

## **Constructing Histories of Labouring Classes: A Study of Delhi Cloth Mills in the Decade 1960s**

Nibha Sinha

*Assistant Professor of History, Lloyd Law College, Greater Noida, Delhi NCR*

**Abstract:** *This paper aims to examine the state of industrial relations during the 1960s in Delhi Cloth Mills. It is based on archival documents mostly collected from Delhi State Archives, data collected from Delhi Cloth Mills (DCM) management and some secondary literature based on labour relations to trace the making of industrial relations in DCM during the period 1960s. The paper attempts to argue that to construct histories of labouring class attention to the everyday life of workers is equally significant with the study of strikes and movements.*

**Keywords:** Industrial relation, Strikes, Movements, Resistance, Class solidarity.

Labour history in India emerged in the post-colonial period when questions of economic growth were of central concern for most historians. Generally speaking, labour historiography may be broadly divided into four phases.<sup>1</sup>In the first phase, the late colonial period, some of the foundational premises on labour were formulated and this established the beginning of labour history in India. Various commissions of enquiry were constituted to understand constraints to industrialization in India during the colonial period. It was these commissions of enquiry which first formulated and developed the discourse on Indian labour. Colonial discourse focussed on the inhibiting social and cultural factors as responsible for stunted industrialization and restricting the mobility of labour.

The nationalist, on the other hand, argued that colonialism was responsible for inhibiting the development of capitalism and hence restricted the growth of the normative industrial workforce. Both of these writings shared fundamental assumptions about the stereotypical image of Indian industrial workers. The stereotypical image of an industrial worker was that of a 'semi-rural semi-urban peasant proletariat'<sup>2</sup>. Morris D Morris critiqued old colonial and sociological frames that saw caste and other social institutions as barriers to labour supply, etc. But he did not fundamentally challenge colonial assumptions. In the second phase which started since independence and dominated until the mid-1970s, Marxist-nationalist historiography and modernization theories became significant. This was the

period of conventional labour history. Most of the writings on labour history during this period shared many assumptions that underlined colonial discourse on labour. Stereotypes about lack of commitment to work and irregular work rhythms continued to underline these discussions.

The third phase started in the early 1970s and became pronounced in the late 1970s and 1980s which heralded major rethinking on various aspects of labour history. New trends began to emerge in social history writing. First, there was a shift away from arguments which framed the discussion of modernisation theorists like Morris. Instead of considering caste and village ties as impediments to labour commitment and supply, now labour historians re-examined the significance of these ties in understanding working-class formation. The other trend was an attempt to develop a critique of the economic assumptions dominant in writings on working-class protests. There was a shift away from conventional trade union histories, in which workers as human subjects were absent, to histories that explored the social and cultural worlds of workers. The general attempt was to show that there is a possibility of the simultaneous existence of different levels of consciousness among workers. There was thus serious questioning of class attributes of the industrial workforce.

The fourth phase, which can be called the new labour history, began in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is still current. It is during this phase that the entire foundation of conventional labour history has been challenged and several alternatives have been proposed. There is a widening of perspective by exploring new themes and issues. "Not only have questions of culture, community, family and gender become more important, but the boundaries of labour history have also opened up to incorporate 'unorganized' home-based workers, casual labourers, self-employed artisans and others who existed on the fringes of the academic writing."<sup>3</sup>

A major break in the writing of labour history in India came with Dipesh Chakrabarty's work *Rethinking Working Class History*, based on a study of jute workers in Bengal. It has been pointed out that Chakrabarty tried to create an epistemological break by bringing culture to the centre of working-class history.<sup>4</sup> For this, he selected several often discussed topics of standard labour history such as the nature of industry and entrepreneurship; the working and living conditions of labourers; the nature of trade union organization and leadership, and the range and nature of protests. He showed the centrality of culture in deciding the nature and outcome of the phenomenon. Thus, according to him, the industry was in continuous crisis because the entrepreneurs were guided by the pre-capitalist commercial culture of profit through buying and selling and were not interested in long-term investment. The trade union leaders, it was argued, treated workers as their subjects and organizations as their zamindari. Workers' protests were divisive along communal lines. According to Chakrabarty, all these things happened because there was no proper bourgeois-democratic revolution in India and no proper working class could be developed here as it was immersed in its pre-

