

*‘Enemy Agents at Work’: A microhistory of the 1954 Adamjee and Karnaphuli riots in East Pakistan**

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Abstract

Between March and May 1954, an election and two riots took place in East Pakistan, with far-reaching implications. On 30 May, the prime minister of Pakistan, in a bellicose tone, declared that ‘enemy agents’ and ‘disruptive forces’ were at work and imposed governor’s rule for the first time in East Pakistan. The autocratic and high-handed attitude of the Central government in Karachi over the seemingly wayward East Wing was to become a portent of future conflicts between the province and the state, eventually leading to the unmaking of Pakistan in 1971. What precipitated the 1954 crisis? Who were the enemy agents and disruptive forces that the prime minister had alluded to? The reference was to the Bengali labourers in East Pakistan—the main protagonists of the 1954 Karnaphuli Paper Mill and Adamjee Jute Mill riots. These were the most violent industrial riots in the history of United Pakistan, if not the subcontinent. Using sensitive materials obtained from multiple archives, this article dismantles the conventional thesis that these riots were ‘Bengali–Bihari riots’, fanned by the flames of Bengali provincialism at the political level, or events instigated by the Centre to derail the democratic hopes of the Bengali population of Pakistan. A microhistory of the events demonstrates a more complex picture of postcolonial labour formations and solidarities; the relationship between state-led industrialization and refugee rehabilitation, and conflicting visions of sovereignty. This is a story of estrangement between employers and workers over the question of who were the real sovereigns of labour, capital, and Pakistan itself.

* I am heavily indebted to Richard Williams and Matt Birkinshaw for their support throughout the entire process of writing and revising this article. Thanks are also due to the following for their excellent feedback and suggestions during earlier presentations and drafts: Sarah Ansari, Anish Vanaik, Sumeet Mhaskar, Aditya Sarkar, Anna Sailer, Lotte Hoek, Delwar Hussain, Ravi Ahuja, Kamran Asdar Ali, and attendees of the Labour History workshops in Warwick, Berlin, and Göttingen. I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and critical engagement with the article. Needless to say, any mistakes are my own.

Introduction

The 1950s were an unpredictable and bloody period for Pakistan. The newly independent nation state found itself severely tested by its citizens in the East Wing who chafed against the repeated policy failures on food, work, and language, as well as the harassment and rough handling of dissent by the Central government.¹ Amongst scholars, the language movement and state killing of protesters in 1952 have generated the most attention thus far.² However, it was the events of 1954 that dangerously heightened tensions between both wings, leading to the complete suspension of democratic rights for the first time.

At the tail end of May 1954, East Pakistan was caught within a powerful vortex of intrigue, conspiracy, and gossip. The Centre was caught off guard by the humiliating defeat of the Muslim League at the hands of the newly cobbled-together United Front coalition (under the formidable triumvirate leadership of Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Maulana Bhashani) in early March. The United Front won 215 out of 237 of the Muslim seats, leaving the Muslim League with a mere nine seats. Richard Park noted: ‘When the ballots were counted it was found that even Nurul Amin, the Premier of the province had been defeated by a 27-year-old student from the Law College who had joined the battle at the last moment.’³ The Centre’s suspicions and misgivings about the new Provincial government, in particular its commitment to the integrity of Pakistan, grew more vociferous and emphatic over the next couple of months. On 30 May, Governor General Ghulam Mohammed dismissed Chief Minister Fazlul Huq and his United Front ministry and declared governor’s rule in East Bengal. This, Ghulam Mohammed said, would enable Pakistan to deal with those ‘disruptive forces and enemy agents who were actively at

¹ Ahmed Kamal’s book on post-partition East Bengal up to 1954 continues to be pioneering work. See Ahmed Kamal, *State against the nation: the decline of the Muslim League in pre-independence Bangladesh, 1947–54* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2008).

² There has been a lot of work on the language movement; the following is a selection of the more critical articles: see Saadia Toor, ‘Containing East Bengal: language, nation, and state formation in Pakistan, 1947–1952’, *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, pp. 185–210; S. M. Shamsul Alam, ‘Language as political articulation: East Bengal in 1952’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1991, pp. 469–487; Phillip Oldenburg, ‘“A place insufficiently imagined”: language, belief and the Pakistan crisis of 1971’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1985, pp. 711–733.

³ Richard L. Park, ‘East Bengal: Pakistan’s troubled province’, *Far Eastern Survey*, vol. 23, no. 5, May, 1954, pp. 70–74.

work in East Pakistan' undermining and destabilizing the advance of the much-heralded postcolonial goals of progress and modernity.⁴ Iskander Mirza, the new governor, announced that he was ready to 'wipe out the Communists to the last man, and if that meant stepping on the Hindus toes [*sic*], then unfortunately it would have to be'.⁵ In addition, he pledged to gain complete control of East Bengal to prevent disturbance, create respect for the law, and provide political education on the 'basic concepts of a democratic centralised state'.⁶

Who were these communists, disruptive forces, and enemy agents that alarmed the Government of Pakistan so much? Maulana Bhashani, the United Front politician, a popular East Bengali peasant, and labour leader, described 1954 as a year of 'excitement-distraction'.⁷ The excitement of the overwhelming victory of the popular United Front against the incumbent Muslim League in the election followed by the United Front's dismissal by the Centre and the imposition of governor's rule and installation of General Iskander Mirza distracted many from the unfolding drama of two of the bloodiest industrial riots in the history of the subcontinent: the Karnaphuli Paper Mill and the Adamjee Jute Mill riots. The 'enemy agents' at work were the Bengali labourers of the mills.⁸

On the morning of 22 March 1954, at the Karnaphuli Paper Mill in Chittagong, fierce shouts of '*kaam band karo*' (stop your work), '*sab pardesi ko khatam kardo*' (finish off all the foreigners), '*usko mill mein nahin rehne denge*' (we will not let stay them in the mill), and '*Pakistan Zindabad*' (long live Pakistan) pierced the morning air, disrupting the regular humdrum of the first shift.⁹ The shouting came from Bengali labourers, who

⁴ 'The Takeover: PM', *Dawn*, 31 May 1954.

