy of labour and its social formation in Bombay City in the early twentieth century.

The vast open spaces of the Indian countryside have often appeared to dominate its economy, the nature of its society and the style and character of its politics. Although large-scale industrialization was substantially under way in the late nineteenth century, it was still the case in the 1920s and 1930s that less than 10 per cent of the country's workforce was employed in manufacturing industry, and this proportion had barely increased by the 1960s.⁴ Those who expected large-scale industry to form the lead sector of the economy soon

² E. Stokes, 'The Return of the Peasant to South Asian History', in his *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 265–89.

³ For instance, in many of the essays in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, 6 vols. (Delhi, 1982–9). An exception among the 'subaltern' historians is the attempt to address the question of working-class culture by D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (Delhi, 1989).

⁴ In fact, between 1901 and 1931, it fell from nearly 11 per cent to below 9 per cent, before rising marginally to over 9 per cent by 1961. See J. Krishnamurty, 'Secular Changes in Occupational Structure of the Indian Union, 1901–61', in *IESHR*, II, 1 (1965), 42–51. J. Krishnamurty, 'The Distribution of the Indian Working Force, 1901–1951', in K. N. Chaudhuri and C. J. Dewey (eds.), *Economy and Society: Essays in Indian Economic and Social History* (Delhi, 1979), pp. 258–76; J. Krishnamurty, 'The Occupational Structure', in D. Kumar (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India* (henceforth *CEHI*), 2 vols., vol. II, c. 1757–c. 1970 (Cambridge, 1982), 533–50.

discovered, although sometimes painfully, that it simply failed to lead. Yet the 'industrial sector' had acquired, by the early twentieth century, a significance out of proportion to its weak and indecisive effect on the Indian economy as a whole. In 1931, over four million workers were employed in the perennial and seasonal factories, the mines and railways in India.⁵ The strength of this labour force was overshadowed by the number of workers employed in unregulated and, therefore, uncounted factories, which either used no mechanical power or else employed less than twenty workers. Between 1901 and 1951, the urban population expanded from 11 per cent to 17 per cent.⁶ Moreover, thirty-six Indian towns had a population in excess of 100,000 in 1931.⁷ Numerous workshops producing a wide range of goods and services mushroomed across the back streets and pavements of every town. Between 1914 and 1947, large-scale manufacturing formed the fastest-growing constituent of the secondary sector.⁸ Moreover, this industrial economy impinged increasingly upon its rural hinterlands. Towns and cities provided a ready demand for its produce. Cash crops provided the raw material for industrial production. Migration to seasonal or permanent wage employment in the towns became a necessary recourse for rural smallholders in the Konkan and the Deccan, in the United Provinces and Bihar.

The political and social significance of the industrial sector was considerably greater than these stark figures suggest. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, the British were only too aware of the value of developing a substantial industrial infrastructure in India. It could transform India, in keeping with changing strategic imperatives, from simply an oriental barrack into an ordnance base as well. It might help to restrict the dumping of foreign manufactures even as Britain's industrial decline was becoming increasingly apparent. It could assuage Indian capitalists who might otherwise turn their minds and their pockets to Congress. It would provide employment and ostensibly inject some dynamism into the Indian economy.

But here surfaced an inherent contradiction in colonial rule. In one sense, the British were concerned to develop the Indian economy, for great empires cannot prosper on bankrupt colonies. It would be impossible to continue pulling resources out of India unless they were also nurtured and replenished. On the other hand, industrial development, as in the case of cotton textiles, created

⁵ *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India* (henceforth *RCLI*) (London, 1931), pp. 6, 75–6, 106, 136.

⁶ A. Bose, 'Six Decades of Urbanization in India', *IESHR*, II, 1 (1965), 39.

⁷ *Census of India, 1931* (henceforth *Census, 1931*), IX, *The Cities of the Bombay Presidency*, part I, *Report*, by H.T. Sorley (Bombay, 1933), p. 3.

