

CHAPTER VI

Employment Scenario and Industrial Relation

The modern jute industry emerged as the single-most important field of employment in contemporary Bengal. If we take into account the case of Calcutta, the industrial hub of Bengal, we find that in 1911 there were about 50 jute mills and 109 jute presses where the levels of employment were 200,446 and 13,842 respectively. In contrast, there were 18 cotton mills, 33 machinery and engineering works, 161 brick and tile factories and 103 printing presses, which gave employment to 11,752 persons, 11,714 persons, 22,019 persons and 12,171 persons, respectively. Thus, of the aggregate factory employments of 271,944 in 1911, the modern jute industry (mills and presses together) accounted for 78.79 per cent. The figure would have been much greater than this if we take into account the tertiary activities that were developed as forward and backward linkage effects of the industry. In view of such an importance of the industry, however, this chapter analyses its employment opportunities from various viewpoints. While Section I discusses the growth of its employment generation and its composition, Section II elaborates its wage structure and various social amenities that were provided to the workers. Section III provides an analysis of the industrial unrests at jute mills during the study period. Section VI draws conclusion to the employment and industrial relation.

I

Higher incidences of employment opportunities in Bengal's jute industry may be explained by two factors. First, as we have already discussed, thanks to the decline of Bengal's traditional jute industry, a large band of workers, quite conversant with the culture of jute, became unemployed, and were available to the emerging modern industry at low wages. There was, therefore, a tendency among jute mills to opt for more labour intensity in production. Available sources indicate that Bengal mills employed 6-7 persons per loom as against two persons per loom at Dundee¹. Secondly, the modern jute technology was relatively more labour-intensive than most of the contemporary modern industries. Raw fibres that came from jute presses were first inspected and classified², involving a very labour intensive process as those were done manually by persons having knowledge about the requirements for hessian and sacking materials, and also about the strength, fineness and colour of the fibres. These apart, there were six stages in the jute technology, viz. batching, preparing, spinning, winding, weaving and finishing³. Batching involved the softening of raw fibres by applying a proper mixture of water and oil, which might be done manually or mechanically. In the former case, labour requirements were surely larger. In the preparing stage also, a good number of workers were employed as it involved carding (i.e. teasing and combing on a carding machine), drawing and roving (to bring them to requisite sizes and to make them straight). These were done on a

¹ Wallace, Romance of jute, p. 62

² Report on jute, p. 192

³ Acharya, Jute mill management, p. 143

series of machines necessitating workers at each end. Fibres then came to the spinning branch where they were spun on machines into various qualities of yarn depending on their uses for hessian and sacking purposes. Winding was, however, done on two types of machines – one for wrap yarns and the other for weft yarns – to despatch for weaving where also mechanical force was employed. Although done mechanically, skilled manpower was essential for spinning, winding and weaving. Finally, cloths were sent to the finishing department, which involved no less than seven stages – such as cropping (to remove projecting fibres from the surface of the cloth), damping (to add moisture on the fibres), calendaring (to press those fibres), mangling (to generate a soft-touch on the wrap), lapping or folding (for the purpose of packing), cutting and sewing (for the purpose of making bags), and packing and bailing. Since automation lacked in contemporary machines designs, a large number of workers were required to run them, and also to bring the products from one machine to another.

Workers, however, worked under an overall supervision of a manager who in addition looked after the quality of product and the maintenance of buildings and machinery. One or more assistant managers worked under him depending on the scale of production. In the case of larger mills, one assistant manager looked after the production side while another manager was entrusted with the maintenance of machinery. Technical jobs were carried out under the supervision of an engineer. He was responsible for maintenance of engines, boiler plant,

electrical equipments, pump houses, water supply and workshops, in addition to keeping up buildings including workers' accommodation, and the maintenance of internal roads. In the office, however, a few clerical staffs were deployed in charge of various sections, such as the procurement of raw jute, the despatch of finished products, storage, payment of wages etc.

Unskilled hands were employed in the industry mainly as porters for loading and unloading purposes, as also for carrying semi-finished fibres from one machine to another. The industry's requirements of skilled workers were, however, met through on-the-job training. Such training spanned variously – such as one week for both shifters and porters, but about one year for weaver⁴. Spinners were generally recruited from people working as shifter at least for about a year. While male workers were preferred in weaving where higher skill was imperative, both male and female workers, as also the children, were recruited in spinning and winding⁵. Children aging between 9-14 years were deployed as shifter⁶ while the finishing and sewing departments employed both male and female workers.

Before coming to jute mills jute fibres from agriculture were processed at jute presses. There were basically two stages in this process, assorting and bailing. The assorting team consisted of one inspector (locally called *jachander*), 2-3 cutters and one leader (called *sardar*),

⁴ Foley, Report on labour, p. x

⁵ Administrative report in Bengal, (1872-73), p.226

⁶ Foley, Report on labour, p. x

working under the common supervision of the bale-supervisor or the manager⁷. The activities in this department involved: a) thorough inspection of fibres so as to separate them in different bundles according to quality, and b) cutting out the hard portions of the root, and also the cleansing of small bark particles from the fibre by beating⁸. In the baling department, the labour intensity was high when processing was carried out manually, but it was reduced to a good extent when hydraulic baling machines (either the grid press or the cyclone press) were used.

Jute pressing required two types of skilled workers, viz. assorters and packers⁹. Assorters should have good knowledge and experience about the quality of fibres, and also about cutting and hackling those fibres. The packers should have familiarity about the packaging of jute bails. The only unskilled workers were the export collies (commonly known as *sangrias*), who brought loose jutes, carried bale of jute from the press to export godown, and loaded them into trolley for shipping. They worked in a team consisting of two or three persons.

The employment scenario in jute mills had been very promising during the study period. Table 6.1 shows that from 38,800 during 1879-84, the average daily employment in such mills grew up to 52,700 during 1884-9, 111,272 in 1900-01, and further to 236,294 in 1914-15. Thus, compared to the base of 1879-84, the employment level rose by about 350 per cent at the close of our study period. Although the growth rate in

⁷ Report on jute. p.192

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*, p.196

the series appears quite volatile, it is not so in the five-yearly series. The averages of yearly growth rates are worked out at 4.5-6.5 per cent in 1890-4, 1895-99 and 1900-04, and then it picked up to 24.16 per cent in 1905-09, and moderated at 3.54 per cent in 1910-14. The study period thus ended up generating extensive employment in Bengal.

