

Book Reviews

Vol. 57, Issue No. 26-27, 25 Jun, 2022

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A Genuine Effort to Chronicle the Mughalpura Workers' Movement

The last couple of decades had witnessed a renewed interest in labour history which has been marked by a range of writings on labour in South Asia. This resurgence in the writings about labour in South Asia, however, has been disproportionately focused towards studying the history of labour in post-partition India. In this renewal of labour history, writings on workers from Pakistan, in general, and Lahore, in particular, have received limited attention. In the nationalist historiography of Pakistan, which remained largely focused on the formation of Pakistan as a Muslim state, the history of Lahore and its diverse working population remained invisible. Ahmad Azhar's book, *Revolution in Reform: Trade-Unionism in Lahore, c 1920–70*, is an important attempt to address this neglect.

The book narrates the history of railway workers employed at Lahore's Mughalpura railway workshop from the early 1920s when labour emerged as a sociopolitical category up to the decade of the 1970s when the working-class movement faced isolation and subsequent decline.

Forging Plebeian Collectives

The monograph's inquiry of the politics of railway workers of Lahore begins with the end of World War I, which ushered in an era of unprecedented and sustained visibility of labour on the urban political scene. In this milieu, the railway workers of Mughalpura were not unaffected. The workshop witnessed a workers' strike in April 1920, where more than 15,000 workers not just struck work but for many weeks came out onto the city's civic arena and organised daily meetings outside the Mochi Gate. By examining the railway workers strike of April 1920, Chapter 1 closely examines J B Millar's (introduced as a charismatic working-class Irishman of Indian domicile who emerged as one of the most popular leaders of the workers) approach to forge a broad plebeian coalition, with railway workers at its centre,

that would bring together a diverse range of wage earners and organise them, cutting across the formal–informal sector divide.

In Chapters 1 and 2 of the book, Azhar probes into the unsettling interface between the emerging workers' movement and the larger narrative of nationalism. He demonstrates that the emerging sphere of plebeian politics did not evolve in isolation and overlapped with the contemporary anti-colonial movements, particularly Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movements.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Azhar clearly points out that Mughalpura workers and their chosen spokespersons, in the course of their interaction with the wider fields of nationalist politics, did not get consumed in the larger story of the struggle against colonialism and retained their autonomy vis-à-vis the Congress and other contending political currents. In these two chapters, Azhar outlines the emergence of a distinct “genuine trade unionism” at Mughalpura that not just remained at odds with the larger stories of anti-colonialism, nationalism, and socialism but increasingly carved out a distinct sphere of its own, marked by its ability to articulate the desire for constitutional, bureaucratised trade unionism by employing the radical rhetoric and symbols referring to repositories of radical working-class movement (p 43).

Moving away from the unity at a particular moment of the Mughalpura movement, Chapter 3 traces the concealed inner tensions ingrained in the regime of labour relations in the workshops. Azhar questions the nationalist discourse on the railways, which was overwhelmingly about race and stressed for Indianisation as a solution. In order to do so, he explores the overlapping worlds of the *mazdurs* (labourers), *mistries* (masons), and jobbers in the Mughalpura workshops by blending his rigorous archival research with Yashpal's semi-autobiographical novel, *Dada Comrade*. Claiming that the wide-ranging work-related changes at the workshop benefited “educated” Indians or *babus*, at the expense of the blue-collar workers, Azhar carefully laid out the conflicts between the Indian *babus* and *mazdurs* within the shop floor. This resentment at the shop floor was further visible in blue-collar workers' apprehension towards the nationalist demand for “Indianisation” (*swaraj*). Workers who saw the Congress as a party of the *babus* perceived Indianisation in the railways as just another term for strengthening hierarchies that benefited the white-collar *babus* but were detrimental to their career prospects.