⁸ S. Sivasubramoniam, 'Income from the Secondary Sector in India, 1900–1947', *IESHR*, XIV, 4 (1977), 427–92; R.K. Ray, *Industrialization in India: Growth and Conflict in the Private Corporate Sector, 1914–47* (Delhi, 1979), pp. 14–21.

sources of competition, within limited and increasingly impoverished markets, for metropolitan capitalists whose fortunes were on the wane even if their political influence remained intact. Furthermore, it was one thing to encourage the development of Indian resources but quite another to field the consequences of rapid social change. The rapid advance of capitalism might erode the basis of the agrarian social order and kick away the props upon which the panoplies of imperial rule rested. The performance of the industrial economy and the effects of imperial rule upon it became a cornerstone of nationalist criticism. The aggregation of large masses of workers in the cities gave rise to anxieties about social conditions and their political consequences. Until 1918, industrial disputes 'when they occurred, were regarded with almost complete apathy by those not immediately concerned with them'.⁹ The two decades which followed witnessed widespread, prolonged and sustained industrial action, in Bombay and Calcutta, in Sholapur and Ahmedabad, in Kanpur, Madras and Coimbatore.¹⁰

Bombay City provides an obvious site for the investigation of the industrial economy and its social context in India. By the late nineteenth century, it had become India's major port, a leading commercial and financial centre, the largest cotton market in Asia and a nodal point for the cotton piecegoods trade. The first cotton mills were built in the city in the 1850s. Significantly, the industry was pioneered and developed largely by Indian enterprise. As the industry developed, so its location grew more dispersed; nonetheless, Bombay City remained, until the end of the period, the largest centre of India's most important industry, which alone employed over a quarter of the labour force working in perennial factories. The hinterland of this bastion of Indian capital extended beyond its neighbouring districts across the Indian sub-continent. Inevitably, the issues and conflicts that concerned the city readily acquired a national significance. The sectional interests of its businessmen, its millowners and merchants, expressed, for instance, in their campaigns for higher tariffs, lower exchange rates or more generous budgets, quickly appeared as national

⁹ B. Shiva Rao, *The Industrial Worker in India* (London, 1939), p. 13.

¹⁰ V.B. Karnik, *Strikes in India* (Bombay, 1967); R. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918–29: A Study of Organisation in the Cotton Mills* (Canberra, 1981); E.D. Murphy, *Unions in Conflict: A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres 1918–39* (New Delhi, 1981); Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*; C. Revri, *The Indian Trade Union Movement* (New Delhi, 1972); V.B. Karnik, *Indian Trade Unions: A Survey* (Bombay, 1966); S.M. Pandey, *As Labour Organises: A Study of Unionism in the Kanpur Cotton Textile Industry* (New Delhi, 1970); P. Saha, *History of the Working Class Movement in Bengal* (New Delhi, 1978); S.D. Punekar, *Trade Unionism in India* (Bombay, 1948); D. Kooiman, 'Jobbers and the Emergence of Trade Unions in Bombay City', *International Review of Social History*, XXII, 3 (1977), 313–28; E.A. Ramaswamy, *The Worker and His Union: A Study in South India* (New Delhi, 1977).

concerns and became nationalist shibboleths. Labour disputes in the city could scarcely be contained within its mill districts and swiftly gained a national prominence. Bombay, as Lord Willingdon, the Governor, explained in 1917, is the nerve-centre of India, both [*sic*] from a political, social and economic aspect. I say this knowing fully well that Calcutta will not agree! but it is a fact and will become more of a fact year by year. It is the metropolis to which princes, chiefs and citizens from all other parts are perpetually coming, and we have therefore opportunities which no one else has got of getting to know the general feeling on important political questions.¹¹

Furthermore, in the 1920s and 1930s, Bombay became the most dramatic centre of working-class political action. Until 1914, strikes in the cotton mills were largely confined to individual departments and mills; at times, they affected groups of mills and even neighbourhoods. After the First World War, however, they were increasingly coordinated across the entire industry. Between 1919 and 1940, the industry witnessed eight general strikes, all of which lasted for at least a month; some continued for considerably longer periods. The general strike of 1928 began officially in April, after several mills had experienced extended strikes over the previous six months, and ended favourably for the workers in October. Between October 1928 and April 1929, more than seventy strikes occurred in the industry. Another general strike which began in April 1929 lasted nearly as long, although it was never as complete as the general strike of the previous year. The general strike of 1934 was not broken for three months. The general strikes of 1919 and 1920 were launched in the absence of an effective trade union. In 1924 and 1928, the prominent trade-union organizations and their leaders opposed industrial action and indeed attempted to prevent it. During the 1928 strike, a group of communists emerged as the dominant force on the strike committee. They formed the Girmi Kamgar Union which, despite continued repression, dominated the labour movement in Bombay throughout the period. As Bombay became the scene of militant industrial action, its labour movement, under communist direction, acquired an explicitly political direction.¹²

Moreover, if the millworkers formed the most active and militant section of

¹¹ Willingdon to Montagu, 25 September 1917, Montagu Papers, MSS. EUR. D 523/18, pp. 31–5. IOR.

