This work under review emerged out of the author's Ph.D. thesis completed at the Cambridge University in the early 1990s. The publication of this volume is a very significant and valuable contribution to the historiography of Indian labour history. In fact it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that it is a pioneering work on the history of women labour in the jute industry in eastern India. There are published works on women labours in jute industry in eastern India but their focus is more on the contemporary period.

The author argues, rightly so, that the issues of gender have eluded most of the Indian labour historians. Perhaps the fact that the character of the industrial work force is predominantly male, and the numbers of women labours employed are small, are responsible for such exclusion from the works on Indian labour history. However the argument may not find favour with the author as the same trend is visible even in the studies of plantation labour in India where women workers were employed in far greater numbers. One reason for this, it is asserted, is that Indian labour historians have sustained their arguments about 'class' by narrowly focusing on 'organised' industrial workers. And since the majority of industrial workers were men and usually 'single' migrants, it has been assumed that 'working class women' have no specific relevance to 'class'. Then there is the notion of rural/urban connection of the Indian working class in most popular and academic parlance, which excludes women from any analyses of labour process. Rejecting these arguments the author asserts that the issue of gender is crucial to the very constitutions of labour process. She points out to the fact that the industrial working class was reproduced, generationally and socially, through the intensification of women's and children's labour in the rural economy. This was particularly so in the case of the jute mill workers who, from the turn of the twentieth century, were mostly single and upcountry migrant who had families back in their villages and with whom they maintained regular links. Hence the reproductive role of 'rural connection'. The question that needs to be asked is how and why the industrial working class became overwhelmingly male. The Bengal jute industry's increasing employs of male labour, the author argues, offers an interesting case of women's 'exclusion'. Given the 'smallness' of numbers of women labour employed in the jute industry and the generally assumed paucity of source material, taking up the study of the history of women in jute labour must be considered a courageous decision indeed.

One of the major themes which runs through the book repeatedly is the process of social and cultural marginalisation of women labour in the urban labour market as well as in the larger society in eastern India from the late nineteenth century onwards. Within the larger and extremely hierarchical world of Calcutta and its industrial suburbs dominated by jute mills, the status of women labour was pushed down to the lowest levels. Numerically small in numbers as compared to male labour employed in jute mills, their strength was further retrenched over the years. At the turn of the twentieth century women constituted about 20 per cent of the total work force which was reduced to 12 per cent by 1950. In the early years women were employed in a variety of jobs in different departments. When the industry expanded rapidly during the 1890s migrant men replaced these women in many departments and women were relegated to a few unskilled and low-paid jobs. Thus began a process of marginalisation at the work place. The jobs were segregated into hierarchies of skilled and unskilled suitable for men, respectively by the employers. This ideological construction of skill and suitability allowed men to lay exclusive claims on better-paid jobs in the mills. The low wages paid were often justified both by the employers as well as the colonial state as supplementary income for the family, being good enough for sustenance.

Women labours in the jute industry during the early years of industry came from local or surrounding areas. Many of these women were destitute—often widows and deserted wives forced to work for hire when they were deprived of familial resources. Many of these women working in jute mills, however, suffered disadvantages by the flux of migrant men who were now being increasing employed. They were invariably relegated to casual, intermittent and lowpaid employment, which came to be labeled as marginal and supplementary.

This study shows that many of the women who came to the city in search of livelihood were single and forced to migrate in order to escape social and familial harassment. Many came because of the loss of traditional independent occupations in the villages—spinning, husking and food processing—as these were taken over by the mills. This process of modernisation made women vulnerable and deprived of their status in rural economy. Many incidences of deprivation, like widowhood, desertions by husbands or casting off by families for a variety of reasons, were the major factors for their migration to the city. In the cities these women's employment as labours was concentrated mostly in the lower-paid end of the wage market.

During the periods of financial and production crises in the industry women labours' status was further marginalised. The burden of retrenchment and rationalisation during the 1930s fell more heavily on women as compared to the male labours. Some of the labour intensive jobs predominantly employing women labour became susceptible to mechanisation threatening their jobs more than those of men. A myth of women's inability to handle sophisticated mechanised jobs was invented. Faced by the increasing prospects of retrenchment, it is asserted, the male workers and the trade unions encouraged this myth. It is the author's contention that a variety of negative perceptions about gendering of work within the factory were shared by employers, male workers and the trade unions that they collaborated amongst themselves to replace women by men. The gender segregation of jobs on the shopfloor in turn adversely affected women's roles and position outside the mill gates, within the household and in the neighborhood.