bourgeois culture.<sup>5</sup>

Another major contribution to new labour history was R. Chandavarkar's work in Bombay textile mills. He has argued against the categorical dualism found in much of labour history. He has pointed out that in conventional labour history, rural-urban, informal-formal, and workplace-neighbourhood are some of the oppositions in which one category is privileged at the expense of the other. In his study of Bombay textile mills workers, he has shown that workers maintained and nurtured rural links as a strategy to tide over fluctuations in employment. He has questioned the conventional notions of one-way migration of workers and has shown that two-way mobility was resorted to rather than one-way migration from the rural to the urban areas. So it was part of the survival strategies of workers to maintain their links with the villages which enabled them to sustain and prolong collective actions against employers. He has also questioned the dualism of workplace-neighbourhood, the former as a site of unity and the latter as an arena of conflict and has shown that the neighbourhood was a source of strength for workers away from the authoritarian control of mill authorities at the shop floor.<sup>6</sup> While D. Chakrabarty's work gives centrality to culture and reifies culture, Raj Chandavarkar's approach place complete reliance on economic and political factors and dismisses culture from any consideration in labour history. Jan Breman has questioned the distinction between the formal and informal economy. He has argued that such duality does not exist in reality and there were no fixed lines between the two sectors. He has suggested that instead of separating the two sectors into watertight compartments, it would be more logical to emphasize the fragmented nature of the entire labour market.<sup>7</sup>

Several other works have also argued that "given the close interaction of agriculture and industry and between rural and urban economies, in structuring the milieu of organised industry, in shaping labour market, etc., any attempt to make distinctions between agriculture/industry and rural/urban can only be misleading."<sup>8</sup> What is required is questioning such distinctions to fully appreciate labour history. During the 1960s, there was a surge in labour history writings in the West. This surge was a result of students' and workers' movements. It has been pointed out that "radical historians, apprehensive that workers were being co-opted within the structures of welfare capitalism in the post-war years, were keen to revive the lost radical traditions."<sup>9</sup> The writings of the English social historian like E P Thompson and history- from-below approach were representative of this trend.<sup>10</sup>

#### **New Labour History and its discourse**

By the 1970s, however, economic restructuring due to globalization changed all this. The emergence of global sub-contracting, diffusion of power in the world economy and collapse of the Soviet system seriously challenged the foundations of labour history.<sup>11</sup> By the early 1990s, labour history was in

crisis. Since then, however, there has been a regeneration of interest in the history of labour in the Southern countries. However, this new revival of labour history writing is different both in structure and style from the traditional focus on the working classes.<sup>12</sup> There is the questioning of both the Eurocentric view of labour history and conceptual binaries. These conceptual binaries of analysis of labour forms were usually located along three axes: spatial, temporal and relational. The spatial binaries were seen in terms of Western developed countries- underdeveloped rest of the world, workplace-home, factory workshop, and urban-rural. The temporal divide was along pre-modern, feudal times and modern industrial times. Formal, structured relationships between employer and employee and informal, unstructured relationships lying outside the sites of the workplace were yet another conceptual binary to understand labour histories.

The new labour history approach has questioned these binaries and has argued that these binaries are not water-tight compartments; they are not mutually exclusive. Rather there is an overlapping and coexistence of multiple identities and forms of labour. In the current changing economic forces, these spatial, temporal and relational binaries seem to be blurring. With the expansion of informatization and feminization of the workforce, what is required is "new forms of comparison that take into account the multidimensionality of relationships, locations and temporalities."<sup>13</sup>

It has thus brought the non-class attributes in workers' lives and activities to the forefront of labour studies. It has made a case to look beyond linear conceptions of change prevalent in conventional Marxist writings. It has opened up new grounds to explore the dynamics of the interrelationship between multiple identities of workers and it has led to major rethinking and is increasingly exploring entirely new areas related to informality, gender, laws, etc. The binaries concerning formal-informal, industrial-agricultural, and free-unfree labour are becoming obsolete. The new approach has provided space to study various labour forms which exist simultaneously and impinge on each other. Despite the changed paradigm, however, the main focus of the new labour history has been mostly, if not entirely, on large-scale organized industry, mining and plantations.