¹² R. Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars', *MAS*, XV, 3 (1981), Special Issue, *Power, Profit and Politics: Essays on Imperialism, Nationalism and Change in the Twentieth Century*, ed. C. J. Baker, G. Johnson and A. Seal, pp. 603–47; Newman, *Workers and Unions*; S. Bhattacharya, 'Capital and Labour in Bombay City, 1928–29', *Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Political Economy*, XVI, 42 & 43 (17–24 October 1981), pp. PE36–PE44; D. Kooiman, 'Bombay Communists and the 1924 Textile Strike', *Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Political Economy*, XV, 29 (19 July 1980), 1223–36; G.K. Leiten, *Colonialism, Class and Nation: The Confrontation in Bombay Around 1930* (Calcutta, 1984).

the working class, industrial action was not confined to them. The railway workshops went on strike in 1917 and again in the early 1920s. In 1930, the workshop men came together with the workers on the line of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway to offer determined resistance against wage cuts, retrenchment and increased workloads. Transport workers struck in 1922; the dock workers organized a major strike in 1932; the leather workers followed suit in 1937. Around these bitter and often protracted disputes, trade unions formed, fractured and collapsed.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Bombay witnessed a wide range of social and political conflicts. These conflicts informed and often developed the contradictions at the base of Britain's Indian Empire. 'The second city of the Empire' was the centre of India's largest industry in Britain's most important, if turbulent, colony. Colonial rulers ranked the city's millowners among their best and most loyal collaborators. Yet the growth of the textile industry posed a major threat to the decreasingly competitive cotton mills of Lancashire, the mainstay of British imperialism, in its most important foreign market. As the Bombay industry encountered a slump in its fortunes in the 1920s and 1930s, the millowners campaigned for tariff protection. But keeping the Indian market open for Lancashire goods had ranked among the oldest and most abiding imperatives of colonial rule.¹³

The relationship between the colonial state and Indian capital came under growing pressure in the 1920s and 1930s. On the one hand, Indian capital was invested in import-substitution industries; on the other, the shifting fiscal base of the colonial state necessitated its dependence on revenues derived from the taxation of trade and industry. Significantly, the fiscal, monetary and tariff policies of the colonial state continued to be determined by Britain's imperial needs rather than India's industrial interests. The Fiscal Autonomy Convention remained no more than an adornment of the statute books. Budgets were framed with the aim of ensuring that the Indian Empire cost the British taxpayer nothing. Monetary policies were driven by the concern to manage the Government of India's sterling obligations rather than India's foreign trade.¹⁴ If nationalism had been, at least partially, the product of bourgeois frustration, it

¹³ B. Chatterji, 'Business and Politics in the 1930s: Lancashire and the Making of the Indo-British Trade Agreement', *MAS*, XV, 3 (1981), 527-73, Special Issue, *Power, Profit and Politics*, ed. Baker, Johnson and Seal; C. Dewey, 'The End of the Imperialism of Free Trade: The Eclipse of the Lancashire Lobby and the Concession of Fiscal Autonomy to India', in C. Dewey and A.G. Hopkins (eds.), *The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India* (London, 1978), pp. 35-68; I.M. Drummond, *British Economic Policy and the Empire, 1919-39* (London, 1972); B.R. Tomlinson, *The Political Economy of the Raj: The Economics of Decolonization in India* (London, 1979).

¹⁴ Tomlinson, *Political Economy of the Raj*, especially pp. 57-152; A.K. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India 1900-39* (Cambridge, 1972), especially pp. 34-67.

was also the case that as nationalist opposition mounted, the colonial state became increasingly concerned not to alienate the millowners and merchant princes whose collaboration it so highly valued. In the 1920s and 1930s, Bombay City came to be regarded as 'the Keep of Gandhism',¹⁵ a seething base of nationalist agitation and anti-colonial politics, as well as the epicentre of working-class political action.