Table 6.1: The growth of employment in Bengal jute mill

Year	Average daily employment	Rate of growth (in %)	Year	Average daily employment	Rate of growth (in %)
1879-4	38,800	-	1901-02	114,795	3.17
1884-9	52,700	35.82	1902-03	118,904	3.58
1889-90	60,630	15.05	1903-04	123,896	4.20
1890-1	62,739	3.48	1904-05	133,162	7.48
1891-2	66,333	5.73	1905-06	144,879	8.80
1892-3	67,291	1.44	1906-07	165,692	14.37
1893-4	69,179	2.81	1907-08	187,771	13.33
1894-5	75,157	8.64	1908-09	203,730	8.50
1895-6	78,889	4.97	1909-10	202,258	-0.72
1896-7	91,389	15.85	1910-11	210,547	4.10
1897-8	95,930	4.97	1911-12	230,039	9.26
1898-9	94,540	-1.45	1912-13	199,725	-13.18
1899-00	101,630	7.50	1913-14	216,377	8.34
1900-01	111,272	9.49	1914-15	236,294	9.20

Source: a) For 1879-05 are from Statistical Abstract for British India, various years b) For 1905-14 from Annual Reports of the I.J.M.A, various years and Government Administrative Report, various years.

From the Foley's report on labour in 1905 we get an idea about the employment opportunities in individual jute mills in this province. Among 29 jute mills under namely (Table 6.2) the lowest level of employment is found at 2,306 for the Anglo-India Jute Mill No. I, whereas the Budge Budge Jute Mill appears as the largest employer giving jobs to 7,003 workers daily. The employment strength is found to be greater than 5,000 in as many as 10 mills - such as the Fort Gloster, Budge-Budge, Gouripur, Howrah, Baranagar, Hastings, Kankinara, Shamnagar, Kamarhati, and Titaghar Jute Mill. These surely vouched for high labour intensity in contemporary jute mills.

Table 6.2: Employment opportunities in different jute mills in Bengal in 1905

Name of the mill	Persons employed	Name of the mill	Persons employed
Clive	3,200	Kankinara	7,513
Anglo-India No. I	2,306	Central	4,000 to 5,000
Anglo-India No II	3,600	Union	3,050
Champdany	2,800	Arathoon	More than 4,000
Dalhousi	2,500	Lower Hoogly	3,500
Fort Gloster	5,296	Shibbpur	3,733
Budge Budge	7,003	Khurdah	4,500
Gouripur	8,000	Standard	4,000
Howrah	6,000	Shamnagar	6,420
Ganges	3,762	Alexandra	3,000
Baranagar	7,000	Kamarhati	5,000-6,000
Hastings	6,000	Titaghar	5,861
Victoria	4,829		

Source: Prepared on the basis of data in Foley, Report on labour, pp. vi-ix, xxii-xxviii

Employment structure in jute mills was, however, largely dominated by male workers. Available sources reveal that at the outset of the twentieth century, the proportion of adult male was as high as 78 percent and that of adult female was 22 percent. The child labour constituted of 12 percent of aggregated workers¹⁰. These compositions certainly varied across the mills. Table 6.3 gives insight in this respect for seven contemporary mills. It is interesting to note that the proportion of child labour was greater than that of female workers at Budge Budge and Kankinara Jute Mills. Possibly lower wage rates for children induced the mills to employ a larger percentage of such labour. Taking all these mills together, however, the proportion of child labour is seen to have been slightly lower than that of female worker. It was 12.85 per cent for the former and 14.68 per cent for the latter.

¹⁰ Foley, Report on labour, p. x

Table 6.3: Composition of workers in Bengal jute mill

Name of the mill	Male	Female	Children (below 14 years)	Total
Fort Gloster	5,200 (87.79)	408 (6.89)	315 (5.32)	5,923
Budge Budge	5,320 (86.01)	550 (8.89)	1,138 (18.40)	7,008
Howrah	4,032 (67.20)	1,229 (20.48)	739 (12.32)	6,000
Kankinara	5,161 (68.69)	985 (13.11)	1,367 (18.20)	7,513
Victoria	3,296 (68.25)	991 (20.52)	542 (11.23)	4,829
Shamnagar	4,542 (70.75)	1,190 (18.54)	688 (10.71)	6,420
Titaghar	4,011 (68.44)	1,040 (17.74)	810 (13.82)	5,861
Total	31562 (72.47)	6393 (14.68)	5599 (12.85)	43,554

Source: Prepared on the basis of data available in Foley, Report on labour, pp. viii-xxvi
N.B. Bracket terms represent the percentage of the total.

The industry's gender composition of workers at Calcutta was largely different from that at Dundee. At the latter location it was dominated by female workers, for which it was often nicknamed as 'the women industry'¹¹. Table 6.4 brings out the gender composition of Dundee jute mills, and also the incidences of child labour in the industry. The latter is seen to have grown from 3.40 per cent of total labour force in 1870 to 10.37 per cent in 1885, but reduced to 6.58 per cent in 1890. The employment level of such labour was, however, greater in Bengal jute mills, which was on average 12.85 per cent (vide Table 6.3).

Table 6.4: Gender composition of workers at Dundee jute mills

Year	Child labour (below 13 years)			Adult labour (above 13 years)			Aggregate		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1870	151 (25.25)	447 (74.75)	598 (3.40)	4,221 (24.87)	12,751 (75.13)	16,972 (96.60)	4,372 (24.88)	13,198 (75.12)	17,570
1874	1,418 (43.06)	1,875 (56.94)	3,293 (8.68)	10,114 (29.19)	24,531 (70.81)	34,645 (91.32)	11,532 (30.40)	26,406 (69.60)	37,938
1878	1,542 (43.78)	1,980 (56.22)	3,522 (9.69)	9,032 (27.51)	23,800 (72.49)	32,832 (90.31)	10,574 (29.09)	25,780 (70.91)	36,354
1885	2,000 (46.29)	2,321 (53.71)	4,321 (10.37)	10,950 (29.31)	26,403 (70.69)	37,353 (89.63)	12,950 (31.07)	28,724 (68.93)	41,674

¹¹ Gordon, Women, work and collective Action, p. 29.