⁵ American Consul, Dacca, Pakistan, 1 June 1954, 'Political developments in East Pakistan', Record Group 84, National Archives, United States (USNA).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Khondoker Mohammed Elias, *Bhashani jakhana Europe* (Dhaka: Muktaadhara, 1978), p. 38.

⁸ James Burke, photographer for LIFE magazine (1951–64) was present in East Pakistan in the aftermath of the Adamjee Jute Mill riots and onset of governor's rule. He was the only photographer to have captured scenes during and after the Adamjee Jute Mill riots. His photographs of the events are available at <https://layliuddin.wordpress.com/2019/08/20/enemy-agents-at-work-a-microhistory-of-the-1954-adamjee-and-karnaphuli-riots-in-east-pakistan/> [accessed 20 August 2019].

⁹ Various shouts were heard during the day; the prominent ones have been mentioned. High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, Appeal no. 201 of 1956 (Chittagong Hill Tracts), Criminal Appellate Jurisdiction, pp. 74–75 (hereafter High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957).

spread themselves throughout the mill, armed with sticks, knives, and pieces of iron rods, moving from one section of the mill to the other, issuing instructions for work and machines to be stopped. The targets of their attacks were the non-Bengali-speaking employees of the mill, some of whom would be killed and others injured. On 23 and 24 March, ten bodies would be fished out from the Karnaphuli River, including Khurshid Ali, the Hyderabad Operative Director, responsible for the overall management of the paper mill, as well as the labour officer, a papermaker, foreman, clerk, peon, the head *durwan* (guard), and two of his Pathan subordinates. Khurshid Ali suffered the most brutal death of all; his autopsy report described in gruesome detail his 'burst testicles' and 'brain matter' leaking out.¹⁰

The second riot was even worse. A month and a half later, on 15 May 1954, ten new members of Fazlul Huq's Cabinet were being sworn in, but the recently inducted Minister for Commerce, Interior and Industries, Syed Azizul Huq, was nowhere to be seen. He was at the Adamjee Jute Mill, alongside the Additional District Magistrate of Dacca, deputy inspector general, superintendent of police, 80 armed police, and 30 men from the East Pakistani Rifles, trying and failing to stop one of the most violent and destructive industrial riots in the history of United Pakistan.¹¹ On the morning of 15 May, mass violence broke out between the Bihari and Bengali employees at the mill. The pretext was the murder of a Bihari *durwan* by Bengali workers the night before.¹² Between 9 am and 11.30 am, over 600 workers were shot, hacked, burnt, or drowned to death and 1,000 millworker homes, including entire villages, were destroyed.¹³ Unofficial estimates of deaths were much higher: from 800 to 4,000 people killed. Although the respective numbers of Bengali and Bihari workers killed are not fully known,

¹⁰ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957.

¹¹ Office of the UK High Commission, Dacca, 24 May 1954. 'Preliminary reports on the Adamjee riots', File no. DO35/5323, National Archives, United Kingdom (UKNA).

¹² Ibid. On 14 May, Bengali workers killed a Bihari *durwan*, allegedly on the grounds that smoke from his cooking fire had wafted over to the Bengali housing colony, he refused to stop when asked, and was thus attacked. The *durwan* died from the injuries sustained.

¹³ Ibid. Biharis was a generic term used for the non-Bengali, largely Urdu-speaking refugee population in East Bengal. They came from different states in India such as Bihar, Orissa, Tripura, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, and so on. I will speak in detail later on the formation of Bihari identity.

reports suggest a higher number of Bengalis died.¹⁴ The government seized copies of the 19 May 1954 edition of the *Pakistan Post*, the English daily, which had printed a list of the dead, fearing that it would inflame Bengali feelings and instigate violence against refugees elsewhere in East Pakistan.¹⁵

Chaudhury Khaliqzaman, governor of East Bengal and veteran Muslim League leader, during his visit to Adamjee in the aftermath of the riot, compared the scenes of the bloodied and mutilated bodies strewn across the mill and floating along the Sitalakya River to the horrors of partition.¹⁶ Other horrifying and apocalyptic descriptions were given of the riot scenes. Mohammed Toaha, Communist Party member and labour leader, stated: '*Sramiker rakte Adamji nagar laale laal holo*' (Adamjee town was awash with red from the workers' blood).¹⁷ Abul Mansur Ahmed described it as a scene worse than any of the riots that took place in Calcutta between 1946 and 1950.¹⁸ The prime minister at the Constituent Assembly told the members that it was a holocaust.¹⁹

A microhistory of violence

The brutal nature and scale of the two riots may have caused much anxiety and alarm at both the levels of Centre and Province at the time, but they have managed only a cameo appearance in the work of most historians so far, taxing little imagination or analysis. The riots are seen as primarily communal, between Bengali and Bihari workers. One set of reasons put forward is that the riots were instigated by the Centre to undermine the new Provincial government.²⁰ Another explanation

¹⁴ 'Adamjee Miler Hungamai 600 Lok Pran Harayeche', *Dainik Azad (Dacca)*, 10 September 1956.

¹⁵ Office of the UK High Commission in Pakistan, 20 May 1954. 'Narayanganj riot', File no. DO35/5336, UKNA.

¹⁶ Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar dekha rajniti: panchas bochor* (Dhaka: Khushruj Kitab Mahal, 2010), p. 264.

¹⁷ Mohammed Toaha, 'Smriti kotha', *Sanskriti*, 2000. This was in a private collection bound into a collected volume. Information is not available on issue dates or page numbers.

¹⁸ Ahmed, *Amar dekha rajniti*, p. 262.

¹⁹ Pakistan Constituent Assembly Debates, vol. 1, no. 22-35, 1954, pp. 1361-1505.

²⁰ Though there is little evidence to substantiate the claims that the Centre was responsible for the riots, it has been accepted by some historians as well as others.

suggests the riots were an extension of the enthusiasm generated by the victory of the United Front and the promises of greater social, political, and economic power and control for the Bengali-speaking populace of the East Wing.²¹

The violence at Adamjee and Karnaphuli unfolded in the heartlands of the postcolonial industrial project of Pakistan. However, unlike other communal riots during this period, which were more geographically contagious, the Adamjee and Karnaphuli events remained confined to the mill areas. Although some scholars have alluded to the question of labour, the riots have been subsumed into narratives of high politics.²² This has emptied the events of historical agency, content, and significance, and retrospectively justified them to 'fit' a particular perspective. Using rare and unseen documents, such as the intelligence documents of the Special Branch for both riots and court cases against Bengali workers in the Karnaphuli riot, this article uses a combination of microhistory, subaltern studies, and labour history in order to counter conventional narratives around the riots. I do this in order to examine other paths and possibilities of the event and centre workers' agency in narratives where they were the primary protagonists. More broadly, I suggest that a closer reading of the riots will help us to understand and interpret the relationship between labour and politics in the postcolonial period.