The social formation of the working classes in Bombay and their interaction with the development of industrial capitalism is investigated against the background of these broad themes. Studies of capitalist development and industrialization have often tended to focus upon entrepreneurs and by subordinating workers to production, industry or the economy have sometimes relegated them to the margins of history. The history of the working classes is studied in terms of the intentions and objectives of the entrepreneurs and the processes of labour-force formation become simply a function of 'how the early entrepreneurs solved the problem of recruiting, organizing, and administering the labour force'.¹⁶ It is implied that employers were able to conjure up the kind of labour force they sought. The choices and actions of workers and their effect upon the forms of recruitment, the nature of discipline and the patterns of labour use fade into a dimly illuminated background. The focus of this book rests upon labour and its conflicts with capital which shaped the patterns of capitalist development. Business strategies and the organization of production influenced the workings of the labour market as much as the dynamics of the latter fashioned work practices. The interaction between them shaped the policies of the employers and determined the nature and possibilities of the solidarities forged

¹⁵ Sir Frederick Sykes, Governor of Bombay, MSS. EUR. F 150 (4), 6 March 1932, quoted by A.D. Gordon, 'Businessmen and Politics in Developing Colonial Economy: Bombay City, 1918–33', in Dewey and Hopkins (eds.), *The Imperial Impact*, p. 194.

¹⁶ 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), p. 1; C.A. Myers, *Labour Problems in the Industrialization of India* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958); 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 Economic and Social History* (Delhi, 1979), pp. 277–95; R. Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855–1946: Some Preliminary Findings', *IESHR*, XIII, 3 (1976), 277–328; C.P. Simmons, 'Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: The Case of the Coal Mining Industry, c. 1880–1939', *IESHR*, XIII, 4 (1976), 455–85; B. Misra, 'Factory Labour During the Early Years of Industrialization: An Appraisal in the Light of the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1890', *IESHR*, XII, 3 (1975), 203–28; C. Joshi, 'Kanpur Textile Labour: Some Structural Features of Formative Years', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XVI, 44–6, Special Number (November 1981), 1823–38; Sir Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), pp. 267–420. It is not intended to suggest that all these historians are agreed on how these problems were solved or that they share the same conception of the economy. But the widespread assumption of the centrality of this problem has led to an inordinate emphasis upon recruitment systems and methods of organizing a labour supply in the 'early stages' of industrialization.

between workers. Although the following chapters will not deal specifically with the patterns of industrial action, the emergence of trade unions or the nature of popular movements, the sphere of politics is brought consistently to bear upon an understanding of the social nexus of the working classes. Indeed, it is taken for granted that this social nexus and its economy can scarcely be comprehended outside a political dimension.

If the history of work and workers has been too readily subordinated to the economy, it has also sometimes been made interchangeable with the history of their leaders, trade unions and political parties. The emergence of modern trade-union organization depended, it is often argued, upon how effectively its leaders could make inroads into the traditional loyalties of the working class. For some historians, the motive force of labour politics lay in the struggle between politicians, attempting to mobilize workers and form trade unions, and the jobbers, the traditional leaders of the working class.¹⁷ As the forces of modernity and tradition clashed, workers, in this view, constituted a passive and inert mass, mere spectators in the struggle being waged to decide their fate.

For the most part, the working class remains silent in Indian history. We have to rely upon those who spoke on their behalf: trade unionists and political leaders, journalists and social workers, civil servants and lawyers. Their protests can sometimes only be studied through the distorting lens of police intelligence reports, the hastily scribbled notes of newspaper reporters or the files of rulers and employers. The motives and ideologies of ordinary people are often only glimpsed either through the prism of dramatic moments of collective action or in the echo chambers populated by their spokesmen. It has often rendered historians vulnerable to the stereotypes of workers gravely professed by the dominant classes: the perceptions of contemporaries become the historians' dogma; their social prejudices are taken for social reality. Historians have frequently built arguments about popular politics upon assumptions about the nature of the social formation which constituted them. By examining these processes of social formation, this book seeks to interrogate some of these assumptions as well as the implications and expectations which have often been extrapolated from them. The investigation of the social formation of Bombay's workers may help, by clarifying the range of options before them, to explain more accurately the nature of their political perceptions and political action.

The second chapter sets the scene against which the main themes of the following pages are played out. It describes the transformation of Bombay from a penurious trading base of the East India Company into a leading metropolitan centre of Asia, the demographic characteristics of the city and the nature of its

¹⁷ Newman, *Workers and Unions*; Kooiman, 'Jobbers and the Emergence of Trade Unions in Bombay City'.

rapidly changing urban environment. It attempts to locate the emergence of Bombay as the cradle of industrial development in the sub-continent within the context of the development of mercantile capitalism in the wider region and tries to analyse the structural constraints within which capital was mobilized in the early twentieth century. The pattern of mobilization and deployment of capital for industrial enterprises shaped the workings of the labour market and, more generally, influenced the changing relationship between capital and labour.

The next three chapters examine factors which shaped the formation of Bombay's labour force as a whole: the mechanisms of the labour market, patterns of labour migration and the nature of the rural connections of the city's workers, and the social organization of the working-class neighbourhoods which formed in the city.

