

# **PRODUCING WORKERS**

**The Politics  
of Gender, Class,  
and Culture  
in the Calcutta  
Jute Mills**

**LEELA  
FERNANDES**

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The Politics of Gender, Class, and  
Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills

Leela Fernandes

**PENN**

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## Preface

This book is about the politics of categories, the political processes that produce our classifications of social and cultural identities, meanings, and practices. In recent years, the politicization of cultural identities such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and race have come to play a central role in shaping relations between nation-states and processes of state and nation building. Affiliations based on religion and ethnicity continue to interact with and contest secular identities of class and citizenship. Meanwhile, in both social movements and theoretical representations, there has been a growing recognition that universalistic categories such as “woman” and “worker” are contingent on multiple social locations, whether of ethnicity, class, race, or gender. Persistent issues of difference raise unsettling questions about the ways identities overlap and group interests are represented. Categories of action and analysis have thus become critical sites of political conflict and contestation.

My concern in this book is with the question of how we can conceptualize the intersections between such categories and identities. In this ethnographic study of working-class politics in the Calcutta jute mills, I argue that the boundaries of a particular category are produced in relation to other social categories or identities. I examine the ways boundaries between class, gender, and community are the products of political processes that unfold through institutional, discursive, and everyday social and cultural practices. Unions, managers, and workers attempt to preserve particular hegemonic representations of class, gender, and community even as such representations are interrupted by moments of contestation. I analyze this dialectic of hegemony and resistance in various sites, such as the labor market, the family, and community organizations.

Throughout this book, I move away from the “either/or” logic that has produced a series of oppositions—for instance, between class and community, capitalist and precapitalist, modern and traditional, and “East” and “West.” Such binaries have often obscured the dynamism of

working-class politics in India by continually measuring Indian workers against an idealized version of the actions of English or European workers. In this endeavor, my focus on the politics of gender plays a central role, since, as a long tradition of feminist research has shown, gender and women cannot easily be added to preexisting frameworks without unsettling their foundations. Thus, gender cannot be limited either to a “capitalist” or “precapitalist” terrain; meanwhile, the marginalization of women workers is a phenomenon that has crossed the borders between “East” and “West.”

In the analysis that follows, I draw on varied disciplinary approaches, presenting a contemporary social history of the Calcutta jute mills both through the *longue durée* of the period from the 1950s to the present and through an analysis of what Anthony Giddens has called the temporality of everyday experience (1981: 19). I employ methods of participant observation, and in my representation of this research I draw on recent anthropological work that analyzes the politics of fieldwork. Finally, I argue for an approach to the study of politics that not only specifies which variable can explain a particular form of collective action but also recognizes that politics is about the negotiations of power over the boundaries between categories. For, as we will see in this book, the production of such boundaries has political and material effects for different groups of workers and shapes and circumscribes the political participation of workers. The interdisciplinary approach I have used will no doubt deviate in some way from the standards of what counts as “history,” “ethnography,” or a “science of politics,” for it is often at the moment of transgression that we confront the materiality of boundaries, whether of categories or of disciplines. Nevertheless, I hope this book will contribute to the production of an analytical space that confronts the very real political implications of the categories we construct and deploy in both theory and everyday practice.

The research and writing that have gone into this project have benefited from the encouragement and critical feedback of a number of people. I began research for the book for my Ph.D. dissertation in political science at the University of Chicago. During this process, my dissertation committee, including Susanne Rudolph (chair), David Laitin, Lloyd Rudolph, and Bill Sewell provided tremendous intellectual support. The book has substantially benefited from their ability consistently to provide engaged feedback and guidance while allowing me to develop my own questions and arguments.

The fieldwork for the book, which I conducted in 1990–1991, could not have been completed without the generosity of many people. Piya Chatterjee shared her home and her family during my initial months in

Calcutta. Thanks also go to Blossom and Vijay Sampat for their hospitality during trips to Bombay. Mr. R. P. Chatterjee introduced me to the industry, shared his knowledge, and provided immense help. Mr. C. N. Chakrabarty, secretary general of the Indian Jute Mills Association, provided access to his organization's resources and source materials. In addition, thanks go to the following people for helping me with sources: Timir Basu, Gautam Bhadra, Rakahari Chatterji, Gautam and Manju Chattopadhyay, and Ranajit Das Gupta. Several leading trade union officials (who must remain anonymous) also helped with sources and shared their experiences and knowledge. Finally, my greatest debt is to the workers, union leaders, and managers at the jute mill that was my primary site of ethnographic research.

A MacArthur scholarship from the Council for Advanced Studies on Peace and International Cooperation at the University of Chicago enabled me to complete the first year of fieldwork in 1990–1991. The Committee on Southern Asian Studies at the University of Chicago provided funding for the second year of fieldwork as well as for a year of writing in Chicago.