Ravi Ahuja describes the late-colonial period up to the 1980s in the subcontinent as the 'age of labour'—a time when the working class constituted a 'source of political energy to reckon with, like it or not'.²³ He argues that industrial labour was central to the development of political identities, mass movements, and conflicts. In state questions of social policy, labour was also central. Yet, in the context of East

Please see Badruddin Umar, *The emergence of Bangladesh: class struggles in East Pakistan (1947–58)* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 270. See also Kamruddin Ahmad, *Labour movement in East Pakistan* (Dhaka: Progoti Publishers, 1969); Salahuddin Ahmed, *Bangladesh: past and present* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2004).

²¹ See Kamran Asdar Ali, *Surkh salam: communist politics and class activism in Pakistan 1947–72* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Stanley Marron, 'The problems of East Pakistan', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 28, no. 2, June, 1955, pp. 132–144; Willis D. Weatherford, Jr, 'Pakistan', in *Labour in developing economies*, ed. Walter Galenson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962).

²² Kamran Asdar Ali mentions 'anti-management agitations', but does not discuss them in detail. See Ali, *Surkh salam*, p. 204.

²³ Ravi Ahuja, 'Preface', in *Working lives and worker militancy: the politics of labour in colonial India*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), pp. ix–xvi.

Pakistan, we know very little about what the ‘age of labour’ looked like, in terms of labour relations, processes, and politics in new mill spaces.²⁴ This means that discussions of labour militancy in Pakistan have been confined to the ‘narrow chronological window of 1968–1972’, with a focus on events in the West Wing.²⁵

A microhistory of the Adamjee and Karnaphuli riots offers an avenue for thinking about labour politics, and especially labour militancy in an earlier period of Pakistan. Sailer, in her work on the 1929 Bengal Jute Mill Strike, demonstrates how a microhistorical perspective allows the exploration of different possibilities, paths, contradictions, and tensions of an event, without it being determined or overwhelmed by larger developments.²⁶ Similarly, I show how a close-up analysis of the riots as they unfolded, spatially and temporally, offers multiple fine-grained images of workers in action. This dynamic narrative makes the worker agency, politics, and structures, obscured by the narrative of high politics, visible. My close-up analysis is complemented with ‘extreme long shots’ in order to situate the riots in a larger context. Why were these ‘enemy agents’, the Bengali workers, proclaiming ‘*Pakistan Zindabad*’ as they rioted? How did the workers see their relationship with the state? The article looks at what connects and disrupts our understanding of the riot events to the political drama at the national level. According to Carlo Ginzburg, the ‘constant back and forth between macrohistory and microhistory, between close-ups and extreme long-shots’ demonstrates that ‘reality is fundamentally discontinuous and heterogeneous’.²⁷ A microhistory of the riots thus offers multiple readings of the event and Pakistan itself.

I argue that the riots, though ostensibly between the Bengali and non-Bengalis of East Pakistan, sprang from a more salient tension inherent within the labour situation: a severe crisis in labour–management

²⁴ Willem Van Schendel writes in his overview of labour historiography in South Asia of the dearth of scholarship on labour relations in East Pakistan. For labour scholarship on East Pakistan, see Willem Van Schendel, ‘Stretching labour historiography: pointers from South Asia’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 51, no. S14, 2006, pp. 229–261; Badruddin Umar, *The emergence of Bangladesh*; Kamruddin Ahmad, *Labour movement in East Pakistan*; Tariq Omar Ali, *A local history of global capital: jute and peasant life in the Bengal delta* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Ahuja, ‘Preface’, p. ix.

²⁶ Anna Sailer, ‘Various paths are today opened: the Bengal Jute Mill strike of 1929 as a historical event’, in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy*, ed. Ravi Ahuja, pp. 207–255.

²⁷ Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Microhistory: two or three things that I know about it’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 1, Autumn, 1993, pp. 10–35.

relations. I will show how the mills of East Pakistan produced differing postcolonial imaginations, labour formations, and solidarities, and different registers and practices of authority. These differences led to an estrangement between workers and employers over who were the real masters of the machines, bodies, and postcolonial state of Pakistan. I focus on the mobilization of Bengali workers during the riots, the complex solidarities they formed, and the demands they made. I conclude by looking at the state responses to the riots and the implications they had for labour politics in the postcolonial phase. This article will attempt to examine both riots, but explores the Karnaphuli riots in more detail, due to the availability of material.

Mills and industrialization

The work of scholars like Akhil Gupta and others has shown how postcolonial nation states were constituted, actively experienced, and imagined by the populace in multiple ways through different mechanisms, modalities, and practices. Srirupa Roy, for example, shows how the discursive and material practices of the state in the form of Republic Day parades, Film Divisions documentaries and newsreels, and State Development Plans gave form to the Indian nation state.²⁸ East Bengal, a hinterland to the bustling metropolis of Calcutta during the colonial period, became the principal space in which Pakistan performed industrial and state power.

The spoils of partition had been humiliatingly minor for Pakistan. The eastern wing received only 12 per cent of industrial establishments of United Bengal, but no jute mills, iron and steel plants, paper mills, chemical works, coal mines, or established hydroelectric projects.²⁹ The

²⁸ Srirupa Roy, *Beyond belief: India and the politics of postcolonial nationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). See also William Gould, Taylor Sherman, and Sarah Ansari (eds), *From subjects to citizens: society and the everyday state in India and Pakistan, 1947–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (eds), *States of imagination: ethnographic explorations of the postcolonial state* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics and the imagined state', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 22, no. 2, May, 1995, pp. 375–402.