Outside and within the workplace the process of the social marginalisation of women labour was further perpetuated through the use of the elitist ideological perspective of domesticity and motherhood. The author argues that the gendering of workforce affected social and cultural attitudes to women's work and negatively affected the status of urban women labour. The low skills, poor conditions of women's work combined with lower wages in turn affirmed the ideology of domesticity and childrearing and further devalued women's contribution towards family sustenance. The emphasis on domesticity and motherhood devalued women's role as earners. During the 1930s period of heavy retrenchment the employers found this emphasis on family and mothering very useful in delegitimising women's factory employment.

Within the social and cultural sphere the author shows that the decline in the practice of bride price, increase in the practice of dowry and increasing emphasis on purdah along with the seclusion from better paid jobs in the urban labour market perpetuated an ideology of women's inferiority to men within the working classes. In this context she argues that 'social' and economic status of women's work must be seen within the configuration of social and cultural perceptions of gender and the close correlation between work, status and purdah'.

Amongst the least written subjects in the Indian labour historiography is the sexual and marital history of the working class. Lack of source material is perceived as the constraining factor. In the volume under review the problem is sought to be circumvented by using the information generated by the elite discourse about the working class morality. A wide range of elite middle class men—doctors, journalists, novelists, mill owners, reformers, managers, government officials and trade unionists etc.—concerned themselves with what they perceived as morally subversive and irresponsible behaviour of working classes, both men and women, in and around the Calcutta jute mills. Their concerns were reflected in the proliferating discourses on deviant sexuality—prostitution, concubinage, ‘temporary’ marriages, extra-marital relations, divorce, desertion, adultery and polygamy—amongst the bhadralok in the working class areas, a kind of history of working class sexuality as told by the contemporary Calcutta bhadralok. In this proliferating discourses the women labours became symbols of infamy and depravation. Such perceptions by the middle class elite grew out of their current obsession with women's chastity and sexual purity.

The body of the book and the elite discourse and its perceptions completely ignored the fact of continuities of marriage practices among the low caste peasants, artisans and tribal communities who constituted most of the working class. Many of their
practices did not conform to the high-
caste middle class Hindu ideal of
womanhood. The relative freedom and
autonomy enjoyed by women among
some of the lower caste poor outraged
Indian and British moralists. The
upper caste brahmanical values and
the concerns about the control of
women’s sexuality were increasingly
being institutionalised under the
colonial legal framework. The middle
class values of marriage, notions of
harmousonic family under male
supremacy were considered ideals to
be followed by lower classes. Practices
not conforming to these norms were
considered illegitimate and deviant.

The final theme in the book deals
with the working class politics and
women’s role in it. The author argues
that even in the realm of politics,
women labourers and their role was
totally marginalised. They were
considered too small in numbers to be
of any significance in the Bengal
labour politics. The contemporary
trade unions as well as the historians
of industrial labour in Bengal shared
this perception. Descriptions of any
form of labour movement are generally
silent on women’s participation.
Women’s presence in demonstrations,
public meetings, strikes was subsumed
as part of ‘crowds’ or ‘mobs’. If and
when women did receive attention
their role was considered to be
negative. The trade unions accepted
the employers’ construction of the
image of women as ‘docile’ and
tractable and left out any of their
mobilisation. As a result women
were excluded from the records of trade
unions. From the relative absence of
women in the records the labour
historians, in turn, concluded that their
role was not relevant in the
working-class struggles.

Critical of these ‘silences’ the author
asserts that it is possible to reconstruct
women workers’ political role by a
careful scrutiny of the existing
recorded information on working class
political activities in Bengal. There are
references to women’s militancy and
violent acts during the strikes. Their
active participation in protest actions
earned them a special reputation for
militancy. In fact, it is argued, there
were very strong and enduring memories
of both strike militancy and strike
breaking. As far as the question of
women’s participation in the
organised trade unions is concerned
they remained mostly outside. Despite
their militancy prominently displayed
during the strikes they rarely registered
as members of the trade unions. The
unions in turn attempted to control
their impulsive acts of direct protests.