1890	1,483 (50.31)	1,465 (49.69)	2,948 (6.58)	12,925 (30.88)	28,937 (69.12)	41,862 (93.42)	14,408 (32.15)	30,402 (67.85)	44,810
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Source: Parliamentary paper H.C 1896, Vol.-90, pp.202-03

N.B. a) Bracket terms under the columns Male and Female in Child and Adult Labour represent the percentages of Total in the columns of Child and Adult Labour respectively,

b) Bracket terms under the column Total in Child and Adult Labour represent the respective percentages of the Aggregate column.

The proportion of female labour was thus greater than that of male labour both among the child and adult workers. In 1870, their proportions were 74.75 per cent and 75.13 per cent respectively. This ratio, however, reduced in both categories over the years. In the child category, the male workers became slightly ahead of the females in 1890 with their percentage at 50.30 as against 49.70 per cent for female workers. However, in spite of its decline over the years, the percentage of female workers in the adult group remained at 69.12 as against 30.88 per cent for male workers. A comparison between Dundee and Bengal jute mills, however, shows the incidence of female workers was 69.12 per cent in the former but only 14.68 per cent in the latter.

We have adumbrated above that the decline of Bengal's traditional jute industry provided the initial supply of labour to the emerging jute mills. In fact, in 1885, the majority of jute workers were of local origin¹². But the rapid growth of the industry that we have seen to have taken place from the early 1890s severely multiplied the demand for labour. At the same time, the industry sought to obtain workers at low rates of wage for the sake of sustaining global competition. In such circumstances, the domestic labour market in Bengal could not cater to

¹² Foley, Report on labour, p.14

the growing demand of the industry. Large-scale labour immigration became therefore a routine for the industry whereby workers hailed from the far-away places like Moghyr, Patna, Arrah, Chapra, Gazipur, Mirzapur, Cuttack and Orissa¹³. Indeed, the rapid development of railway network connecting Calcutta with those places during the second half of the nineteenth century facilitated the process of migration. It was also facilitated by the fact that the industry required only a low level of skill, which could be ensured through a little amount of training. There was, however, no systematic recruiting agency on the mills' behalf¹⁴. Workers came on their own either on the basis of inspiring information from the people of their respective places of origin or under the inspiration from labour leaders (known as *sardar*). Some authors, however, identified certain push factors in the neighbouring states that fuelled the process of labour migration to jute mills in Bengal. According to that school of thought, political instabilities, social repressions and very limited job opportunities in those areas acted as the relevant push factors¹⁵. The jute mills' pull forces are believed to be of lesser importance because, in that case, the mills could have attracted workers from within the province.

The rapidity of the event is, however, learnt from the fact that while there was an insignificant proportion of migrant people among jute workers before 1885, an inquiry report by a deputy police commissioner reveals that in 1895, there were as many as 35,000-40,000 migrant people in the band of 70,000 strong workforces in the modern jute

¹³ Ibid, p.vii

¹⁴ ibid, p.9

¹⁵ Hann, Migrant labourers in Eastern India, p.163

industry¹⁶. Thus, within a span of a decade, the migratory labour constituted more than 50 per cent of total workers. Indeed, that was a period of steady growth for the industry. The rapid stride of migration continued thereafter. In a survey among twenty-five jute mills in Bengal, Foley found that two-third workers in most of the mills under survey comprised of migrated people in 1905¹⁷. Only in the three mills - the Champdany Jute Mill, the Fort Gloster Jute Mill, and the India Jute Mill - local Bengali workers dominated¹⁸. In the India Jute Mill, two-third workers came from Srerampore, a nearby place, while others included mainly the workers from Orissa¹⁹. The migratory workers in the Fort Gloster Mill included about 1,000 persons from Orissa, 500 persons from the up-country, and another 500 from Bilaspur. In the Champdany Jute Mill also, a few workers hailed from the places like Chapra, Patna and Orissa.²⁰

There was, however, a division of workers in the religious line. A contemporary survey reported that about 68 per cent of jute workers in Calcutta were Hindu and the rest 32 per cent were Muhammadan²¹. Hessian weavers in many mills hailed mainly from the up-country places having faith in the Muslim religion while Bengalis, especially the Hindus, wove the sacking cloth²². It transpired from the contemporary reports that up-country Mohammedans were much stronger, steadier and regular in work, and also more careful in finer tasks. The workers from Orissa,

¹⁶ Cited in the Report of the labour enquiry committee(Calcutta,1896), para 10 as referred by Dipesh Chakroborty in Communal riots and labour, p.141

¹⁷ Foley, Report on labour, p.14

¹⁸ Ibid, p. viii

¹⁹ Ibid, p. xxiv

²⁰ Ibid, p. viii

²¹ Ibid, p. x

²² Ibid, p.14

however, worked generally as weavers but were never found in the spinning division²³. The industry also employed some Telugu workers from the Ganjam district of South Orissa and Bilaspuri workers from Central Province. A few Chinese people were also employed as carpenters in some mills²⁴. Indeed, the top positions in the industry- such as manager, assistant manager, overseer etc.- were earmarked for Europeans.

There was, however, an interesting distinction between the pattern of migration from North India and South India. Generally, workers came from North India, especially from North Bihar, Orissa and U.P, leaving their families at their respective home villages. They usually went back to their villages during the harvesting period spanning for 3-4 months during April-June. But the Telegu speaking workers from Andhra Pradesh, migrants from the Ganjam district of South Orissa, and also the Bilaspuri from Central Province came with their families. Though settled permanently around the factory locations during the service period, they maintained relations with the relatives in ancestral villages and usually returned back after retirement to their respective places of origin.