²⁹ For more on the division of assets during partition and after between India and Pakistan, see Ayesha Jalal, *The state of martial rule: the origin of Pakistan's political economy of defence* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1991); Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: a comparative and historical perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Joya

response to this injured pride was the industrialization of East Pakistan at an impressive and rapid scale. The 1948 ‘Statement of Industrial Policy’ proclaimed that ‘free play will be given to private enterprise and individual initiative’ and clarified that certain industries were to be owned and operated by the state, while others were to be made the subject of Central Planning.³⁰ To this effect, the government set up the Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC) and entrusted it with the task of developing the major industries for jute, paper, sugar, textiles, shipbuilding, cement, iron, and steel, as well as others. These industries were to be financed entirely by the state or in partnership with private industrialists. Papanek has shown how Pakistan’s pro-private enterprise position in the early years enabled the growth of a new class of businessmen and industrialists.³¹ In the first couple of years, PIDC directed almost 70 per cent of their initial investment towards the making of the Adamjee Jute Mill and Karnaphuli Paper Mill—the crowning jewels of Pakistan’s postcolonial ambitions.³²

The construction of the Adamjee Jute Mill, situated in Siddhirganj, about four miles north of the bustling river port town of Narayanganj, began around 1950. By 1954, it was the largest jute mill in the world. The glossy brochure of the PIDC in 1955 stated that the three mills of 1,000 looms with their ‘modern machinery, ready access to all qualities of jute, [and] plentiful supply of labour capable of being trained to a

Chatterji, *The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Anwesha Sengupta, ‘Breaking up: dividing assets between India and Pakistan in times of partition’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2014, pp. 529–548.

³⁰ Rakibuddin Ahmed, *The progress of the jute industry and trade (1855–1966)* (Dhaka: Pakistan Central Jute Committee, 1966).

³¹ Hannah Papanek, ‘Pakistan’s big businessmen: Muslim separatism, entrepreneurship, and partial modernization’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 21, no. 1, October, 1972, pp. 1–32.

³² Government of Pakistan, *Economic progress of East Pakistan: a review of eight years of economic development* (Karachi: Department of Advertising, Films and Publication, 1956). For more substantive scholarship on state-led industrialization efforts in postcolonial South Asia, see Vivek Chibber, *Locked in place: state-building and late industrialisation in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Pranab Bardhan, *The political economy of development in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); T. J. Byres (ed.), *The state and planning in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Francine Frankel, *India’s political economy, 1947–1977* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Atul Kohli, *State-directed development: political power and industrialization in the global periphery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); S. Akbar Zaidi, *Issues in Pakistan’s economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Tariq Omar Ali, *A local history of global capital*.

high standard of efficiency [...] stood in a strong position capable of successfully competing with any country in the world'.³³ The construction of Karnaphuli Paper Mill, situated on the borders of Chittagong Hill Tracts and Chittagong District, was equally massive. By 1954, the mill was equipped with the latest machines in papermaking and included facilities such as its own powerhouse, water filtration, and chemical plants. The PIDC boasted that the electricity and water consumption of the factory exceeded that of Karachi, Pakistan's capital.³⁴ By 1954–55, Adamjee Jute Mill and Karnaphuli Paper Mill were two of the largest employers of an industrial working-class population in East Pakistan.³⁵

The constant reference to Karachi—the seat of national political power—in the PIDC brochures was not an incidental comparison of scale, but underlined the high-risk political gamble being made by the state. The Pakistani state had intimately crafted these industrial projects as a vision of its own spirit, power, and legitimacy. They were the physical and symbolical stamps of Pakistan's immortality and permanence in the postcolonial era. Travelling through the riverine delta of Bengal, these massive sprawling industrial establishments, with thick, grey smoke billowing out from their chimney towers and thousands of bodies at work, were the visual spectacle desired in place of rolling paddy fields. The industrial grandeur of Adamjee Jute Mill and Karnaphuli Mills reflected the dizzying heights of postcolonial ambition and, most importantly, the growing might of the newly emerging free postcolonial nation state of Pakistan.

However, industrialization was not simply a project of the possible postcolonial state futures, but also an attempt to deal with the pressing material needs of the province, which emerged as a result of extraordinary population pressures on the land, a largely unemployed and urban refugee population, and a locked-in trade situation with India.

³³ Government of Pakistan, *Economic Progress of East Pakistan*, p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

³⁵ By 1954–55, Karnaphuli Paper Mill officially employed 3,000 workers on a daily basis. However, this does not include temporary or contractual labourers. The data for Adamjee Jute Mill are more difficult to disaggregate from other mill numbers. The total numbers officially employed on a daily basis in 1954–55 at the seven jute mills was 28,302. Adamjee Jute Mill was the largest mill in the world at that point; hence, more than likely, that they had the largest share of the 28,000 workers. For more, see Nafis Ahmed, *An economic geography of East Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

The 1951 Pakistan Census recorded approximately 700,000 immigrants coming into East Pakistan from West Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Tripura, and Bihar.³⁶ Dina Siddiqi describes the refugees as a heterogeneous group in terms of class and ethnicity but united by their linguistic difference from the Bengali-speaking majority in East Pakistan.³⁷ The catch-all term ‘Bihari’ designating the refugee population was a marker of that difference.³⁸ However, this was not the only thing that the refugees shared; they were in many ways also a working-class population. The majority of Biharis who migrated to East Pakistan were a lot poorer than their counterparts in the West Wing. Fleeing from bloody and horrific riots around partition and after, these refugees had crammed their bodies onto trains and carts, leaving behind their homes and meagre possessions, to arrive in East Pakistan empty-handed.³⁹

Although East Bengal saw smaller inflows of refugees than West Pakistan and a greater outflow of minority communities, it had less land and fewer economic opportunities to offer these *muhajirs* (refugees). With no material attachments to the land of East Bengal, the refugees constituted an additional pressure point on the state of Pakistan to industrialize as quickly as possible in order to resolve unemployment problems both in rural Bengal and amongst the refugees. The mills, thus, acquired pride of place in the state’s programme of refugee rehabilitation, providing them with jobs, housing, and a sense of

³⁶ These numbers continued to fluctuate in line with government policies, food shortages, communal violence, and so on. See ‘Weekly and fortnightly reports from British High Commissioners and Deputy High Commissioners’, East Bengal, 1947–50, IOR/L/PJ/5/305-336, UKNA.

³⁷ Dina Siddiqi, ‘Left behind by the nation: “stranded Pakistanis” in Bangladesh’, *Sites*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, pp. 150–183.