Historians of industry and labour in India have invariably focussed upon large-scale industry, as the 'lead sector' of the economy, while relegating the others to the margins, thus obscuring our understanding of the role of the non-industrial sectors in determining the shape of the industrial economy itself. Chapter 3 locates the industry within the context of the city's economy and in particular its labour market. The casual and uncertain conditions of work have been explained primarily in terms of the character of labour supply. Workers in the early stages of industrialization, usually rural migrants, it is supposed, sought casual and temporary work because they had not sufficiently adapted to the demands of factory discipline. This chapter attempts to restore the balance by examining the conditions in which the demand for labour was generated.

Migrant workers to the city continued to maintain close connections with their village base over several generations. This has commonly been interpreted as the consequence of their rural mentalities. Lacking any commitment to the industrial setting, it is said, migrant workers were simply concerned to earn cash quickly and return to the land at the first opportunity. Yet underlying, indeed undermining, these characterizations lay the fact that the low wages and uncertain conditions of work forced most migrants to retain their rural connections as a second base of material provision in the city. Indeed, the purpose of migration was frequently to enable the peasant household to retain its village holding. For this reason, migrant workers were often strongly committed to the urban setting and struggled to defend their position within it. The rural connections of the working classes should not be seen as merely an effect of the early stages of industrialization, not least because workers in Bombay would appear to have been passing through them for over a century. Migration has often been portrayed as a process of acculturation in which peasants were initiated into new (modern) ways of life represented by the city and the factory. That the history of peasant migrants consists of their gradual, progressive initiation into the modern world is a self-regarding notion which has misconceived their

behaviour and flattened their history. Chapter 4 investigates the causes of migration and the nature of these rural connections. It also examines the role of urban employment and the village base in workers' strategies for subsistence and in the operation of their household economy.

The dominant image of Indian workers has been cast in terms of their peasant character. Migration occurred within the framework of caste, kinship and village connections. Migrants to the city lived with their co-villagers, caste-fellows and relatives and sought work with their assistance. In times of distress, it was within these social connections that they found relief. Caste and kinship appeared to form indivisible social units in the city's working-class neighbourhoods. Similarly, 'the jobber's gang' has recently been described as 'a unit of urban society' and the jobber himself was frequently portrayed as a kind of village headman.¹⁸ The nature of this so-called traditional social organization is examined in chapter 5. It investigates the nature of power and authority which flowed from the social organization of the neighbourhoods. It looks at the patterns of association which formed within them. These collectivities often informed the development of the political perceptions, organization and action of Bombay's workers. Fundamentally, this chapter investigates how the social organization of the working class came to be constituted. It was inflected by the fluctuations of the labour market and the uncertain conditions of work. The interplay between the spheres of the workplace and the neighbourhood was crucial to the social organization of Bombay's workers.

From the sphere of the neighbourhood, this book turns to the workplace in a case study of the cotton-textile industry in the final three chapters. Chapter 6 examines the origins and development of the cotton-textile industry in Bombay. The nature of its development shaped the business strategies of the millowners and the formation of the industrial labour force. The difficulties which engulfed the industry in the 1920s and 1930s emerged out of its earlier pattern of growth. The industry's history informed the millowners' perception of and response to their seemingly perpetual crisis. It also influenced the workers' response, indeed often trenchant resistance, to the policies of their employers. The following chapter investigates the economics of the textile industry in Bombay and its effects upon the organization of production: the structure of authority at work, the nature of skill, the hierarchies and differentials which marked the workforce and the patterns of labour deployment. Whereas the social organization of the workforce is supposed to have fragmented the working class, industrialization is assumed to have united it. As workers are concentrated into larger masses, it is believed, their interests become more uniform and their social consciousness

¹⁸ Newman, *Workers and Unions*, pp. 28, 54; RCLI, *Evidence taken in the Bombay Presidency (including Sind)* (London, 1931), Government of Bombay (henceforth GOB), 'Memorandum on the Conditions of Labour in the Bombay Presidency', I, i, 10.

is unified. On the contrary, as chapter 7 shows, the process of industrial development heightened the sectionalism of the working class. This sectionalism was not simply a function of the traditional divisions of caste and kinship; it was also generated by the processes of economic development.