After Chicago, the manuscript benefited from criticism and support from a number of people. Thanks in particular go to David Ludden for his early interest in the manuscript and the sharp questions that helped me rethink and reframe my arguments. His faith in this project helped me to gather the energy to keep working. I am delighted that the book is part of his new series.

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Seminar at the University of Pennsylvania and a workshop on labor history at the Department of History, Calcutta University (co-organized by Erasmus University).

A portion of Chapter 3 appeared in revised form as "Contesting Class: Gender, Community and the Politics of Labor in a Calcutta Jute Mill," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 26 (1994). Thanks go to editors Bill and Nancy Doub for permission to reprint the material. Thanks also to Mike Siegal in the Geography Department at Rutgers for preparing the illustrations for the book. Finally, I am grateful to my editor at the University of Pennsylvania Press, Patricia Smith, for her enthusiasm for and support of the book.

Throughout the exhausting process of revision, friends and family members provided personal support and necessary distractions. When I was exhausted, Susanne Rudolph's belief in this project at critical points kept me working. Ruthie Gilmore, Sanjay Gupta, Prema Kurien, Ellie Marks, Asha Rani, Brinda Rao, Amrita Shodhan, and Caridad Souza have provided personal support and fun times. Thanks go to my sister and brother-in-law, Pearl and Milbhor D'Silva, and to Karl, Natalie, and Christopher for spoiling me during numerous vacations in England. Finally, my parents, Herman and Enrica Fernandes, have always provided encouragement for my education and choices in life. This book is dedicated to their labor.

# Abbreviations

AITUC	All-India Trade Union Congress
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BCMS	Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Sangh (Bengal Jute Workers Union)
BMS	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (Indian Workers Union)
CITU	Center of Indian Trade Unions
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
ESI	Employees State Insurance
FB	Forward Bloc
FB(M)	Forward Bloc (Marxist)
HMS	Hind Mazdoor Sangh (Indian Workers Union)
IJMA	Indian Jute Mills Association
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
NUJW	National Union of Jute Workers
PF	Provident Fund
UTUC	United Trade Union Congress

*Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak.*

—Trinh T. Minh-ha

*The superstructures of civil society are like the trench systems of modern warfare.*

—Antonio Gramsci

*I think my problem and “our” problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meaning and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering and limited happiness.*

—Donna Haraway

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# Chapter 1

## **Introduction**

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On November 9, 1991, the workers of the weaving department of a jute mill in Calcutta participated in a wildcat strike to protest the suspension of four workers, including the general secretary of one of the leading trade unions in the factory. Management had suspended the workers in retaliation for a conflict between the workers and supervisors earlier that day. The conflict had begun as a quarrel between two workers on the shop floor. A weaver was waiting for his machine to be fixed by a mechanic. The mechanic did not arrive on time, and the weaver was angry at being unable to work; since his was a piece-rated occupation, the delay had resulted in a loss of wages for the weaver. When the *mistri* (mechanic) finally arrived, an argument started; the mechanic injured the weaver with his hammer, and in the ensuing fight the mechanic was also injured. At this point the general manager and personnel manager happened to be in the department, and they took the two to the dispensary. The general manager tried to resolve the conflict, and he made the two workers shake hands.

On the same day, the weaver, accompanied by three other workers from his caste group, went to the weaving department in the mill and confronted the assistant manager. The general secretary of the leading trade union, who was also present at the scene, was angry that the quarrel had been patched up by management without his consultation. At this point a large crowd had gathered, and the general manager tried to defuse the situation. In the midst of the argument, one of the four workers pushed the assistant manager, who fell against a machine. Management, in retaliation, gave orders that the four workers were not to be allowed inside the factory. Since two of the workers were temporary workers, their names were simply struck off the employment list. The other two workers were suspended from work.

In response, the general secretary of the union led a deputation of about fifteen or twenty workers to the labor office and told the labor officer that if management did not withdraw the charge sheets in twenty-

four hours, the union would take further action. Meanwhile, the union leader also filed a police report against the mechanic. Management wanted the mechanic to file a report, but he refused because he was receiving threats in the labor lines. The mechanic did not have access to adequate protection, since his caste group was much smaller and since in such cases police protection is usually insufficient. According to one labor officer, the mechanic was being hunted by the weaver's caste members and was therefore in hiding. At this point the union held firm, and speeches were given at a gate meeting. The first speech, delivered by the union's general secretary, was a direct attack on management for charge sheeting the workers. The leader argued that the management was persecuting workers who had worked in the mill for thirty years. He contended that the union did not want violence but that they would not accept injustice. He denied that there had been any assault on management during the conflict. On the following morning the leaders of the union walked into the weaving department and called for a wild-cat strike. Although the weavers struck for one hour, the leaders were unable to mobilize workers from other departments, and the strike unraveled without any effective challenge to management.