Substantial job opportunities for the migrant workers were also created in jute presses. Total employment in this branch of the industry was enumerated at 13,729 in 1901, which increased slightly to 13,842 in 1911. The Census of 1901, however, revealed that out of its total employment in that year, there were 1,344 persons belonging to the category of owner, manager and

²³ Ibid, p.14

²⁴ Ibid, p. ix

supervisor while operatives and other subordinates stood at 12,385²⁵. Religion-wise enumeration in that census showed a slightly higher proportion of Muslim population in this job, namely 7,113 as against 6,344 people of the Hindu faith and 249 people of the Christian faith (excluding a minor proportion of people of other faiths). The Census of 1911 gave a detailed account of employment structure in Bengal's jute presses (vide Table 6.5). The table shows that, as in jute mills, the male workers largely dominated the employment structure in jute presses also. The ratio of female and male workers was found at 1: 8.75 in 1911. But, in contrast to what we have found in the case of jute mills, the jute presses employed a much higher proportion of unskilled workers. As against the employment of 2,458 skilled workers, 10,349 unskilled workers were employed in the job²⁶. Their further distinction from jute mills was that they employed a lower proportion of child labour. While its proportion was above 12 per cent in jute mills, it was only 1.60 per cent in jute presses in 1911. But the most important distinction was that jute presses dispersed over a wider region so that was generated employment across the province. Table 6.5 shows that much of the employment was certainly created in and around Calcutta, which accounted for more than 56 per cent of the aggregate employment. Outside the Calcutta agglomerate, the industry created jobs for 3,468 in Dacca, 1,640 in Pubna, 324 in Cooch Behar, 185 in Mymensing, 171 in Tripura, 139 in Nadia and 104 in Faridpur. The employment level was, however, insignificant in Jalpaiguri and Malda, at 35 and 20 respectively²⁷.

²⁵ Census of India 1901, Vol.-VI(A), part-II, table xv, p.318

²⁶ Census of India, 1911, Vol.-V, part-II, table-XV-E-XV-V, p.342-343

²⁷ In 1891, Census of India showed that the total employment of jute manufacturers, managers and agents in Burdwan, Presidency, Dacca and Rajsahi division were 16,997, 13,631, 5,029, and 989 respectively. Vol.-IV, Table-XVII-B.

Table 6.5: Employment structure in Bengal jute presses in 1911

District	Total number of worker		Director, Supervision & Clerical		Skilled worker			Unskilled worker			
	M *	F*	European & Anglo-Indian (M)	Indian (M)	European & Anglo-Indian (M)	Indian		Above 14 years		Below 14 years	
						M	F	M	F	M	F
Howrah	1,570	114	4	48		269		1,249	114		
24 Parganas	4,951	420	26	292		965		3,656	397	12	23
Calcutta	658	51	3	4	1	89	35	559	16	2	
Nadia	133		1	11				119		2	
Jalpaiguri	35			11		1		20		3	
Pabna	1,495	145	7	130	2	357	27	887	105	112	13
Malda	20							20			
Dacca	2,829	639	58	306	8	444		1,982	638	31	1
Mymensing	151	34	1	17		4		117	28	12	6
Faridpur	94	10	1	18	1	13	4	59	6	2	
Tripura	169		6	21	1	63		78			
Coach Behar	317	7	1	69	20	151	3	73	4	3	
Total	12,422	1,420	108	927	33	2,356	69	8,819	1,308	179	43

Source: Census of India, 1911, Vol.-V, part-II, Table-XV-E-XV-V, p.342-343

N.B. : M* represents male workers and F*, female workers

The working season at jute presses spanned over nine months, from August to March, so that their workers became seasonally unemployed for three months each year²⁸. In view of this inconvenience of the job, the press management usually provided the workers with advance payments to maintain themselves during the lean months. Because of a very high proportion of unskilled workers in this activity, the industry largely employed migratory workers that were available at low rates of wage. Migration of labour took place from the up-country districts like Balia, Mirajpur, Gazipur, Jaunpur, Azamgarh, Shahabad, Patna, Benaras, and Muzaffarpur²⁹. Some workers also hailed from Fatehpur, Rai Berili, Partabgarh, Allahabad, Basti, and also from Orissa. While it was common that workers migrated to these presses on their own, the press management sometimes deputed *sirdars* with advance money to recruit workers from those distant places³⁰. Often, they recruited men in gangs comprising of two to six members, commonly known as *khatas*, who hailed either from the same village or from the same joint family (including women and boys), and worked under a headman, known as *Khatader* ³¹.

²⁸ Foley, Report on labour, p. vii

²⁹ Ibid, p.25

³⁰ Ibid, p.26

³¹ Ibid, p.25

II

Chapter II has already made a comparative study of wage rates among jute mills in various countries including Bengal. It has been found that for working hours of 55 per week, the wage rate for spinner was Rs. 1.85 in Bengal as against Rs. 4.50 at Dundee. The wage rate, however, varied widely in the industry depending on the nature of jobs, skill of the workers as also their ages and genders. There were six types of activities in a jute mill, namely, porting, winding, spinning, sewing, weaving and mechanical. While, for the purpose of porting, both adult male and female workers as also the child labour were employed, only adult male workers were engaged in winding, weaving and as mechanics. Whereas the child labour was preferred in the spinning purposes, adult workers of both sexes were equally preferred in the sewing department. An official report of 1906 reveals the following wage structure in contemporary jute mills (Table 6.6)³².

Table 6.6: Weekly wages of the workers in Bengal Jute mills

Department	Ordinary worker (in Rs.)	Trained worker (in Rs.)
Porting: Adult male	2.25 – 2.36 (i.e. 2.30)	2.50 – 2.72 (i.e. 2.61)
Adult female	1.84 – 2.84 (i.e. 2.34)	2.06
Children	1.00 – 1.25 (i.e. 1.12)	1.36
Average	1.92	2.01
Winding: Adult male	3.00	4.00
Sewing: Both adult male & female	2.50	3.00
Spinning: Children	2.60	3.42
Weaving: Adult male	4.00	6.50
Mechanic: Adult male	N.A	10.00 -12.00 (i.e. 11.00)

Source: Foley, Report on labour in Bengal, p. x

³² For the wage rate in different jute mills, see Annexure 6.1

The table shows that excepting the job of mechanics (which exclusively required trained personnel), all the jobs in jute mills were performed both by ordinary and trained workers. Employment of ordinary workers, indeed, economised the labour cost, but a greater proportion of unskilled labour might have adverse impacts on the quality and the time-schedule of production. The management was, therefore, required to make a trade-off between these workers at the time of manpower planning. Table 6.6, however, shows that the wage differential between ordinary and trained workers was as high as 62.50 per cent for weavers, 33.33 per cent for winders and 31.54 per cent for spinners. It was at a lower side of 20 per cent for sewers, 21.43 per cent for child porters and 13.47 per cent for adult male porters.

