

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

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***Abstract:**The Calcutta Port and Dock presented a complex configuration of different types of employees, engaging a workforce that varied in skills, employment patterns, and educational attainment. It can be said that from the inception of the Port Trust until the 1920s, no such organized, permanent, and strong union was formed among the workers of Calcutta Port. Dissatisfaction or strikes that were observed based on mainly economic demands among the workers until this time were sporadic but mainly developed on the initiative of the workers themselves. No facilitation or initiative was seen from outside. In 1920, the CPTEA was formed as the first union of Calcutta Port employees. But it was not until the beginning of the 1930s that any such permanent and strong organization emerged among the Calcutta port and dock workers. From this time on, labour organizations were formed mainly on the initiative of leftists. The Calcutta Port and Dock Workers Union was formed in 1934. The labour unions of this period intensified the agitations and strikes to meet the demands of the workers. This article tries to shed light on the labour composition, conditions, and early stages of unionization of the working class of Calcutta Port and Dock.*

***Keywords:** Calcutta, Dock, Employee, Labour, Organization, Port, Worker etc.*

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Introduction

The Calcutta Port is only significant river port in India. It is located 203 kilometres (126 miles) upstream of the sea on the left bank of the Hooghly River at 22° 32'46"N and 88°18'53"E. The British East India Company built Calcutta Port after receiving trading privileges from the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1698.¹However, even before this there

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

was a tradition of local traders taking boats to Calcutta's ghats. But after the arrival of the British, the business got a boost. At the same time there was a remarkable development of Calcutta-based English private shipping.²As a result, Calcutta Port started to grow with the focus on import-export trade. Between 1709 and 1718, the East India Company used 41 ships in their trade with Bengal, and in 1727, the shipping associated with the port of Calcutta passed the 10,000 tonne threshold. After the Battle of Plassey, the number of ships increased quickly from thirty per year to forty or fifty, and the port's capacity for tonnage increased along with it.³But the history of development of the port of Calcutta to facilitate the trade up to the year 1868 was a history of plans, projects, Commissions of enquiry. Much was proposed but nothing came out of it.⁴Calcutta emerged as a modern port in the second half of the nineteenth century. Because of the spectacular improvement of communications through the introduction of railways, steamships, Canals, telegraphs, and Cables was made in the 1850 and 1860s. With the inauguration of the Suez Canal towards the end of the year in 1869, it was followed by a dramatic improvement in marine communication that sped up the usage of steam ships by cutting the distance between England and India in half to just 6500 km. The whole seaborne trade of Calcutta increased from Rs. 19.13 crores to Rs. 40.53 crores between 1854 and 1864, more than doubling.⁵

I

After the great revolt in 1858 following the shift of power from the company to the British Crown, a Port Commission was set up in 1870.⁶The port was conceived to be a commercial port and gateway of Eastern India and is the guiding factor to trade and commerce. It commands a vast hinterland that comprises the entire North-Eastern part of India and two landlocked neighbouring countries, namely, Nepal and Bhutan.⁷When the Port Trust was established in 1870, the Calcutta Jetties were already in operation. In 1893, the first Kidderpore dock opened, and by 1902, the entire system was complete. King Georges' Dock first opened in 1928, after it underwent numerous additions. In addition, there were separate jetties for oil, warehouses for tea, etc.⁸The port played a very important role during the colonial period.

The size of the working class grew enormously in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through the establishment of this entire factory based industries and the development of transportation system. In the early twentieth century more than three lakh

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

workers were engaged in this modern industry.⁹In the early period Bengali workers were mainly employed in all these industries. But, the rapid expansion of factories from the beginning of the twentieth century led to a huge demand for workers and as a result, local Bengali workers were replaced by workers from the neighboring states of Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh in droves.¹⁰From this time non-Bengali workers were in the majority rather than Bengali workers due to the Bengalis' apathy to industries hard work. Apart from this, as wages were higher in other jobs, factory work was socially looked down upon by Bengalis at that time. On the other hand, the economic condition of neighbouring regions was worse than that of Bengal. As a result, the non-Bengali people of those regions were employed in Calcutta's industrial areas at low wages due to poverty.¹¹Therefore, British owners started recruiting non-Bengali workers from the outside of Bengal to ensure increasing profits in the industry.¹² In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the participation of workers increased considerably in this factory-based industry sector. One such important sector was the port, where large numbers of workers were employed.¹³ Thus, this article will discuss how the organization and movement of the workers of Calcutta Port started and what their condition was in the early stages.