³⁸ The refugees did not necessarily have a shared language between them, but spoke a mix of languages: Urdu, Bhojpuri, Magadhi, Maithili, and others. Although the term ‘Bihari’ is problematic, I will use it for easy identification, but also to reflect how the refugees are described in sources.

³⁹ Papiya Ghosh, ‘Reinvoicing the Pakistan of the 1940s: Bihar’s “stranded Pakistanis”’, *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. II, no. 1, 1995, pp. 131–146. For more interesting scholarship on the Biharis in East Pakistan and Bangladesh, see Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji, and Annu Jalais, *The Bengal diaspora: rethinking Muslim migration* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Victoria Redclift, *Statelessness and citizenship: camps and the creation of political space* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Papiya Ghosh, *Partition and the South Asian diaspora: extending the subcontinent* (Delhi: Routledge, 2007); Md. Mabubur Rahman and Willem V. Schendel, “‘I am not a refugee’: rethinking partition migration”, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, July, 2003, pp. 551–584; Siddiqi, ‘Left behind by the nation’; Chatterji, *The spoils of partition*.

belonging. The refugees, in turn, must have forged a specific conception of, and devotion to, the mills and the state.⁴⁰

Thus, in 1954, when these symbols of national pride turned into sites of carnage and destruction, the Central government could not help but react forcefully against those who threatened to paralyse industrial progress in Pakistan. However, if massive and spectacular industrial projects represented state power, perhaps the rioters' occupation of mill space and violence can be interpreted as a counter-performance of power and belonging by postcolonial citizens. The cryptic comment of Bengali mechanic Amiruddin Chowdhury to his Hyderabad colleague Abdur Razzaq appears to support this interpretation. On 12 March 1954, at the Karnaphuli Paper Mill, a week or so before the riot, Amiruddin Chowdhury, making conversation with Abdur Razzak, stated: 'If one big officer is killed, everything will become O.K.'⁴¹

Complex solidarities

Why did these mills become sites of industrial carnage? In 1954, a general restlessness spread among the population of both wings of Pakistan. In the East Wing, the police recorded a rise in riots. Over 2,225 cases were reported in the first six months of 1954 compared to the 1,754 cases reported in the first five years of independence.⁴² The most serious disturbances occurred in industrial workplaces between Bengali and Bihari workers. But this bad blood had not always been there. In 1952, Bengali and Bihari peons, orderlies, and sweepers jointly defied their government employers by wearing 'hunger' badges and facing suspension together.⁴³ The police attributed the changing relationship

⁴⁰ More work needs to be done on the relationship between state-led industrialization and refugee rehabilitation in postcolonial nation states, and in particular the relationship that refugees forged with industrial scapes and relations. There is some scholarship on this: see Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'Divided landscapes, fragmented identities: East Bengal refugees and their rehabilitation in India, 1947–79', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1996, pp. 24–39; Chatterji, *The spoils of partition*.

⁴¹ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957.

⁴² Government of East Bengal, 'Review of half-yearly return of serious crimes for the period ending on 30.6.54', Home Police, B Proceedings, File no. 156, November 1954, National Archives, Dhaka (NAD).

⁴³ Government of East Bengal, 'Suspension orders to the L.S.S of this dptt for non compliance with govt. orders', Home Police, B Proceedings, File no. 6D, January 1952, NAD.

between the groups to the elections, which had stirred feelings of Bengali provincialism.⁴⁴ At face value, the connection between the riots and the broader political context seems evident. The Karnaphuli and Adamjee riots appear to be a communal riot, with Bengali workers attacking and killing Bihari workers and vice versa. However, on closer inspection, this picture starts to disintegrate. R. K. Bose, the co-ordinating engineer of the Karnaphuli Mill, who captured the riots on film, was one of the few people able to offer multiple and diachronic shots of the riot. The intelligence reports stated:

He heard shouting near the Chipper House and it gradually spread towards gate no. 1. He saw rioters going towards the Pay Master's office and some of the going across the nullah [stream]. Some of them engaged in a clash with somebody in front of the Pay Master's Office. The entire mob would be about 150. After a while the mob scattered and returned carrying split bamboo and other implements and attacked somebody outside the Pay Master's office and then returned to the Machine House and then attacked it. Some men came and attacked the Post Office. Some men attacked the aluminium huts. Some gathered near the colony. They collected rods and bamboos and marched towards the factory. The witness saw some men approaching the O.D's offices.⁴⁵

As I will argue, the close-up shots of the Karnaphuli riot provide us with alternative pictures to that of a mob whipped up by communal frenzy and hatred. The ethnicity of workers was not immutable, but rather an unstable and fluctuating category of identity; workers actively constituted and reconstituted identities through discussions and bodily interventions during the riots.

The workers' negotiation of identities can be demonstrated through several specific instances. Syed Badaruddin, the personal assistant to the operative director, Khurshid Ali, was rescued from his attacker, a 'bearded man with a stout stick', by Bengali workers on account of the fact that he was a 'good man'. The senile and poor-sighted Abdur Rahman Khan, the Pathan chowkidar, was rescued by the shouts of '*bas karo, mat maro*' (stop it, don't hit him) by another Bengali worker, at which point his attackers abandoned their assault. The assailants of Abul Kasem Zaidi, an assistant electrical engineer at the Power House, escorted him to a safe place after they had identified him as a

⁴⁴ Government of East Bengal, 'Review of half-yearly return of serious crimes for the period ending on 30.6.54'.

⁴⁵ R. K. Bose handed over the negative rolls to the police; see High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, pp. 50–51.

‘worker’.⁴⁶ Other stories emerged of Bengali rioters who were both assailants and, at other times, protectors of non-Bengalis. It appears that, where the Bihari person was identified as a worker or someone who appeared to possess moral qualities that workplace relations and labour processes failed to suppress, their ethnic identity was no longer their primary identification and their life was spared. The compartmentalization of labour processes within the mill can help to explain the inconsistencies and contradictions of the behaviour of the rioters. Their role as assailants, spectators, or protectors was based on workplace relations, which were not the same for every one of the rioters or those they attacked.