The activity-wise wage differences in the table were that the mechanics obtained the highest wage rate of Rs. 11 per week whereas the porters were at the lowest end of the scale, receiving only Rs. 1.99 per week on average (between ordinary and trained workers). In between these, there were weavers (at Rs. 5.25 per week), winders (at Rs. 3.50 per week), spinners (at Rs. 3.01 per week) and sewers (at Rs. 2.75 per week). Sometimes, the Chinese workers were employed in jute mills as carpenters at an average wage rate of Rs. 12 per week³³. It is interesting to note that child workers in spinning used to receive more than what adult male workers earned in winding, or what adult male and female

³³ Foley, Report on labour, p. xxv

workers got in sewing. While the majority of the workers were paid weekly, the monthly payment system prevailed for joiners, smiths, clerks and other office staff. All these recruitments were considered permanent in the sense of the regularity of work in six days per week. But they could be terminated from the job under a notice of seven days for the workers who were paid weekly, and for one month for those who were paid monthly. In addition to these wages, however, the jute mills generally followed an incentive/ penalty scheme to regularise the workers' attendance. A small amount of bonus was awarded for regular attendance but trifling fines were imposed for irregular attendance or bad work. There was no payment for insurance against sickness, accident or old age. Only in case of workers who were injured at the work place, wages were paid at half of their wage rates during the period of absence from duty³⁴.

Although this prevailing wage structure appeared to be lower both in the absolute term and relative to that in other jute manufacturing countries, their family income was attractive in view of the common practice among the Calcutta mills to appoint all the members of a family in different types of job. In addition to augmenting the family income of workers, this practice ensured a greater supply of labour to the industry and also improved the regularity of workers' attendance. In the contemporary society, a worker's family usually consisted of five

³⁴ Royal commission of labour, p.141

members. For such a family with two sons and one daughter, Foley estimated the family income at Rs. 17 per week (vide Table 6.7), i.e. Rs. 68 per month. A family's income at this level was considered attractive, and thus induced the workers to migrate from far-away places.

Table 6.7: Weekly wages of a family mill hands

Member of the family	Wage (in Rs.)
Father (weaver)	6.00
Mother (sewer)	3.00
Boy (spinner)	3.00
Do (spinner)	3.50
Girl (sewer)	1.50
Total	17.00

Source: Foley, Report on labour in Bengal, 1906 p. x

A different wage structure prevailed at jute presses. There the wage rate varied across the workers' type, viz. importing porters (i.e. those who brought raw jute from river jetties to sheds), exporting porters (who took away jute bales to river jetties), press porters (those who were employed for bringing jute from one place to another within the factory), assorters and press workers. Even there were wage variations within each category depending on the level of tasks. Thus, for example, depending on the distance between the jetty and the shed, the wage for importing porters varied from press to press. For them, the average wage was 42 paisa per bale (i.e. the bales meant for export). The average earning for an exporting porter was 12 Annas per day and that of a press porter 12anna – Re.1 per day³⁵. It should be noted that the wage rate for press porters

³⁵ Foley, Report on labour, p.24

in Narraingunj was greater than that in Calcutta.³⁶ However, an assorter's wage depended on the quality of fibres they were to work with. The rate was high for superior quality fibre as it required more careful grading, cutting and packing. In Calcutta, the rate was Rs.2.50 per bale for white jute, Rs.2 per bale for tossa jute, and Re.1 per bale for daisee jute³⁷. On average, an assorter earned 12 Annas per day. There were also variations in pressing charges across the presses. In 1914, it was on average Rs.1.84 - Rs. 2 in the mills located on the side of Calcutta and Rs.1.72 to Rs.1.84 in those on the Howrah side³⁸.

Working hours at jute mills changed time to time during our study period. Prior to the introduction of electricity in 1895, work was confined from dawn to dusk. Till 1872, the practice was to commence the work at six o'clock in the morning and to continue through six in the evening with two intervals, one during 9 A.M-10 A.M and the other during 1 P.M -2 P.M. A 10-hourly working period thus prevailed in the industry³⁹. A new system, the so-called reliving squad system, was introduced in 1872 whereby the working period was extended to 5 A.M -7 P.M for the summer season with three shifts of work. Each worker worked for 9-10 hours at a time with a rotational break for three hours and a tiffin break for one hour⁴⁰. Jute mills were, however, subject to several restrictions in

³⁶ Ibid, p.26

³⁷ Report on jute trade, p. 197.

³⁸ For the wage rate of skilled and unskilled workers of jute presses in Calcutta, see Annexure 6.2.

³⁹ Wallace, The romance of jute, p. 40

⁴⁰ Foley, Report on labour, p. xxii.

1881 when the Factory Act was introduced in India. The Act stipulated that the minimum age of a child worker to be employed in the industry should be seven years; that such a labour could be employed for nine hours a day at the maximum; and that in each month at least four holidays should be earmarked for them⁴¹. Further suggestions followed from the Factories Commission in 1891. Jute mills were urged to increase the minimum age for the child labour from seven years to nine years, and also to curtail the working hours from 9-14 hours a day to 7 hours a day for children and 11 hours a day for women⁴². Though these several restrictions were in line with the practices in the contemporary industries in other countries, those could not be administered properly in Bengal due to the lack of interest among the mill-owners, inadequate administrative capacities, and, above all, the ignorance of the working people. The situation was further aggravated after the introduction of electricity in the industry in 1895. In fact, the application of electricity spread very fast across the industry. Within a decade, as Foley found, electricity covered twenty-two mills out of twenty-five mills that he surveyed. Equipped with the electrical power, however, modern mills at Calcutta extended the working hours till 8-9 o'clock in the evening, adding 2-3 hours daily in the working schedule⁴³. Some mills even

⁴¹ Ghosh, A history of Calcutta jute mills, p. 89

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ Judicial Dept. Police. Progs. A. January 1896.

started four shifts a day, severely straining the working community⁴⁴. In such circumstances, the Factories Commission intervened again in 1908 with a stipulation that daily working hours should not be more than six for the child labour, and not more than 11 for female workers and the young workers in the age group of 14-17 years⁴⁵. The commissioner further stipulated that all such workers should be given to enjoy a compulsory interval after six hours of continuous work. But, as before, all these stipulations remained largely unheeded. It was found in 1912, that in the shift system 75 per cent of workers belonging to the adult group of both sexes were compelled to work for 13½ hours while the rest had to work for more than 10½ hours⁴⁶. In addition to satisfying their greed for higher profit, the mill-owners extended the working hours in view of the shortage of workers in the contemporary jute labour market in Calcutta.