The millowners were no more able than their employees to take a single, or even steady, view of their industry and its future. Chapter 8 examines the discourse of 'rationalization', the fashionable remedy of the day offered by the colonial state and a wide range of interests for the industry's problems in the late 1920s and 1930s. But the diversity of interests within the industry made it impossible for the millowners to combine for a concerted assault upon their structural problems. At the same time, the sectionalism of the workforce was accentuated by the piecemeal introduction of rationalization schemes. Changes in employers' policies affected different groups of workers variously. As their markets slumped, the millowners, unable to embark upon the reconstruction of the industry, attempted to manipulate and exploit their labour force. Yet this only served to heighten the resistance which their policies encountered. While the millowners also sometimes perceived rationalization as a means of, or an opportunity for, breaking labour resistance, the intractability and truculence of their workers often narrowed their options and deterred them from adopting measures of fundamental reform. Significantly, although rationalization was extensively discussed, and some steps taken in its name, largely to allow the millowners to tighten their grip on labour, no comprehensive programme of reform and reconstruction was undertaken by the millowners. Nonetheless, the formulation of these schemes, and the play of competing views about them, revealed not only the complexities which marked the formation of an industrial labour force in Bombay and the nature of the business strategies in the industry, but also the ways in which working-class action shaped and limited the options of the capitalists.

Perspectives

In recent times, the conceptualization of class and social consciousness, culture and poverty, colonialism and industrialization has been in a state of flux. This enquiry into the processes which conditioned the formation of the working class in Bombay City seeks to address these broader questions and is offered as a contribution to a more general, comparative or 'theoretical' discussion of industrialization, class and labour movements. To a large extent, this discussion has thus far proceeded by generalizing from limited cases. The sociological and historical evidence of an 'Indian case' is not conventionally expected to provide material for thinking more generally about industrialization and its social consequences. Indeed, it is not often presented as if it might be. The interest of Indian society is assumed to lie in its 'agrarian' or 'pre-industrial' character,

whose inwardness can only be properly comprehended in terms of its own particularisms. Alternatively, 'industrial development in India' is portrayed as 'part of the very broad movement which had its origins in Western Europe'.¹⁹ According to this evolutionary schemata, the patterns of social change and economic development in India were moving broadly along tramlines towards 'industrialism', or modern capitalism, familiar in the 'Western' experience. Thus, one historian of Indian labour was led to assure us that,

group tensions and conflicts in Indian industry take on the characteristics of Western industrialization and do not require any analysis specifically developed to suit the requirements of a distinctively Indian situation ... The group tensions which will confront Indian industry will not be strange to the scholar. They will remind him very much of those which affected other regions in early periods of economic development.²⁰

In this way, the historical experience of the West becomes the source of the conceptual frameworks and social theories by which the Indian working classes may be comprehended.

The assumption that Indian social history was essentially particularistic or that it simply followed patterns laid down by the West in earlier centuries has effectively withdrawn its study from an active role in the comparative discussion of social change and the wider discourse of social theory. The cost has often been either to attribute a cultural specificity to fairly general phenomena or to perceive as a general effect of a broader evolutionary development towards industrialism what is produced by a particular historical context and its contingencies. The cultural specificity of the jobber system or the characterization of indigenous patterns of entrepreneurship, averse to risk, prone to speculation, slow in its response to technology, is an example of the former. So perhaps is the readiness with which urban neighbourhoods are conceived primarily in oxymorons like 'urban villages'.²¹ Conversely, historians have sometimes taken for granted that 'early industrial workers' or insufficiently industrialized or non-industrial urban labour were marked by their rural origins and peasant character.²² Their attitudes to work and politics have often been read in the light of the perceptions of similar groups at what is deemed a comparable stage of industrialization in Britain or elsewhere in the West.

¹⁹ M.D. Morris, 'The Growth of Large-Scale Industry to 1947', in Kumar (ed.), *CEHI*, II, 553.

²⁰ M.D. Morris, 'The Effects of Industrialization on "Race Relations" in India, in G. Hunter (ed.), *Industrialization and Race Relations: A Symposium* (London, 1965), p. 160.

²¹ See, for example, O.M. Lynch, 'Rural Cities in India: Continuities and Discontinuities', in P. Mason (ed.), *India and Ceylon: Unity and Diversity* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 142–58; D.F. Pocock, 'Sociologies: Urban and Rural', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, IV (1960), 63–81; W.D. Rowe, 'Caste, Kinship and Association in Urban India', in A. Southall (ed.), *Urban Anthropology: Cross Cultural Studies of Urbanization* (New York, 1973), pp. 211–49.

²² Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*; D. Arnold, 'Industrial Violence in Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XIII, 2 (1980), 234–55.