These identities were produced through not simply the mill environment, but also other commingled spaces such as the neighbourhood. In the case of Hatom Serang, accused of incitement and distributing sticks to the Karnaphuli rioters, the judge was puzzled at his benevolence towards Yusuf Khan, the cousin of the murdered Pathan *durwans*: ‘If he were a wicked man, he would deal with Yusuf Khan, P.W. 90 in the manner which other rioters had dealt with Mudassar Khan [head *durwan*]. I hold that Sk. Hatom has established his innocence.’ Hatom Serang’s behaviour becomes less enigmatic when the judge comes to let slip in his summary that both Yusuf Khan and Hatom Serang were ‘close neighbours’.⁴⁷

The ‘Bihari’ and ‘Bengali’ identities were more pronounced during the riot for certain sections than others. Anu Miyan, a ‘helper’ at the Saw Mill, aware of a commotion happening at the mill, had remained at his house in Dobaashi Bazaar, cleaning. It was only when Saiyedur Rahman, the secretary of the Chandraghona Paper Mill Union, and a contingent of 50–60 men arrived at his doorstep and shouted, ‘How is it that you are sitting idle, don’t you work at the mill?’ that Anu Miyan left his house to take part in the riot. Anu Miyan’s identity as a ‘Bengali’ was defined by his relationship to the mill.⁴⁸ His participation in the riot mattered because he was a Bengali worker, who was being asked to demonstrate solidarity because of a common experience and knowledge of labour within the mill. However, this demand of Bengali solidarity was not made on all the Bengalis at the mill. Mujibur

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, for Badaruddin, p. 45; for Abdur Rahman, p. 102; for Abul Kasem Zaidi, p. 66.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.162.

⁴⁸ ‘Confessional statement of accused Anu Miyan’, in ‘Serious rioting at Chandraghona Paper Mills in the district of Chittagong Hill Tracts on 22.3.54’, Home Police, B Proceedings, File no. 166, January–July 1959, NAD (hereafter Chandraghona Files).

Rahman, the Bengali administrative officer, was intentionally set upon by workers during the riots. He was charged with having done little to redress their grievances despite being their 'Bengali brother'.⁴⁹ These bonds of fraternity, then, were not assumed or natural. They were based on a certain set of expectations based on their relationship within the mill-scape and, if not met, that relationship was easily broken. Mujibur Rahman's association with Khurshid Ali undermined his claims to Bengali-ness in the mill context. Conversely, the Bihari identity was pronounced for some because of their relationship to authority. As the riot unfolded at Karnaphuli, it was clearly a conflict between labourer and mill management, who happened to be non-Bengali as well. In these specific industrial circumstances, to be 'Bihari' meant to be marked as an authority figure and open to attack.

The question, then, turns to why had the death of Khurshid Ali, the operative director of Karnaphuli, not been enough? Why did papermakers, labour officers, peons, clerks, and *durwans* have to die—some of whom were on the bottom rung in the workplace, much like their Bengali counterparts? It was because these men had come to be seen as 'Khurshid Ali's men'.⁵⁰ Their bodies were seen as extensions of Khurshid Ali's authority, particularly so in the case of labour officers and *durwans*, who were often used to discipline workers, and were therefore the visible, and more brutal, signs of domination and subordination of the workers.⁵¹ The death of Mudassar Khan, the head *durwan*, had not come as a surprise to the police, who had described him as a 'marked man' since 1951, when he had been tried for murder and acquitted in a previous riot.⁵² The workers meted out their own form of 'justice' as they struck against these men for the crimes they had committed in their position of authority.

The Adamjee Jute Mill riot narrates a similar tension between management and workers. On the morning of 15 May, Bihari workers gathered to pay respect to the murdered Bihari *durwan*, and the mill managers and administrative staff—the majority of whom were also

⁴⁹ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, p. 144.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144. The Judge S. M. Hasan described the men killed as those who were suspected to be 'supporters and associates' of Khurshid Ali.

⁵¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'On deifying and defying authority: managers and workers in the jute mills of Bengal, circa 1890–1940', *Past and Present*, vol. 100, no. 1, August, 1983, pp. 124–146.

⁵² 'Memo from Office of the Superintendent of Police, Chittagong Hill Tracts', 2 April 1954, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

non-Bengalis—joined them.⁵³ The mourners wore black badges, unfurled and hoisted black flags, and declared the day as ‘martyrs day’. As Bengali workers went to collect their wages from the Pay Office, they were confronted by Bihari workers, armed with guns from the *durwan* store, and shouts of ‘*roktek badla rokto cai*’ (we want blood for blood).⁵⁴ The riot started off as coordinated managerial violence unleashed on Bengali workers; however, it assumed a different dynamic and an up-ending of those relationships of power as it spread out to the working-class neighbourhoods, where it was now the turn of non-Bengalis to be killed.⁵⁵ These spaces after all housed workers from various industrial establishments in Narayanganj, such as those employed in the dockyards, jute presses, textile mills, and glass factories. For these men, on the day of the riot, the Bihari labourers of Adamjee Jute Mill had become coterminous with an authority that had turned guns on its workers.

Labour historians have long debated the question of communal violence between workers in South Asia and taken several different approaches. Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote about an enduring communal consciousness amongst workers, reinforced through the *sardari* (jobber) mode of recruitment and control, which was based on rural, caste, and religious connections, and prevented workers from forming a united front along the lines of class.⁵⁶ Chandavarkar, arguing against Chakrabarty’s cultural determinism, suggested that disunity amongst workers was instead a rational response to business strategies, employer policies, and the mechanisms of the labour market.⁵⁷ However, Sumit Sarkar is correct to observe that both Chakrabarty’s and Chandavarkar’s deterministic models omit ‘moments of labour self-activity, militancy and autonomy’.⁵⁸ Nandini Gooptu and Chitra Joshi develop a more fluid, dynamic, and complex understanding of worker activity, identity, and solidarity, situated in their everyday working-class life and events of

⁵³ See fn. 12.

⁵⁴ ‘Adamjee Miler Hungamai 600 Lok Pran Harayeche’, *Dainik Azad* (Dacca).