The narrative of the events leading up to the strike weaves together a complex configuration of interests and identities based on class and caste. On one level, the issues represent a clearly defined workplace conflict. According to some workers, the union leaders were angry because the management resolved the conflict without adequately addressing the mechanic's negligence. Workers and unions in the factory continually complain that their work is made difficult because machines are old and supervisors are lax in securing repairs. The incident also involved a conflict over the symbolic exercise of authority in the factory. Several workers and labor officers indicated that the union leader was angry because he was not consulted before the manager made the two workers shake hands. The fact that the manager made them shake hands represented a direct symbolic attack on the leader's position of power in the factory.

A second political strand in the conflict requires that we shift from the conventional boundaries of workplace conflicts to the internal identities and interests within the jute workers' communities. The weaver who was involved in the conflict was from the *goala* (buffalo herder) caste, which enjoyed a high degree of political power in the workers' communities. The two main unions had thus been involved in a competition to win the support of workers from the *goala* caste. The *goala* caste members had largely been under the leadership of one union, but a fraction of the caste had shifted allegiance to the union leader involved in the conflict. It was this fraction that had become involved in the conflict. If the gen-

eral secretary of the union was able to successfully defend the weaver and the three other workers, he would potentially increase his support of the caste members. The mechanic, however, was from the relatively weaker *lohar* (metal worker) caste. The incident points to the significance of caste allegiance in trade-union mobilization within the factory.

A third strand of conflict emerged in the subsequent union-management confrontation. One of the workers charge sheeted was the assistant secretary of the union in question. Given his prominent position, the union could not back down without significantly undermining its political position in the mill. Moreover, some managers privately admitted that they were trying to use the incident to undermine the union. One high-level manager went so far as to clearly state that they wanted to “break” the general secretary of the union. At this stage, the conflict took the form of a traditional class-based opposition between the union and management, one in which the union leaders were placed in a vulnerable position.

Viewed within the larger social milieu of the factory, the interplay between these strands becomes evident. Although the strike was contained within a single department (the weaving section of the mill), the entire factory became a stage for a fierce ideological battle to define the meaning and history of the conflict. On one level, this battle was carried out by management, the union, and workers not involved in the original conflict. While management engaged in the reconstruction of the conflict through notices posted in the factory, the union held gate meetings in which it denied allegations that members had assaulted the assistant manager. Several versions of the events spread through the mill. During the brief course of the conflict, the ideological contest far surpassed the specific characteristics of the conflict. The strike’s leader became a symbol of a standard of justice and equality that workers were denied within the factory. The strike itself, meanwhile, became a symbol of protest against what workers termed the management’s *jungli raj* (uncivilized kingdom).

The incident reveals the manner in which worker resistance, such as a strike, may arise out of conflicts and social hierarchies between groups of workers. In this case the caste allegiance of the weaver shaped the union’s participation and occurred at the expense of the mechanic. However, once the conflict involved a union-management confrontation, it acquired a different meaning for the participants and the workers in general. The wildcat strike rested on a link between the workers’ caste positions and union mobilization. However, the meaning of the strike was not limited to this caste relationship. To many workers not involved in the initial conflict, the strike represented a challenge to an unfair system of authority, that is, within the capitalist system in the factory.

#### 4 Chapter 1

In short, there was continual slippage between the politics of caste and class through this sequence of events.

This case, in which a dispute among workers was transformed into a confrontation between unions and managers, is an example of an important category of conflicts that take place in the jute mills. A particular group or community of workers may bring to management a grievance against another worker. If management does not take action, the community may then mobilize in protest. For example, in one case a woman worker was sexually assaulted by another worker in the factory. The woman worker's community leaders brought the grievance to management and demanded that the male worker in question be fired: the assault represented an attack on the *izzat* (honor) of the woman and her community. Management, under pressure from this community of workers, fired the male worker. The worker's union then organized a wildcat strike. The strike was unsuccessful, and the worker was not reinstated.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the final outcome of the strike, the central point for our purposes is that in this context a gendered conflict based on cultural meanings of honor<sup>2</sup> was transformed into a union-management confrontation.

Such incidents of labor conflicts in the Calcutta jute mills bring to the fore the issue of overlapping and conflicting identities. How do we explain the meaning of such cases? One possible and often used explanation is that the case reflects the persistence of primordial, precapitalist relations in a largely "traditional" society. A second explanation is that affiliations of caste serve as resources that are used and manipulated by workers, unions, and managers. Both explanations rest on an assumption that there exist pre-given boundaries between social categories such as caste, class, and gender. The central questions in this context ask which categories are central at particular historical moments and in specific political contexts and how they interact with each other.