The transformations taking place in the discipline of labour history today can be stated in terms of, "the present juncture is one in which geographical boundaries of the discipline, which were narrowly configured around the nation-state, are being challenged; and the analytical category of labour, for long identified with the industrial, unionized and male worker, has been stretched to include hitherto marginalized informal workers."<sup>14</sup> "The rethinking has been to look beyond an exclusive focus on the industrial factory workers, to map the submerged histories of the 'urban poor', 'irregularly employed' and 'sub-proletariat'."<sup>15</sup>

The emerging trend is thus to look beyond the site of workplace and factory walls and explore non-work sites like slums, chawls and bustees. Contemporary economic forces have reversed the 'proper' evolutionary

sequence of change. The recent trend is towards informalisation and feminization of labour. "Instead of factory employment replacing cottage industry, formal sector workers are increasingly forced by retrenchment to eke out a far more precarious existence in informal sector home-based production units."<sup>16</sup>

Trends in labour history writing might keep on changing, however, the interest in studying the complexities of the relationship between labour, capital and state will never go out of fashion. In a rapidly changing and globalizing world, the study of industrial relations has gained new significance. Liberalization of the Indian economy brought about a change in the role of government in the industrial relations system. The relationship between major actors of the industrial relations system- government, employer, employees and trade unions has shifted from conflict avoidance to collaboration in the wake of the government's adaptation to structural adjustment programmes initiated by organisations like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.<sup>17</sup>

### **Changing Paradigms to industrial relations**

In the contemporary economic situation, the collectivist industrial relationship paradigm has given way to the individualistic human resource management paradigm. This shift has not only affected the labour movement and its responses to expansion in the informal economy but has also led to an increasing contractualisation of work. It is thus significant to explore the changing paradigms about the matter of industrial relations. In commonsensical terms, the term 'industrial relations' implies labour-management relations; labour and management are defined in the context of the law governing that relationship.<sup>18</sup>

"This law defines a set of norms that determines the nature of that relationship and prescribes the machinery through which any disputes on issues can be resolved."<sup>19</sup> Generally speaking, industrial relations are usually stormy in any country. India is no exception to this rule. Labour, being a concurrent subject, both the centre and state can legislate on it. Consequently, there are inter-state variations in industrial relations scenarios. These variations inevitably lead to industrial conflicts. There can be no industrial unit free from such matters relating to industrial conflicts. The state of affairs concerning industrial relations in DCM is one such example.

Based on this overview of labour historiography and industrial relation in contemporary India, this paper would like to discuss the case of Delhi Cloth Mills in the decade of the 1960s. The DCM presented a conspicuous model of recurrent industrial conflicts between labour and capital; industrial relation in DCM was marred by frequent strikes and industrial disharmony. The machinery provided by statute to settle industrial disputes became the most used system of resolving disputes in DCM. Disputes were rarely settled informally by meeting between representatives of labour and capital.

The system of consultation and arbitration as ways of resolving

industrial disputes failed to develop in DCM. There was a constant tussle of power between the most prominent union, the Communist-led Kapra Mazdoor Ekta Union and the DCM management. Industrial relations in DCM during 1950-1990 went through several ups and downs. Various ad-hoc measures and short and long-term agreements guided labour matters in DCM. The industrial relations in DCM, however, failed to stabilize and reached the brink of a breakup with the closure of mills.

By the late 1980s, these mills were becoming 'unprofitable' and the management decided to shut down the mills. The shifting/ closure of textile mills was becoming a common phenomenon worldwide by the late 1980s and 1990s according to the information bulletin of the International Labour Organisation. Under the Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act, such 'unprofitable' large business houses were allowed to sell the mill land to augment their financial resources for efficient working of other business ventures. Delhi Cloth Mills was not an isolated case, for these motivations were shared by the management of obsolete mills in congested urban centres in general. The closure of mills came as a hard blow to textile workers in Delhi. In this context, it is necessary to go back to the historical background of Delhi cloth mills. Delhi made a late debut on the industrial stage. During the colonial period, Delhi was not an important industrial centre. Its economic base was mainly as a trade centre.<sup>20</sup>

"The first Delhi *wallah* to dream of a cotton mill in his city was a man who had neither money nor knowledge of machines."<sup>21</sup> The textile industry was the oldest and one of the major manufacturing operations in Delhi. More than twenty thousand workers were employed in the four major textile mills of Delhi namely Delhi Cloth and General Mills Ltd., Swatantra Bharat Mills, Birla Mills and Ajudhya Mills. It constituted one-third of the total industrial workforce in Delhi. All mills were composite plants, privately owned, controlled by managing agencies and produced for competitive home and foreign markets.<sup>22</sup> In these textile mills, often there had been confrontations between labour and management which led to strikes and industrial disputes. To illustrate that not only strikes but also everyday forms of resistance played a major role in forging working-class solidarity, it is necessary to look at the state of affairs regarding industrial relations in the decade of 1960s.