⁵⁵ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁵⁷ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The origins of industrial capitalism in India: business strategies and the working classes in Bombay 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ Sumit Sarkar, ‘The return of labour to South-Asian history’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2004, pp. 285–313.

militancy.⁵⁹ Chitra Joshi writes: ‘Workers bear the mark of multiple identities, a multiplicity not captured in the neatness of homogenous categories.’⁶⁰ Workers had a combination of identities—caste, class, religion, nation—and these were constantly shifting, contested, and reconfigured, depending on the specific context. Class struggles were at times refracted through caste, religious, and national lens.

Following Gooptu and Joshi, I offer a picture of complex solidarities and unities that emerged during the riots. Ties were formed between different types and forms of labour, between workers of different regions, and between the workplace and neighbourhood. These connections were fundamentally based on the life of labour in and outside the industrial establishments. I suggest that these were complex because these ties were not in any sense assumed or natural, nor were they exceptional or anomalous to the context. These solidarities offer a different explanation to the presumed Bengali–Bihari axis of the riot. However, they were complex because there were very precise and real ways in which the Bengali–Bihari axis was being utilized by the management.

The new borders between India and Pakistan in 1947 became a means of labour discipline and capital accumulation. Historically, Bihari men have been ‘one of the largest and most enduring labor diasporas’ from the eighteenth century onwards, working as mercenaries in early modern India and later as earthworkers, railway porters, jail wardens, and millhands in the jute mills of Hooghly and Calcutta.⁶¹ After partition, workers previously described as having ‘one foot in the rural world and other in the urban industrial complex’ had little opportunity to return to their homes. They were now truly a proletariat class—landless and urban. They were left dependent on the management for employment, housing, and a sense of community. These workers, previously perceived as unruly and troublesome, were now vulnerable and precarious. A report on the human and social impact of industrialization in East Pakistan stated:

Even those immigrants who have had no experience of factory work have sought factory employment, as it is almost impossible to settle them in agriculture when

⁵⁹ Nandini Gooptu, *The politics of the urban poor in early twentieth-century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Chitra Joshi, *Lost worlds: Indian labour and its forgotten histories* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2003).

⁶⁰ Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, p. 275.

⁶¹ Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais, *The Bengal diaspora*, pp. 163–171.

there is already a heavy pressure of population on land. As the immigrant labourer has generally brought his family with him and has no homestead in this province, he has to be provided with housing for himself and his family by the management or the government when he has not been able to secure any accommodation himself. *The immigrant workers and their families are entirely dependent on the factory for their livelihood.*⁶²

The management used this weakness to discipline workers in two ways. First, the threat of Bihari workers organizing against the management was removed as a consequence of their economic dependency.⁶³ Second, the management used this ethnic division to discipline Bengali workers. Because the Biharis were seen as tough, they were appointed as security guards, supervisors, contractors, and labour officers at the mills. They were paid better and given free accommodation. A University of Dhaka report on industrial labour showed workers from outside the province were earning on average Rs 67.5 per month as compared to Rs 60 for other workers.⁶⁴ Thus, Bihari labour power came from them being able to discipline and undermine Bengali labourers. G. P. Hampshire, the UK Deputy High Commissioner, noted, in his report on the Adamjee riots, how one of the strategies of the management to prevent labour organization was to 'import and place at strategic points in the Mills trusted employees from Calcutta (more Biharis) who were in effect management spies and *goondas* [gangsters]. The effect of this was not unnaturally a marked increase in tension'.⁶⁵ The management used the Bihari worker as a buffer between themselves and an unfamiliar, and consequently unstable, workforce. The contradiction between the image of the powerful Bihari workers as the strongmen for mill management and their actual vulnerability as refugees led to their deaths at the hands of their Bengali co-workers.

⁶² A. F. A. Hussain, *Human and social impact of technological change in Pakistan: a report on a survey conducted by the University of Dacca and published with the assistance of UNESCO*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 123, emphasis added.

⁶³ In 1964, the editor of *Pakistan Observer* in conversation with American Consul and Vice Consul said: 'West Pakistani businessmen operating in Dacca and Narayanganj were encouraging trouble because they were interested in having more Bihari labourers at their mills. They wanted this because they regarded the Biharis as more docile than the Bengalis.' See fn. 59 in Ghosh, *Partition and the South Asian diaspora*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Hussain, *Human and social*, p. 247.

⁶⁵ UK High Commission, Dacca, 'Letter from G.P Hampshire to J.D Murray, Acting High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan', 24/5/1954, DO35/5323, UKNA.

The Bengali workers

The Bengali workers at the Karnaphuli Paper Mill were the main protagonists in the riot, but what do we know about them? Like the Biharis, there is a vulnerability that becomes apparent as the labour-recruitment process is more closely examined. There were 2,000 workers on the 'regular pay roll' of the Karnaphuli Paper Mill for the three shifts.⁶⁶ It is not clear as to whether all these workers were part of a permanent labour force or drawn from a pool of *badli* (regular substitute) or casual labourers.⁶⁷ Anu Miyan, one of the accused, had only been hired back as a 'helper' after having been retrenched from his earlier job as 'stone crusher' at the mill.⁶⁸

The practice of hiring temporary labour, daily-pay workers, and contract workers remained common in most industrial establishments, with just a small number of workers assigned with permanent status.⁶⁹ Arjan de Haan notes how, in the pre-partition period, the *badli* system was used by the mill management as an 'adaptation to the migratory pattern of workers', so that mills continued to function when workers returned to their villages to attend marriages, emergencies, harvests, and for other family reasons.⁷⁰ The *badli* workers often constituted a vast majority of the jute-mill workforce, recruited on a daily basis at the factory gates.⁷¹ The *badli* system continued to persist in spaces like the Karnaphuli Paper Mill and the Adamjee Jute Mill for the Bengali workers, who continued to have rural attachments and obligations, unlike the Bihari workers, who were most likely permanent.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Mission of 1952–53, commissioned by the Pakistani government to identify labour problems, highlighted the labour inefficiency in industries, with employers hiring twice the number of workers they needed. The report attributed this to

⁶⁶ 'Memo from Office of the Superintendent of Police, Chittagong Hill Tracts', 2 April 1954, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

⁶⁷ There are very few data on the actual labour force of these large mills, but readings of various documents indicate the regular use of casual labour.

⁶⁸ 'Confessional statement of accused Anu Miyan', in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

⁶⁹ Richard Kriegel, *Labor in Pakistan, 1947–59* (n.p., 1959).

