

Book Review-3

Nirban Basu, *Trade Union, Working Class Politics and Protest: Bengal: 1937-47*, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2019, ISBN- 978-81-8064-228-9, 400pp

In exploring the history of class struggle and the workers' movement in Bengal, there has been a predominant focus on the jute mill industry. Researcher such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Samita Sen, Amal Das, and Partha Dutta have explored its various dimensions in depth. However, this emphasis has often come at the cost of neglecting other important industries in Bengal, which have received comparatively limited focus. Significant studies such as Ranajit Dasgupta's "Oraon Labour Agitation: Duars in Jalpaiguri District, 1915-16" and Professor Nirban Basu's another work "Trade Unionism among Steel Workers of Bengal on the Eve of Independence (1945-47)" have provided valuable insights, yet these works are limited in number. In this context, the book discusses Bengal's key industries within a unified framework, making it a potential benchmark in the field. In this book, Professor Basu describes his methodology as "episodic." While addressing the struggles of the working class, he does not follow the "history from below" approach commonly adopted by earlier scholars. Instead, he attempts to analyse the subject through a "history from above" perspective. This approach will effectively offer readers a new viewpoint on understanding working class history.

The book contains nine chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. The second chapter of the book examines the political background of the study. The timeframe in discussion is 1937 to 1947—a period marked by substantial political breakthroughs in Indian history. This decade experienced a succession of significant events, including the provincial elections, the wartime crisis, the Quit India Movement, the turbulent period of 1945-46, and ultimately, the transfer of power. Between 1937 and 1947, the chapter vividly illustrates the conflict between the Congress and the Communists as both sought to increase their influence over the working class. It thoroughly explores the activities of both established and newly formed trade unions and labour associations during this politically volatile era. The next six chapters of the book focus on six major industries of Bengal: tea plantations, coal mines, iron and steel, cotton textiles, Calcutta tramways, and Calcutta port and dock. The Non-Cooperation Movement had little impact on the tea plantations of Darjeeling, Dooars, and Chittagong. Trade unionism only emerged in the mid-1940s. Communist influence, linkages to the Tebhaga movement, and opposition from non-communist groups such as the Gorkha League, Congress, and the Socialist Party impacted labour politics in these regions. Professor Basu argues that among the rest of the province; the coal mining areas were the most disorganised

in terms of workers activities. The workers were not much affected by either the Royists or the Communists. Though several strikes took place throughout the time, its primary objective was only wage increases, not concerns like safety or enhancement of living situations. However, a strong and organised trade union culture had developed in the nearby industrial belt of Kulti and Burnpur, especially within the Iron and Steel Company (IISCO). During this time, a number of strikes were the result of the interaction of outside provocation and the workers' growing frustration over a variety of concerns. These movements, although powerful and well-coordinated, were limited to industrial grievances and did not connect with the larger goals of the national struggle. On the other hand, worker movement in the cotton textile sector was significantly more spontaneous than in other industries. The industrial status in three regions—Greater Calcutta, Dacca, and Kusthia—has been looked into. Due to the predominant involvement of Bengali entrepreneurs in this industry, nationalists exhibited limited interest in it. The organization of the workers was primarily conducted by the communists. Professor Basu observed that the Calcutta Tramway workers' unions were arguably the most significant trade unions in Bengal. Major strikes were conducted in 1939, 1945, and 1947. A salient feature of this union was its capacity to align its efforts with broader political movements. Consequently, it attracted attention and support from a wide range of political parties, including both nationalists and communists. In the 1920s, Calcutta Port workers built a strong labour resistance, even though they had to work in hard conditions and were divided into different groups. In the 1940s, radical unions grew, and the 1947 strike was the peak of their power. This strike was a sign of unity between Hindus and Muslims during the Partition violence. Their fight against colonial exploitation showed how powerful worker unity can be in getting justice and changing the way things were done at work in Bengal.

The book boasts a comprehensive and extensive bibliography, which is one of its significant features. The book draws from a range of sources, including archival files and proceedings, reports from the Intelligence Bureau, annual reports from various trade unions, contemporary English and Bengali newspapers, and interviews, enhancing its informative and engaging nature. The author incorporates numerous secondary sources as well. Professor Basu takes a different approach that does not solely emphasize class consciousness and class struggle. Instead, he demonstrates how the workers' movements in one industry varied from those in another. The local economy, culture, transport systems, social conditions, and the mindset of the workers in each region shaped these differences. The book significantly enhances the study of New Labour History by presenting innovative concepts grounded in strong research and regional insights.

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