There are explanations for women’s
reputation as strike breakers. The
author shows that during the period
of labour unrest women often found
that their ascribed gender role—as
housewife and mother—conflicted
with their idealised solidaristic ‘class’
role. Hardships of economy due to
wage cuts, shortages or even total
depivation of daily essentials like
housing and water supply in the basti,
frequently resorted to by the employers
during the strikes, made it extremely
difficult for them to fulfill their roles as
mothers and housewives. Apart from
these distressing consequences of strikes
there were also instances of women
becoming direct targets of
managerial violence. Poverty, multiple
pregnancies, high child mortality,
strains of double work—in the mills
and in the households—were factors
which led to severe stress and
alienation of women from organised
trade unions and activities. Trade
unions in turn often showed
indifference to the specific interests
of women.

Some of the limitations in the book
may well be due to constraints
imposed by the nature of sources
available. For example, the distinction,
if any, between the single women and
women running households is not
reflected in any detail. Second, most of
the construction of social and cultural
life story of women labourers is on the
basis of how the middle-class elite
perceived them. The impression given
in the elite accounts is one of widely
prevalent practices of sexual
transgression and deviant behaviour
among jute mill labour women. What
is not clear to the reader is whether
this perceived sexual and moral
transgression was a widely practiced
phenomenon among working class
men and women or was it merely
a highly exaggerated account in the elite
discourse?

There is also an underlined
assumption of multiplicity of interests
between male employers, male trade
unionists and male workers which is
inherently in conflict with those of
women workers in the jute mills. Such
an assumption is problematic. While the
conflict with employers and alienation
from trade unionist is demonstrated
with reference to documentary evidence
the relationship between men
and women workers has remained
unexplored to assert such an
assumption

On the whole it is a very well
written and well-argued account of the
forgotten history of working class
women in the Calcutta jute industry
and a very valuable and welcome
contribution to the growing literature
which recognises the significance of
the role of gender in Indian history.

Rana P. Behal is Reader in History
in a College in Delhi.

Latest Books from the Institute

Directions in Indian Sociolinguistics
Ed. by R.S. Gupta

The book, the result of a national Research-cum-Study Week in October 1996 at
the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla under the aegis of the Inter-
University Centre, assesses the status of sociolinguistics and the sociology of
language in India.

It brings together selected papers presented by eminent Indian sociolinguists
focusing on literacy, translation studies, minority language education, language
use in the media and language and group-relations in a culturally and linguistically
plural society. The book sets up priorities for research that can give new thrust
and direction to Indian sociolinguistics, focusing on western (monolingual)
models and frameworks.


Bio-Social Dimensions of Ageing
ed. by Arun Bali

The demographic revolution enveloping the world has accentuated the
problems, especially in developing countries, of the aged. However, these problems
have largely been ignored by researchers in the country. This book, bringing
together contributions of distinguished scholars from social and medi cal. sciences, aims
at filling this gap. It analyses in depth and with sympathy the problems of older
persons in India. The book will be useful to sociologists, social geronomists,
geriatricians, psychiatric, biologists, planners, administrators, demographers, as
well as voluntary organisations involved with the care and welfare the older
persons.


Science and Tradition
ed. by A.K. Raina, B.P. Patnaik, Monima Chadda

This volume contains contributions by a wide spectrum of scholars—scientists,
philosophers, theorists of language, social scientists and others—and presents a
panorama of thoughts and opinions on science, tradition and their
inter-relations. The aim is to develop a bridge between the word out there (science)
and the world in her (tradition), the former built up of perpetual hypotheses and
the latter of perpetual facts. But then the hypotheses do change as do the facts:
creative science and creative tradition are both dynamites. Both have their respective
cosmogonies: in science major events occur in real-time, in tradition they usually
occur in the beginning or at the end. This closing millennium belongs to sciences,
shaped in no mean measure by traditions. It is necessary to understand their
interaction in order to comprehend the telos of the human enterprise. This
volume is an attempt in that direction.

The volume opens with a section on contemporary issues in modern science:
issues of truth, reality and objectivity. Clearly these issues interface with questions
tradition also raises and attempts to resolve. The next section looks at the Indian
tradition from a modernist perspective to assess the answers it gives to these
questions in the light of developments in scientific thought. The impact of all
this knowledge in terms of social power, history and pedagogy, on society and its
organisation is assessed in the final section of the volume. It is earnestly hoped
that this work will spur the debate further on these complex and fascinating
philosophical problems.


For trade enquires, write to
Public Relations Officer
Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla-171005
Fax: 0177-231389
email: pr@iias.res.in