It should be noted that the weavers did not come under the shift system. The managers did not object them to work continuously, and even if any of them took a relief by his neighbours on the shop-floor. They used to fix the workers' tasks in terms of the pieces of cloth they had to deliver each day⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ Foley, Report on labour, p. 13

⁴⁵ Ghosh, A history of Calcutta jute mills, p. 93

⁴⁶ Adam to the Secretary, GoB, Commerce department, 22 August, 1919 .

⁴⁷ Ghosh, A history of Calcutta jute mills, p. 92

In addition to wages, the workers used to get housing facilities in the vicinity of their respective working places. It was not that the mill authorities always provided such facilities. In fact, there was no such facility from the authorities' end at those mills which were located in or around the city of Calcutta. The *sardars* used to construct huts in such cases to attract workers and to keep them under their control. Those huts provided generally narrow dwelling spaces with improper sanitation facilities. Over the years, those places got over-crowded and ultimately became slum areas. But for the mills that were situated in isolated places, the authorities constructed labour lines with good sanitation facilities⁴⁸. Foley estimated that a cost of Rs. 97,000 was involved in the construction of a labour line with 200 rooms (vide Table 6.8).

Table 6.8: Construction cost of labour line at jute mills

Items	Cost (in Rs.)
Salami for land at Rs.500 a begah	12,000
Compensation to tenants and value paid for buildings demolished	8,000
Cost of filling tanks and levelling up ground	5,000
Cost of 22 lines (each containing 20 rooms) at Rs.3, 300 per line	72,600
Total	97,000

Source: Foley, Report on labour, p. vii

These were estimates for brick-built houses. The labour lines for some mills also accommodated mud-houses. There was, however, no uniform policy for rent of the accommodation for workers. While some mills charged for accommodation, others did not do so. The rent for accommodation, when charged, varied from 12 Annas to Re.1 per month

⁴⁸ Foley, Report on labour, p. 11

for brick-built room, and from 6 Annas to 10 Annas for mud-built room⁴⁹. It should be noted that all jute presses situated away from Calcutta provided rent-free accommodation for the up-country workers, and also for the local workers who lived at places 5-6 miles away from the working sites.⁵⁰

III

Industrial relation in Bengal jute industry may be periodized into three phases, i) upto 1890 when there was virtually no industrial unrest, ii) 1890-1904 that witnessed sporadic tension in such relation, and iii) 1905-14 when the trade union movement began to take shape in the industry with participation from political parties. Contemporary newspapers and the reports of Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA) confirm a congenial environment in the labour-management relationship in the industry before 1890. For example, the report of IJMA in 1890 revealed that there was 'no notice of such disputes as occurred in the jute mills and that no strikes or lock outs of general interest or importance ever took place there'.⁵¹ The only incidence of this phase was the jute strike of 1885 that broke out in the Samnagar, Titaghar and Kankinara Jute Mills. The strike at former two mills was ignited by the management's move to reduce the wage rates without any explicit cause

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. ix, xxii - xxviii

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 26

⁵¹ Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, p.140

showing thereof⁵². For other mill, the immediate cause was the workers' demand for higher wages. It should be noted that these strikes were the consequence of the lack of uniformity in the wage structure of jute mills in spite of their adjacent locations. In fact, lower wages for similar jobs in adjacent work-sites caused workers' grievances which sporadically caused industrial tension before 1890.

The period 1890-1904, however, witnessed a series of strikes and other industrial unrests mainly in communal lines. This is not to say that jute workers did never agitate on the ground of their privileges during this period. A wide-spread agitation, indeed, took place after the introduction of electricity in the industry in 1895, which, as we have already noted, increased the working time by 2-3 hours per day. In spite of extended working hours, the wage rates in jute mills were kept virtually unchanged. Comparing the wage structure between 1872 and 1905 Foley reported that there were no significant hikes in wage payments for different categories of workers⁵³. In fact, in 1902, the spinners of the Wellington Jute and Twist Mill, the India Jute Mill and the Samnagar Jute Mill went on strike for higher wages, and the weavers of the Hastings Mill and the Wellington Mill did so demanding shorter working hours⁵⁴. Certain mills did, however, raise their wage rates in view of extended working period but it caused workers' grievances in

⁵² Directors minute, 3 June and 29 April, 1885.

⁵³ Foley, Report on labour, p. 9

⁵⁴ Directors minute, Champdani Jute Company, 5 and 22 May, 1902.

their neighbouring mills where the management did not do so. An example in point was that when the porters' wage rate was increased at the Gundalpara Jute Mill in 1895, the porters at the Kankinara Jute Mill, mostly up-country Muslims, went on strike for similar wage hikes⁵⁵.

The communal feelings initially emerged among jute workers in Bengal, and subsequently escalated, on account of specific nature and large volume of labour immigration in the industry. The steep increase in the productive capacity of the industry since the mid-1890s, and the concurrent introduction of electricity in many mills, which we have already noted, substantially increased the demand for jute labour in and around Calcutta. Labour migration was consequently escalated in those localities. Immigrations usually took place at the behest of *sardars* who enjoyed the authority of recruitment, as well as the power of dismissal, of workers in their respective mills⁵⁶. It was, however, a common practice for the *sardars* to recruit workers from their own villages, or their vicinities, belonging to their own extended families and communities. There was, therefore, a tendency among workers coming from the same village, culture and religion to congregate in a given industrial area⁵⁷. Such a tendency helped to nourish the community consciousness among workers that often led to communal violence in and around the jute premises. The first Muslim riot broke out in Shambazar in 1891 when a

⁵⁵ Judicial Dept. Progs. A. January 1896

⁵⁶ Report of the Royal Commission of Labour in India (London 1930), pp. 22-4.