With the recognition of “labour” as both a social and political category of analysis by the colonial state and mobilisation of labour by its critics during the interwar years, the contest to claim the exclusive rights to represent the labour sharpened. Azhar cautions us from overdrawing the boundaries of “reformist” and “revolutionary” to understand this contestation within workers’ politics. This contestation was evident in the Meerut Conspiracy Case trials (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5). Azhar’s work challenges the seemingly irreconcilable discourse in labour historiography as well as trade unionism over reformist and revolutionary with considerable detail by drawing on archival sources and combining it with written memoirs, oral interviews, and literary works. This conceptual binary of “reformist” and “communist” form of trade unionism was questioned by unpacking the political and ideological journey of two prominent labour leaders—Bashir Ahmad Bakhtiar and Mirza Ibrahim. By utilising the hitherto unused biographical and recorded interviews of these two trade unionists as source material, Azhar traces the overlaps between the two currents of trade unionism. By tracing the lives of Bakhtiar, who described himself as a “genuine trade unionist” as opposed to Ibrahim, who by the late 1940s emerged as a prominent communist leader in Pakistan (p 93), Azhar demonstrates that the idea of who was a “genuine” or “radical” trade unionist was contextual and temporally contingent as “reformist” trade unionism during the interwar period had often opted for radical modes of workers’ protest. Socialist rhetoric and symbolism in Bakhtiar’s account permeated the speech and unionisation efforts of the genuine trade unionists, even before the formation of the Communist Party, and was deployed outrightly during the interwar period.

Unrealised Alternative Possibilities

In the course of exploring the history of the Mughalpura railway workers, Azhar, in Chapter 6, focuses on the post-World War II turn of the Mughalpura movement. Stepping aside from the hegemonic narratives of intercommunity conflict and the formation of nation states, he recounts the historical significance of a railway workers’ strike that took place in 1946 at the Mughalpura workshop. The strike at this juncture not just challenged both the colonial government and the contending political parties but further exemplified a counter tendency to rising communalisation of popular politics. Azhar points out that the strike and labour mobilisation, in the late 1940s sheds light on the alternative possibilities that remained unrealised and forgotten even in our historical remembrance. The book

narrates Ibrahim's recollection of the strike as a moment with stories of "Hindus and Muslims burying the hatchet, soldiers refusing orders [...] and Sikh railwaymen acting first as railwaymen and second as Sikhs" (p 125). Despite being faction-ridden and encountering divergent approaches to labour in the Punjab Provincial wing of the Communist Party of India, the communists established their influence over the Mughalpura railway workers' movement in these years leading up to partition. Azhar suggests that the communist approach of establishing "labour schools" and the *mohalla* (neighbourhood) committees helped them to forge multiple points of engagement facilitating direct and everyday engagement with the workers outside the organised union structures. It further provided space for an engagement between Communist Party intellectuals and the workers. Even in the words of "reformist" trade unionist, Bakhtiar, the labour schools "created a political conscience amongst [the workers]" (p 141). However, the content of the lectures and the conversations that would have followed in these "labour schools" remains elusive to the reader. A discussion on the lectures and discussion that followed in these "study circles" would have helped to comprehend the interface between the Mughalpura workers' movement and the communists better.

This hegemony of the Communist Party over Mughalpura's workers, Azhar argues, was established at a moment of its own political isolation within the political spectrum. This relative isolation of the Mughalpura workers' movement combined with the railway workers' consistent resistance to the hegemonic claims of the Congress and the Muslim League, in the preceding decades and on the eve of the formation of independent nation states, produced possibilities of their exclusion from the visions of the nation, articulated by these nationalist parties. In the last chapter, weaved around the testimony of Ibrahim, Azhar chronicles the strategy of isolating workers' radicalism following the formation of Pakistan and how the Mughalpura workers responded to the attempts of the nascent Pakistani state to marginalise and repress them. Alarmed by the railway workers' rallying behind Ibrahim, barely a few months after partition, the Pakistani state, Azhar points out, took recourse to colonial-era emergency legislation to clamp down on the left-wing trade unionists. The book establishes that the allegiance to the Communist Party not only meant that the movement would be further isolated from the mainstream political currents but also invited the full brunt of the Pakistani state's coercive and ideological assault on the militant workers and leaders. This state repression and its experience, Azhar observes, differed vastly

depending on the social position of the subjects involved. He points out that this contrast was glaringly visible in the realm of law, where social hierarchies and barriers of the class could not be broken between working-class cadres and elite party members. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime, in Ibrahim's narrative, represented a crucial turning point for the radical trade unionism where a rift between the elite "political leftists" and the rank-and-file workers surfaced over the question of supporting the regime.

Azhar's book is an important contribution to South Asian labour historiography. This rich history of Lahore's railway workers spanning over half a century, which chronicles the rise and fall of labour as a political category, is a significant attempt to revisit the questions of working-class politics with new perspectives. This monograph is an essential reading for historians and other readers interested in understanding the working-class politics in Punjab and the social history of labour in South Asia more comprehensively.