Before discussing the labour organization and movement of Calcutta port, it is necessary to give a brief idea about the composition of port and dock workers. The Calcutta Port and dock presented a complex configuration of different types of employees, engaging a workforce that varied in skills, employment patterns and educational attainment.¹⁴The Calcutta Port Trust initially employed shore personnel for cargo handling and persons responsible for the maintenance of the port and its approaches, including white-collar staff. The history of the early days of the port does not give any definite information as to the nature of the employment of port labour. But in spite of this, it is known from some places. For example, Hugh Leonardo's pamphlet 'Improvement of the Port of Calcutta' (1867) can be said in this case. From this one can get an idea about the cargo handling procedure of the Calcutta port of that time and the labourers involved in that work. At that time, the export goods were not taken to the customs house. It was brought directly from a shop in the city to the river bank by putting it on the heads of the workers or on bullock carts. Since there was no good quality jetty service at that time, the ships could not be parked on the river bank. As a result, the goods were lifted by labourers to get wooden planks in the anchored boats. Then

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

the boats were taken alongside the ships and all the goods were loaded on board. There were no large traffic reserves in places convenient for both railway and maritime transport. The cargo release process was also not smooth sailing. Ships anchored in the river at suitable places. The cargo was unloaded from the ships by boats and brought as close as possible to the customs house on the river bank and after that, carried by the porter to be inspected at the customs house and at last stored at warehouse.¹⁵ The cargo handling system at the port gradually improved after the formation of the Port Trust. However, the labour arrangements of the Port Commissioners' at the time were insufficient. Early on, the M/s Bird & Company entered the scene. The Birds began their business as a labour contractor in 1864, and in 1879–1880, they signed their first contract with the Port Commissioners. From that point on, the Birds provided the majority of the labour force at the Calcutta Port for many years.¹⁶ The Calcutta jetties, Tea warehouses, and the mechanical plant berths at the Coal Dock were subsequently used as sites for the Commissioners' departmental labour. Without using an intermediary, the guys were hired on an individual basis and paid monthly fees. In the 1920s, at the Port Trust around 6,754 workers were directly employed.¹⁷ The Port Commissioners oversaw these workers in this capacity. Around 22,000 employees were directly employed by the Port Commissioners in the 1930s, according to a preliminary calculation.¹⁸

II

The term 'dock worker' was used to define the workers who handled the job of the jetties, docks, wharfs, and quays of the ports.¹⁹ This category of labourers was supplied by Bird & Company to perform the shore work. The Birds' contract work was expanded over the entire dock system in 1895, three years after the Kidderpore docks opened. The Port Trust Enquiry Committee of 1907 likewise backed the system of labour provided by the contractors rather than the departmental labour in the docks that had been promoted by some.²⁰ The private work contractors known as Stevedores had traditionally handled the cargo handling aboard a ship across ports. Compared to their coworkers on the shore, the stevedoring employees were much more numerous. Both the stevedore and the shore labourer were paid on a piece-work basis. All of these labourers worked in groups or gangs, with the exception of a very small group of men employed by Bird & Company and paid a monthly salary.²¹