I focus here on a third interpretation of overlapping identities, one that analyzes the ways boundaries between social categories and identities are constructed. As Stuart Hall has suggested, social categories are not natural, transhistorical entities but are created and marked by the production of "political, symbolic and positional boundaries" (Hall, 1992a: 30). In the case I narrated earlier, for example, unions produced a form of working-class politics that was constructed through caste politics. The boundaries of class interests thus became contingent on caste hierarchies through a specifically political process that involved the participation of workers, unions, and managers in the factory. The wildcat strike represented the culmination of a political struggle in which unions were contributing to the creation of a class identity that was marked by a particular form of caste hierarchy. My argument is, first,

that such cases of social and political conflict in the factory can be understood in terms of a process through which the boundaries between categories are created and contested through a set of political processes; and, second, that the boundaries of a particular category are both constructed through and challenged by other social identities.<sup>3</sup> For example, in the case of the conflict arising out of the assault on the woman worker, class is constructed through the politics of gender and community. Politics in this context is not merely about mobilization around particular predefined identities but involves continual contests of power over the relationship between such identities. The “purity” or distinctiveness of a category or identity, then, is not a given but an effect of power, where, as Stuart Hall has put it, particular social actors attempt to “police the boundaries” (1992a: 30) of the category; in this process such “purity” usually signifies a particular hegemonic representation of the relationship between the category in question (for instance, class) and other forms of difference (for instance, gender or caste).

My argument builds on research concerning the significance of the intersections between identities such as gender, race, and class (Sacks, 1990). In the field of feminist studies, for example, recent research has deconstructed the transhistorical, universalistic conception of “woman” as an “always already constituted category” (Butler, 1990; Mohanty, 1991) and demonstrated that explanations of women’s practices and attitudes must be contextualized in relation to differences based on race, class, and national origin. Feminist scholars have argued that the limited participation of African-American women in the mainstream American women’s movement is a consequence of the movement’s focus on narrow definitions of gender oppression which do not address differences of race and class (Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1984). The point is not just that black and white women may have different interests but that a movement that focuses solely on gender oppression may in fact be transforming “woman” into an exclusionary racialized category; gender in this context becomes defined through the boundaries of race. As Jacquelyn Hall has argued, the mobilization of African-American women in feminist campaigns against rape depends on the ability of women’s organizations to confront the historical phenomenon of lynching, the corresponding (mis)construction of African-American men as rapists, and the use of an ideology of the protection of white women in order to justify the lynching of black men (Hall, 1983). An analysis of African-American women’s participation in the women’s movement requires a shift from a focus on the level of gender consciousness of African-American women to an understanding of the complex historical relationship between race and gender in the United States. An understanding of the construction of gender through historical and social conceptions of race thus pro-

duces a new understanding of political participation in the American women's movement.<sup>4</sup>

Such theoretical developments have opened up the space for analyzing specific political outcomes as products of intersections between class, gender, and community or "interlocking systems of oppression" (Collins, 1990). What is at stake here is the longstanding notion that there are discrete boundaries that can demarcate categories such as gender, class, ethnicity or, at a broader level, realms such as culture, politics, and economy. The question at hand is how to further a conceptualization of such forms of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1992: 404) and move beyond an "interaction" or "interplay" between discrete identities, terms that continue to suggest static distinctions between categories of social analysis.<sup>5</sup>

A study of the contemporary history of the Calcutta jute workers reveals that the political boundaries that delineate relationships between gender, community, and class are constructed and reproduced through the production of such spheres as the labor market, the working-class family, and community organizations. These boundaries are the product of hegemonic practices and discourses that build on and reproduce distinctions and hierarchies among workers. The labor market, a sphere often associated with the politics of class, is constructed through conceptions and hierarchies of gender and community. Meanwhile, particular models of the working-class family are created and enforced by practices and discourses shared by managers, trade unions, and workers' community organizations and do not exist as transhistorical signifiers of patriarchy and gender oppression. In this situation, contemporary labor politics is not merely the product of the links or interplay between the distinct spheres of work and family, class and community, or capitalism and patriarchy. Rather, the definition of the lines that demarcate each sphere involves continual negotiations of power through institutional, discursive, and everyday social practices (Acker, 1988; Mies, 1986; Glenn, 1992).

Exclusionary representations of class, gender, and community, which produce hierarchies between particular groups of workers, in effect signify the "trench systems of modern warfare" (Gramsci, 1971: 235) that preserve relations of domination and subordination. I suggest that hegemony is in fact centrally about the ways in which we produce boundaries between social identities within various arenas in civil society. For instance, when trade unions in India construct the boundaries of class identity and politics through gender hierarchies, they are transformed into a site for the reproduction of a particular structure of gender oppression. Or, to return to the example of rape and racial violence in the United States, when women's organizations or media representations of