#### **Widening Psychological Gulf in the 1960s**

The decade of 1960s witnessed the deterioration of industrial relations in DCM. By the early 1960s, the gulf between management and labour had widened to such an extent that the Implementation Committee had decided to maintain industrial peace at any cost.<sup>23</sup> The Union, however, alleged that the management did not adhere to this resolution. This provocative and anti-social attitude of the management has been reflected in the *Delhi Cloth Mill Patrika* dated 25<sup>th</sup> April 1961.<sup>24</sup>

It was pointed out by the union office-bearers that even Prime Minister Pt. Nehru had spoken highly of Cuba and its patriotic and fearless leader Fidel

Castro and had condemned the invasion of that country. The union argued that the Delhi Cloth Mill Patrika was full of foul comments on Cuba and other friendly nations. It also pointed out that the article created unrest among the workers. They resented the remarks made against Mr. Castro and his country and patriotic elements of other countries that were fighting for national liberation and economic independence.<sup>25</sup> It seemed that the management's critical stand on the struggle of workers of the world did not go down well with the Ekta Union.

The Union further argued that the management preached high morals of denouncing politics in industrial matters, but in reality, it indulged in these practices. Such self-directed efforts on the part of union and workers shows that everyday forms of resistance played a significant role in forging solidarity among them. In the same Patrika, there was a commentary on a drama "AajkeNeta" (Today's Leaders) which according to the union was against the interests of the working class."<sup>26</sup>

With such a militant and assertive tone, workers posed a challenge to the authorities, signifying their solidarity. Such writings imply the development of an awareness of their conditions and a will to change them. Workers were anxious to know how the world in and around is responding to their cause. These were signs of their aspirations for change. Such politically-charged writings not only worsened industrial relations but also widened the already present psychological gulf between workers and the authorities. By raising matters published in the Patrika, unions rushed to enhance their authority and began to establish closer linkages with mill workers.

It is significant, however, to note that the forging of this apparent solidarity was not only the result of stirring speeches of communist union leaders but also a product of deeper considerations and debates in tea shops of neighbourhood workers' residential quarters of DCM. The political consciousness workers among the lot used to read newspapers, which had a definite impact on their daily resistance against the authority. The Union also complained that the "aim of publishing this gazette was not to contribute to labour welfare, but to propagate the worst brand of politics at the expense of the mill revenues, earned out of hard labour of the workers."<sup>27</sup> Asha Ram, president of AITUC requested the Director of Labour and Industries to instruct the management to restrain from creating ill-feeling among workers by carrying on such objectionable writings.<sup>28</sup>

The role of communism as a political vision also captured the minds of workers and union leaders who believed in the imminence of change. However, the relationship between the two was no less complex. The former did play a dominant role in the world of workers but that did not mean that it was only a powerful institution to gain the faith of the workers. The workers too had their agency to place their demands and grievances.

Another important issue which strained the industrial relation was a violation of the Code of Discipline in which officers of the mills were openly vilified and their effigies were burnt; speeches were made to incite workers

against the management in general and individual officers in particular. Matters displayed on the news board of the union were equally potent enough to disrupt industrial peace in DCM. It was pointed out by the management that the news board of the Ekta Union contained false and derogatory statements against high functionaries of the management. The management pointed out that "our reading of the situation is that the whole trouble is because Ekta union is organized as an adjunct to and controlled by a political party and as such party interests dominate the scene."<sup>29</sup>

The matter which appeared on the news board of the union on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1961 showed that workers believed that their salvation does not lie in peaceful collaboration but in class war. The union complained that management seemed to assume that it has created '*ramrajya*' for the workers. But in reality, the policies and activities of the management were like '*ravanrajya*'. It was alleged that anti-labour policies of the management included "efforts to create feud in union, retrenchment, forceful retirement, partiality in giving workers quarters, trying to stop workers from becoming member of union, creating violence in meetings and peaceful demonstrations, transfer and temporary workers were badly treated, non-recognition to democratically elected workers' unions, trying to weaken union by falsely bringing union into legal battles, giving notice to vacate quarters to old residents, legal battles, wasting workers hard earned money in legal battles."<sup>30</sup>

By the late 1960s, disillusionment grew among workers because of various reasons like failure of the Workers' Participation Scheme, violation of the Code of Discipline, strife over voluntary arbitration, etc. The decade of the 1960s was a period in which industrial relation in DCM was also attuning themselves to the changing dynamics between the State, capital and labour. Thousands of workers from mills like DCM, Birla Cotton Mills, Ayudhia textile mills, and Swatantra Bharat mills had been agitating for the fulfilment of their demands. They protested against economic hardships and worsening working conditions.<sup>31</sup> This sense of uncertainty was all pervasive during this time as the economy was reeling through enormous pressure because of certain external factors as well.<sup>32</sup>

The Indian economy was in massive crisis in many respects by the mid-1960s. Monsoon failures of 1965 and 1966, fall in agricultural output and food grain output, rise in inflation in 1968, rise in food price, deterioration of the balance of payments situation, and rising dependence on foreign aid – forced the Indian planners to abandon long-term planning and three annual Plans (1966-69) were adopted. With the failure of the devaluation and liberalization of controls on trade and industry, the Indira Gandhi government launched a series of radical economic reforms in post -1967 period major private commercial banks were nationalized, the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices (MRTP) Act, restricting the activities of large business houses, was passed. These measures had devastating long-term effects on matters relating to industrial relations.