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

Most of the labour recruitment was done primarily from Bihar, UP and Orissa. Bengali workers were employed in very small numbers. Own labour of the Port Commissioners' and the contractors supplied labour both were belonged to the same class of men. They were all outsiders who prioritized their careers in agriculture, and throughout various times of the year, particularly during harvest, a sizable portion returned to their hometowns. The authorities had made claims about a temporary labour shortage caused by absenteeism and labour turnover, but as unqualified workers were frequently available, these claims rarely materialized into major problems.²² Regarding the communal, regional, or caste makeup of the labour force, no accurate, in-depth statistics are available. Approximately 9000 Muslims and 5000 Hindus, predominantly Oriyas, made up the total number of employees employed by stevedores in the 1930s, according to one source. Most Muslims from Uttar Pradesh made up the skilled labour of the winchmen, who used a crane to mechanically load and unload cargo onto a ship. Both Hindu Oriyas and Muslims, primarily from Bihar, performed the physical loading and unloading as unskilled labour or gangmen.²³

The labour supplied by the contractor was recruited chiefly through an intermediary called Sardars.²⁴ The Sardars provided the labour needed by both Bird & Company and the Stevedores. Men from well-known villages and areas were hired by the Sardars. Due to this, they were able to exert significant influence and control over the gangs. Even the Bird & Company officials themselves did not fully understand the relationships between the Sardars and the individuals who worked for them. Most likely, the Sardars had a core of employees who were constantly loyal to them, and around this, they developed gangs with other individuals they could find on a daily basis.²⁵ It was stated that the Sardars were actually Bird & Co.'s subcontractors. Once per week, the Sardars received payment. However, it was fully up to them to decide when and how to pay each of their gang member individually.²⁶

Amongst the dockyard worker women, children as well as aged men are not found for the arduous nature of the work.²⁷ So it can be easily said that all the workers here were males of a certain age group. These non-Bengali immigrants workers lived mostly in 'messing' groups of five or more in tenements and slums. Although the Calcutta Port Commissioners have made an effort to provide housing for their staff, the actual number of tenements is far insufficient to meet the demands.²⁸

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

The Calcutta Port and Dock labour movement is important especially for two reasons. 'Firstly, the port and dock, taken together, employed a large number of workforces. Secondly, the port and dock had a crucial importance in the economy of not only Bengal also of neighboring provinces.'²⁹The papers of the Port Commissioners' meeting in May 1877 contain an early mention of labour agitation in the Calcutta Port. Work was suspended on 30th April as a result of "a strike among Sardars and coolies" brought on by the municipality's imposition of a license levy on Sardars. At that time port authorities knew and understood little about existing labor organizations.³⁰There were also several other instances of labour unrest or strikes in the early twentieth century at Calcutta Port. For example, in December 1907, jetty labourers went on strike due to the authorities ignoring their demand for increased wages and a lack of adequate accommodation for them to live. However, the strike did not stop the work of the jetty, as not all workers joined the strike.³¹In another case, in May 1913, the Heave Up and Houseboats staff went on strike to demand an increase in their wages. However, the Calcutta Port Commissioners authorities took up the grievances of the workers.³²There were sporadic work halts in several departments at the ports and jetties in the wake of the escalating labour unrest in the post-World War I era. For example, Port Commissioner's Workshop labourers' strike (October, 1920), Hooghly Docking Engineering Company Limited workers' strike (November, 1920), dock cranemen's strike (January, 1921), Jetty Coolies' strike (January, 1921), and Stevedore Coolies' strike (May, 1922) can be mentioned.³³These strikes were mainly carried out by the workers to demand an increase in their wages.

III

On April 12, 1920, Dr. Moreno, a Christian missionary, founded the Calcutta Port Trust Employees' Association (CPTEA), largely as a social welfare organization. This is the first union of Calcutta port employees. I B Sen, a respected labour leader and barrister, served as the organization's president. Nripaul Bhattacharya, the Joint Secretary, was one of the other white-collar workers who made up the other leaders and members.³⁴The union had 1400 members in total.³⁵The early enthusiasm of the members quickly faded, because of this organization was initially formed as a social welfare organization it could not take any

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

initiatives for the interests or demands of the workers. As a result, workers were disillusioned. But Bhattacharya, whose name Nripaul was distorted by labourers into Nepal, revitalized the Association in 1922.³⁶ According to the Indian Trade Union Act of 1926, it was registered as a union on June 20, 1929. Following recognition, during the years when it had no competitors, it successfully negotiated significant gains on issues like provident funds, leave, and other fringe benefits. After 1929, the union started recruiting shore workers in addition to port staff.³⁷