⁵⁷ Chakroborty, Communal Riots, p. 144

building, allegedly a mosque, was demolished. The leading people in the riot belonged to the community of up-country *jollahas*, who were Muslim weavers hailing from Bihar and U.P⁵⁸.

A series of industrial unrest also took place in this period for the grant of leave during the festive occasion of different communities. In fact, various fairs and carnivals organised in such occasions outside the mill-gates, and the migratory workers desired to participate there to get rid of their monotonous factory life-styles⁵⁹. In 1894, for example, certain mill-workers belonging to both Hindu and Muslim communities, urged for leave with pay during the religious festivals of *Bakr-Id*, *Muhharam* and *Rath Jatra*⁶⁰. When refused by the management, workers stroke production in some mills, for example at the Baranagar and Kamarhati Jute Mill, while others opted for unauthorised leave, in which case the management imposed fines on them⁶¹. A series of such events occurred in the following years also. In 1895, the management at the Samnagar Jute Mill granted three-hour leave on the Muslim festivals of *Id* and *Bakr-Id*. While enjoying those privileges the workers also took a full-day leave on their festival of Maharam, causing severe disputes with the management⁶². Similar disturbances took place at the Titaghar and Kamarhati Jute Mills in 1895 when Muslim workers asked for leave on

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p. 142 fn

⁵⁹ Dasgupta, Material conditions and behavioral aspects, as referred by Basu, Strikes and communal riots, p. 957

⁶⁰ Chakroborty, Communal Riots, p. 144

⁶¹ Judicial Dept. Police Branch January 1896, p. 4961

⁶² I.J.M.A report, 1896, pp.76-80

the day of *Bakr-Id*; and also at the Gouripur mill, where Muslim workers urged for holidays on the *Id*, *Bakr-Id*, and *Muhharam*, and the Hindu workers asked for leave on the *Rath Jatras*. The Victoria Jute Mill, however, avoided such unrests by sanctioning a half-day leave each on the occasions of the *Id*, and the *Rath Jatra*, and also a two-day leave for the festival of the *Durga Puja*⁶³. During these industrial unrests, the management often took resort to violence by opening fire upon the workers, or else, calling upon the police to control, both of which antagonised the workers straining the industrial relation⁶⁴.

Communal consciousness often took the form of communal riots, which occurred several times since 1894 within and outside the jute-mill premises. Such events broke out at the Rishra, Titaghar, and Lower Hoogly Jute Mills in 1896 when Muslim workers sacrificed cows on the Bakr-Id day. When the Hindu workers sought to resist it, a communal riot followed between those religious communities in the vicinities of the mill premises, which subsequently spread to the neighbouring mills, and also to outside places. A Bengali newspaper reported in that year, "This is the first year in which cow-killing quarrels have taken place in Bengal, and that in the vicinity of the metropolis."⁶⁵ Though it appeared to be a local event, the district administration pointed that it was a part of the anti cow-slaughtering movement that broke out during 1888-93 at

⁶³ Ghosh, A history of the Calcutta jute mill hands, p. 202

⁶⁴ Basu, Strikes and communal riots, p. 958

⁶⁵ Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, p. 148

Arrah, Gaya and Saran from where workers migrated to these jute mills⁶⁶. To curb those disturbances in the mill areas, the Government restricted cow slaughtering at some places. It was even forbidden in those areas where Muslim workers were proportionately insignificant in number. These restrictive measures angered the Muslim workers and caused communal riots at the Rishra and Standard Jute Mill in 1895, and also at the Titagharh Jute Mill in 1896⁶⁷. The low-caste up-country Hindu and Muslim workers were mostly involved in those riots. These were followed by two consecutive riots at a wider scale on the issue of the demolition of mosque, contemporaneously known as the Calcutta Riot of 1896 and the Talla Riot of 1897, where jute mill workers involved in battle with Europeans at mills and with the police in the street⁶⁸. The latter riot paralysed the city for two consecutive days. Though organised by the Muslim workers, the upper echelon of the community refrained from them. They criticised the incidences of mosque demolition, but disinclined to support those riots on the ground that those mosques were not built up on the *waqf* land, and that the *Koran* did not sanction the construction of a mosque on such lands⁶⁹. Haji Zakariah, the Motwali of the largest mosque in Calcutta, even issued a *fatwas*, restraining the Muslim workers from any riotous events. Another riot took place at mill premise in 1898 when the government sought to curb the menace of

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.148

⁶⁷ Judicial Dept. Police Branch, A, Nos. 119-21 and 52-3,1896.

⁶⁸ Judicial Dept. of Police, A, Nos. 1-13.

⁶⁹ Judicial Dept. of Police Branch, November 1897.

plague, a contemporary epidemic in Bengal, by a set of regulations that were believed to discriminate between the workers and the administrative people, mostly Europeans⁷⁰. The workers strongly agitated against those regulations, and went on strikes, forcing the government to repeal those regulations⁷¹.

Labour movement in jute mills in Bengal, however, got an important dimension since 1905 when the Swadeshi Movement broke out in the political scenario of this province. Prior to that year, labour movements in jute mills were rather localised to individual mills without any intervention of political personalities. But from 1905 onwards, those movements were organised on a much larger scale across the industry where political parties intervened. From the available sources it is gathered that during this period labour movement spread over as many as 17 jute mills out of 37 in aggregate⁷². In October 1905, two significant strikes took place in the industry, one at the Lower Hoogly Jute Mill and the other at the Gouripur Jute Mill, because of the physical assault of workers by European assistant managers⁷³. These were followed by three successive strikes at the Fort Gloster Jute Mill⁷⁴. The first strike took place on October 16, 1905 when the mill authority strongly opposed an endeavour of the workers to unite themselves by way of exchanging

⁷⁰ Subhu Basu, *Strikes and communal riots*, p. 973

⁷¹ *Ibid*

⁷² Nirban Basu, *The working class movement*, in Hann, *A case for labour history*, p.116