**Notes and References (Endnotes)**

1. S B Upadhyaya, "Indian Labour History: A Historiographic Survey" in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.) *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography* (Delhi: ICHR in association with Primus Books, 2011), p. 87
2. Term used by Samita Sen in the Introduction of the book titled, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, First Published 1999)
3. Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), p. 6
4. S B Upadhyaya, "Indian Labour History: A Historiographic Survey" in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.) *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography* (Delhi: ICHR in association with Primus Books, 2011), p. 100
5. Ibid
6. Ibid., p. 101
7. Ibid., p. 97
8. Sen, Samita, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India, op. cit.* p. 3
9. Marcel ven der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra(eds.) *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009), p. xi
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. xi
13. Ibid., p. xii
14. Ibid., p. ix
15. Ibid., p. x
16. Jonathan P Parry, Jan Breman and Karin Kapadia (eds) *Introduction, Conclusion to The Worlds of Industrial Labour* (New Delhi: Sage Publications 1999), p. vi
17. Arun Monappa, Ranjeet Nambudiri and Patturaja Selvaraj, *Industrial Relations and Labour Laws* (New Delhi: McGraw Hill Education, 2013)
18. Sujata Patel, *Introduction to The Making of Industrial Relations: The Ahmedabad Textile Industry 1918-1939* (Delhi: OUP, 1987)
19. Ibid
20. The role of Delhi Cloth and General Mills Limited, established in 1889 in placing Delhi on the industrial map of India is a story in itself. The port towns like Bombay, Ahmadabad, and Madras, however, had already created a niche for themselves as renowned textile producing centres in South Asia and beyond. It was after half a century of industrial growth of port towns that the industrial enterprising activities started in Delhi
21. By profession he was an accountant in a firm of bankers and owner of real estate. The man was Gopal Rai of Kotwal branch of Agarwals of Kucha Mai Das, in Chandini Chowk. He along with his employer Lala Chunnamal and a small group of entrepreneurs established textile mills in Delhi. On 26 March, 1889, the company was formally registered. "Delhi's first textile mill was named after the city, the Delhi Cloth and General Mills Company Limited." From the outset, DCM was established as a composite mill. By late 1920s, two new plants Delhi Cloth Mill No. 2 and No.3 were added to the old mill. As cited in Khushwant Singh and Arun Joshi, *Shri Ram: A Biography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1968), pp. 31-32

22. These mills had well-staffed 'Personnel and Industrial Relations' departments and Welfare Officers. The relationships between companies and their union existed within the framework of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 and the Code of Discipline. No company, however, formally recognized any union. As cited in K. N. Vaid, "Why Workers Join Unions," *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.1, No.1 (July, 1965):211.
23. File No. 10(60)1961/LAB, 13. Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
24. File No. 10(60)1961/LAB, 13. Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
25. These derogatory comments were made on Cuba and opinion expressed in the patrika appeared to be a version of imperialistic ruling circles of U.S.A. than of Indian national opinion. Further in the Patrika, under title "Aag Oogalte Jawalamukhi" (Fire-emitting Volcanoes) there were "anti-national" comments on Cuba, Laos, Congo and Sri Lanka. File No. 10(60)1961/LAB, 13-14. Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
26. The union pointed out that management's stand on labour issues through this drama was such that "this drama and comment on the same would make us believe that all those who fight for labour cause or stand for election etc under country's democratic set-up were hypocrites and low in character and social life." File No. 10 (60) 1961/LAB, 14. Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
27. File No. 10 (60) 1961/LAB, 14, Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
28. File No. 10 (60) 1961/LAB, 14, Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
29. File No. 10 (60) 1961/LAB, 14, Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
30. File No. 10 (60) 1961/LAB, 23 Delhi State Archives, New Delhi.
31. File No. 25 (15) 1964/LAB, 2, Delhi State Archives, New Delhi
32. File No. 25 (15) 1964/LAB, 2, Delhi State Archives, New Delhi