However, when testifying before the Royal Commission on Labour (1929), the port authorities and their labour contractors attested to the lack of organization or combination among dock labour in Calcutta.³⁸ Although, additional evidence points to an increasing trend, among dock workers to voice their demands and complaints.³⁹ Several resolutions were accepted at a mass gathering of over 1500 dock workers held in December 1927 under the supervision of the provincial committee of the AITUC, which was led by its President Mrinal Kanti Bose a congress-minded labour leader. A close examination of these decisions reveals that, despite several requests made to the port authorities, they were unable to solve the problems. The formation of the "Dock Workers' Union" as a union for these dock employees was decided at the above-mentioned mass meeting. They sought better housing and a provident fund in addition to the elimination of recruitment bribery given to Sardars and Babus.⁴⁰ Because Babu and Sardars used to harm the strike of the workers by colluding with the authorities for their own financial interests.⁴¹ However, not much is known about the proposed union. According to a source from 1930, the National Union of Dockers, Calcutta was renamed the 'Calcutta Dock Workers' Union' in April of that year, and a committee was established with left-leaning Congress leader Hemanta Kumar Sarkar as its president and S I Yatzdani as its general secretary. But it appeared that all of these unions were largely paper-based and temporary.⁴² From the discussion above, we see that the port authority was not providing any trade union information to the Royal Commission until the First World War. But on the contrary, in the information given by Nilmani Mukherjee, we come to know about a meeting of the workers and some demands. Also, Nirban Basu traces a short-lived port workers' union to a trade union document dated April 1930. Thus, it can be said that from the inception of the Port Trust till the second decade of the twentieth century, no such organized, permanent and strong union was formed among the workers of Calcutta port. Dissatisfaction

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

or strikes that were observed among the workers until this time were sporadic but mainly developed on the initiative of the workers themselves.⁴³ No facilitation or initiative was seen from outside. Forced by their own difficulties, the workers tried to organize themselves into small groups and express their demands. Political parties were still apathetic about port workers. During this period, isolated and scattered strikes and agitations based on various demands can be observed among them. Their demands were mainly economic. As well as working hours, accommodation claims were added. In some cases, however, the authorities considered workers' demands during this period.⁴⁴

Contrarily, although there were periodic work stoppages that were the earliest signs of the labour movement in the case of the dock workers as early as the late nineteenth century, it wasn't until the early 1930s that real attempts were made to organize the dock workers. At this time, Niharendu Dutt Majumdar returned from England after passing the barrister's exam and formed the Bengal Labour Party in 1933 to work among the workers. Later in 1939, it was founded as the Bolshevik Party. They were working to build trade unions among workers in various fields.⁴⁵ It attracted Marxist academics that cared about the suffering of workers to its ranks. After learning about his actions, the dock workers asked him to help them form a union in January 1934. As a result, the Calcutta Port and Dock Workers' Union was founded, and by the end of the first year, it claimed to have 14,000 members.⁴⁶

The Bolshevik Party, a Marxist-Trotskyite organization primarily confined to Bengal, took the initiative to establish the "Calcutta Port Trust Employees Association" and the "Calcutta Port and Dock Workers' Union" in both cases. The CPTEA did not face any significant competition until 1938, when the National Union of Port Trust Employees (NUPTE) was founded by leaders of the Muslim League, who wished to seize control from the leftist CPTEA. Up until the late 1920s, the CPTEA's membership consisted only of clerical and supervisory port employees, who at the time were not particularly notable for their union activism. The port and shore workers' unions were also engaged in this conflict between the Kala Jhanda and Lal Jhanda traditions, although in their case, the Lal Jhanda was more entrenched and older. Another distinction is that the port authorities were the only employer those unions had to deal with. Additionally, because the workforce was better educated, the movement was able to develop its own leadership.⁴⁷ As a result the port workers' unions were stronger and better organized than the dock workers' union.⁴⁸