⁷³ Parimal Ghosh, *A history of the Calcutta jute mill hands*, p. 207

⁷⁴ Das, *Outside intervention of jute mill strikes*, in Hann. *A case for labour history*, p. 87

friendship thread (the so-called *rakhi*). About 9,000 workers participated in the strike protesting against the incidence. They also submitted a charter of demand where hikes in the wage structure were also included. The strike continued for about a month and compelled the management to accept most of those workers' demands. The next strike broke out on December 7, 1905 in the wake of the incidence that the management prevented the workers from shouting the slogan of *Bande Matarm*⁷⁵. In fact, this slogan symbolised the political ambition of Indian leaders against the British governance, and thus showed the emerging political underpinning of the labour movement. However, the dispute was amicably settled at the behest of A.C. Banerjee who was an important political personality of contemporary Bengal. The third strike at the Fort Gloster Mill occurred in March 1906, and this time it was ignited among the clerks and *sardars* on the issue of cribbing time. For protesting against this issue, seven clerks and four *sardars* were suspended from their jobs. Only after the intervention of political leaders, those staffs were re-inducted. It should be emphasised that the underlying tone of these movements were set up by the sprit of the *Swadeshi* Movement. Since the non-Bengali workers were emotionally less involved to the sense of 'the *Swadesi*', those movements took place mainly in those mills where the Bengali workers dominated⁷⁶.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, p. 88

⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.87

A common feature of the above strikes was that the workers took primary initiative to mobilize themselves and started movements. In course of those strikes, they contacted the nationalist leaders to provide leadership. Those workers thus gave opportunities to the political leaders to come close to the working section of the society. Subsequently we find that political leaders began to take interest to form trade union at jute mills. A successful opportunity came to this end in 1906 when the workers at the Clive Jute Mill went on strike against the ill-treatments of the manager, and also for better working conditions. A.C. Banerjee provided the leadership in this movement, and formed a trade union under the name 'Union-The Indian Jute Mill Hands' where he was the president⁷⁷. In 1907, another trade union was set up at the Delta Jute Mill under the guidance of A.C. Banerjee, when its workers strove its functioning⁷⁸. The labour movement in jute mills thus entered into a new phase of development involving the political personalities so that the political parties looked into the protection and promotion of the welfare of the working class in a broader socio-economic perspective.

⁷⁷ Basu, Outside leadership, in Hann., A case for labour history, p.116

⁷⁸ NMML, PPAC, Head clerk Benodbehari Mookerjee to A.C Banerjee, as referred by Das, Outside intervention of jute mill strikes, in Hann, A case for labour history, p. 96

IV

We thus find that the development of jute industries had a far-reaching impact in the labour market of the contemporary Bengal. In addition to augmenting the demand for labour, it led to a series of qualitative changes also. The major findings of this chapter as follows:

- a) Since both jute pressing and jute processing was high labour intensive, a large number of jobs were in the industry. We have found that the average daily employment was as high as 236,294 in jute mills in 1914-15 and that in jute presses to the tune of 14,000 in 1911.
- b) Both skilled and unskilled workers were employed in the industry. While in the jute mills unskilled workers were namely deployed as porters, skilled workers were employed for running of the machines. Jute presses also employed large number of unskilled workers as porters, and skilled workers as assorters and packers. The weekly wages for trained weaver, spinner and mechanic were Rs.6.50, Rs.3.42 and Rs.11 respectively. The wage for children was Rs.3.42 in spinning department. On average, an assorter earned 12 Annas per day in the jute press, Calcutta.

- c) The employment structures of jute mill were heavily dominated by male workers. The male and female ratio has been worked at 78:22, as against of 29:71 at Dundee mills.
- d) Owing to the fast rate of industry's growth, the local labour market could not meet the demand for labour, inducing the immigration of workers from far-away places like Moghyr, Patna, Arrah, Chapra, Gazipur, Mirzapur, Cuttack and Orissa. In 1905, the ratio of migratory and local workers was found at 2: 1.
- e) The industry also witnessed a series of labour movements from the early 1890s. An analysis of those movements has shown that while, in the initial years, the industrial relation was broken down several times on the issues like disputes relating to working hours, wage and holidays, the trade union movement crept in the industry from 1905 onwards. In the later phase, the political personalities provided the leadership of the movement under various trade unions.

Annexure 6.1: Lowest monthly wages given to skilled and unskilled labour in different jute mill on June ,1901 (in Rs.)

Name of the factories	Blacksmith	Carpenter	Bricklayer Or Mason	Weaver	Spinner (man)	Engine Driver Or Boiler man	Dyer	Messenger	Cooli (Man)	Cooli or Porter (woman)
Ganges mill	21	18	14	14	9	15	8	6.50	7.50	6.50
Fortgloster	15	13	14	17.75	8.50	12	7.50	8	6	5.25
Central	14	14	12	7.75	7.36	45	6	8	7	6
Howrah	21	29	20	20	10	17			8	
Sibpur	12	16	7.50	12	8	14	9		6.50	6
Delta	12	10	15	12	10	37	10	8	7	7
National	10	9	12	8	8	20	7	8	6	6
Wellington	27.75	30.55	14*	22.64*	11.60*	22.50	9*	8.75		
India	10	9	14	12*	11.45*	13	9*	8		6*
Hastings	15	15	14*	14*	8*	15	8*	9	6*	5*
Gouripur	9	5.25	10.06			8	5	4	5	3.36
Kankinara	7.50	9	6.60	9.06	5.06	6.60	6.06	4.18	5	3.36
Baranagar	12.36	9	8	12	6	9	5	5	4.50	4
Upper Hoogly	11	10	8	9.25	7	8	5	4.18	4.36	3.42
Clive	8.36	8	8	5.25	4.54		5.25	5.25	4	3.30
Budge Budge		5.60	6.66	7.30	3.30		4.54	4.54	4	4.18
Victoria	26	22.75	21.12	24*	10.40*	20	11*	8	7.34*	6.16*
Champdany	20	18	17	16*	9	22	9	6	6.40	4.48

Source: Annual report on the working of the Indian factories act, xv of 1881-1901-02

*it is calculated from weekly wages.

Annexure 6.2: The lowest wages of different classes of skilled and unskilled labour of jute press in Calcutta, December, 1909,

Skilled labour	Rs.
Black smith	18
Fitter	21
Carpenter	24
Bricklayer	15
Mason	9
Engine Driver	14
Boiler man	16
Unskilled labour	
Collie(man)	10
Collie(women)	9

Source: Annual report on the working of the Indian factories act, 1909, p. viii