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

In a memorandum to the authorities in November 1934, the union wanted two gangs per crane in place of the current one gang per crane, shorter working hours for dock workers, and higher wages. Workers began to take strikes on November 26, 1934, when the authorities rejected their charter of demands.⁴⁹ From November 26 to December 14, 1934, there was a strike. The Times acknowledged the economic nature of the striking demands while maintaining that communism was the root of the problem.⁵⁰ A women leader Sudha Roy was active in dock workers' in this strike. A year earlier, she had joined the Bengal Labour Party. The task was not easy at all. In such a situation, when all workers are male and majority of leader also male, there handled the leadership of a middle-class woman in a labour field with great importance and courage, it can be said without a doubt.⁵¹ Rajni Mukherjee, Shishir Roy, Vishwanath Dubey, Salim, Sherkhan, Aziz Sardar, and other leaders were also present. From among the labourers, Salim and Serkhan attained positions of leadership, and Aziz from among the Sardars.⁵² However, at a meeting of the employees at Calcutta Maidan on December 16, the union's strike committee formally announced that the union had decided to call off the strike in light of promises made by the Shipping Agents that no victimization will occur. The union also anticipated that the government would provide a guarantee that, if a solution could not be reached within three weeks of the workers' return to work, a Court of Enquiry under the Trade Disputes Act would be appointed by the government.⁵³ Eventually, the dock labourers' shifts were cut from eleven to nine hours, and the daily pay for the twelve-person gangs increased from twelve to fourteen and then to sixteen rupees.

IV

However, the 1934 strike was not entirely successful. In reality, the government's oppressive actions, including the implementation of Cr P C 144 and the arrest of leaders, as well as the splintering strategies of a rival union founded by Muslim League leader H. S. Suhawardy, forced the cancellation of the strike.⁵⁴ The government after the end of the dock workers' strike in 1934 quickly declared the Calcutta Port and Dock Workers' Union illegal on the grounds that its leader N Dutta Majumdar was seditious. Viswanath Dubey, however, continued the union's work under a new name, the Dock Mazdoor Union. The Dockmens'

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

Union, founded in 1937 by Nepal Bhattacharya, was renamed the Bird & Co. Workers' Union in 1942 after the private company that handled freight on the coast.⁵⁵

However, it can be said through this discussion that since the second decade of the 20th century, the organization of Calcutta port and dock workers has started to develop gradually. At this time, the initiative to organizing the labour union came from outside, mainly from the leftists. Special importance was given to building the labour movement and organization among the left wing. Out of this, the leadership tried to awaken the workers. Also, as workers were already aware of their economic and labour demands, they also began to organize themselves during this period after learning about the world labour movement through outside leaders. In this phase, it can be seen, that besides economic demands, stability of work, reduction of daily working hours, and other issues will be added as workers' demands. Also during this period, workers' agitations and strikes became very intense. The port authorities adopted a significantly more aggressive stance towards all of these labour unions at this time.⁵⁶

Conclusion

In this discussion on the labour organization and movement of Calcutta Port and Dock, it has been seen that during this period, mainly the left wing, especially the Bengal Labour Party, actively participated among the port workers and conducted the organization and movement among them. Also, towards the end of this period, left-wing port workers' unions began to face competition from Muslim League unions. But the important political party in India at this time, the National Congress is not found in the discussion in this phase. Because they could not build any active organization among the port workers at this time. However, it must be noted that the influence of the National Congress was also seen in the port workers and other various labour organizations. After World War I, workers in various fields were inspired by strikes and agitations of Congress. As an example in the case of port workers, during civil disobedience movement the port workers were inspired by this and went on strike in 1932.⁵⁷ Workers wanted to further legitimize their struggle by associating the strike with the nationalist movement. Although, the Congress as a party had no enthusiasm for these

The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

movements and rarely took part in organizing strikes.⁵⁸Therafter, the port workers' union and movement moved slowly towards the next phases.

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The Early phase of Calcutta Port and Dock: An analysis of the Labour Composition, Condition and Organization of the Working Class

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