⁷⁰ Arjan de Haan, 'The *badli* system in industrial labour recruitment: managers' and workers' strategies in Calcutta's jute industry', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 33, nos. 1–2, 1999, pp. 271–301.

⁷¹ Subho Basu, *Does class matter? Colonial capital and workers' resistance in Bengal (1890–1937)* (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

the abundant supply of cheap labour and managerial resistance to new work methods as well as to repairing expensive machine parts. Interestingly, the ILO Mission also noted that labour inefficiency was a deliberate worker tactic in East Pakistan, which had large numbers of employed and underemployed persons.⁷² Hence, many workers found themselves bought in as 'helpers' and apprentices for months by relatives and friends, living on less than a subsistence wage, before they could be assured of some regularity of employment, even as part of a reserve force of casual labourers. The University of Dhaka report recorded the case of a 22-year-old married man at the Adamjee Jute Mill who had 'smuggled' his way in to learn work in the spinning section for two months pretending that he had relatives at the mill when he had none. After two months, when work at Mill No. 2 started, he walked up to the manager for a job, was given a test and found suitable, and therefore given a more permanent position.⁷³

The working-class neighbourhood, in particular the bazaar, emerged as an important space for solidarities to form between temporary, irregular, and contract workers. Dobaashi Bazaar in Karnaphuli was the waiting area of labour. The day after the riots, the superintendent of police of Chittagong Hill Tract prepared to undertake a raid on the bazaar to round up suspects on the information that the large group of mill employees, as well as ex-employees and those looking to be employed, had congregated there.⁷⁴ This gathering was not related to the riot itself, but indicates the mill's regular practice of hiring and discharging workers daily and the blurring of the distinction between permanent and casual labour.⁷⁵ Chandavarkar has demonstrated the importance of the neighbourhood in mediating a worker's relationship to the workplace. He describes it as a 'distinct arena of social and political action'.⁷⁶ As Bengali workers gathered and waited anxiously in Dobaashi Bazaar for different contractors to come and employ them for earthwork and work in the brickfields, bamboo yard, and mills, they

⁷² International Labour Organisation, *Report of the ILO labour survey mission on labour problems in Pakistan, August 1952–February 1953* (Karachi: Government of Pakistan, 1953), p. 16.

⁷³ Hussain, *Human and social*, pp. 104–109.

⁷⁴ 'Memo from Office of the Superintendent of Police, Chittagong Hill Tracts', 2 April 1954, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

⁷⁵ 'F.I.R on Chandraghona', 22 March 1954, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

⁷⁶ Chandavarkar, *The origins of industrial capitalism in India*.

drank tea, gossiped, and exchanged information on jobs, daily wages, and jobbers.⁷⁷ The bazaar and neighbourhood were spaces where solidarities and dependencies were formed between Bengali workers on the basis of their shared experience of the impermanency of labour at the mill and their impatience with their precarious conditions.

The Noakhali connection

Although the original charge sheet of 63 Bengali workers in the Karnaphuli riot revealed a mix of workers from various districts of East Pakistan, the majority of the rioters had been from Noakhali (see [Table 1](#)).

This pattern appears again in the Adamjee riots, where Noakhali workers played a prominent role.⁷⁸ Noakhalis have long been an industrial and footloose community due to their proximity to places like Chittagong and Narayanganj and their mobility, driven by severe landlessness, continual floods, soil erosion, and severe food shortages. Prior to partition, men from Noakhali were working in the ports, docks, and factories of Calcutta.⁷⁹ Although an itinerant community, many left for East Bengal after the 1946 Calcutta killings and some were directly involved in the Noakhali riots that occurred later on in the year.⁸⁰ After the birth of Pakistan, Noakhalis continued to be mobile, travelling to Dhaka, Narayanganj, Chittagong, and other industrial spaces for work.

However, there were no natural lines of unity between the Noakhalis and other Bengal workers. Richard Kriegel, in his report on *Labour in East Pakistan, 1947–1959*, stated: ‘There is also what might be called “normal tension” between the people of various districts or grouping of districts.’⁸¹ Noakhalis were regarded as ‘ruffians’ and resented by

⁷⁷ For more on urban daily labour markets, see David Mosse, Sanjeev Gupta, and Vidya Shah, ‘On the margins in the city: Adivasi seasonal labour migration in Western India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 28, 9–15 July, 2005, pp. 3025–3038; Mythri Prasad-Aleyamma, ‘The cultural politics of wages: ethnography of construction work in Kochi, India’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2017, pp. 163–193; Rina Agarwala, *Informal labour, formal politics, and dignified discontent in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷⁸ UK High Commission, Dacca, ‘Letter from G.P Hampshire to J.D Murray, Acting High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan’.

⁷⁹ Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: war, famine and the end of empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁸¹ Kriegel, *Labour in Pakistan*, p. 84.

TABLE I.

The native district and subdistricts/police stations of Bengali workers charged in the Karnaphuli case

District	Subdistricts or police stations
Noakhali: 33	Begumganj (16), Senbag (3), Sudharam (3), Feni (3), Chagal Naiya (2), Companyganj (2), Lakshimpur (2), Sonagazi (1), Ramguti (1)
Chittagong: 11	Rauzen (4), Hat Hazari (2), Rangunia (2), Chandraghona (1), Mirsawrai (1), Sitakund (1)
Sylhet: 9	Kotwali (4), Moulvi Bazaar (2), Barlekha (1), Balanganj (1), Nabiganj (1)
Dacca: 6	Nawabganj (3), Dhamrai (1), Dohar (1), Lohajganj (1)
Tiperra: 2	Brahmanbaria (1), Chandpur (1)
Rangpur: 1	Pirgacha (1)

These data have been compiled from the charge sheet in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files. *Source*: Chandraghona File, 1957.

Bengali workers of other districts because they were able to obtain more secure and better-paid work due to their industrial experience.⁸² What, then, explains the solidarity between Noakhali workers and other Bengalis during the riots? What role did the Noakhali workers play in these riots?

Noakhali labourers were found to be influential in supporting the establishment of workers' unions at Adamjee Jute Mill and Karnaphuli Paper Mill. The Chandraghona Paper Mill Union meeting, which had taken place the evening before the Karnaphuli riot, had been presided over by a Noakhali, who worked as a subcontractor at the mill, and two of the speakers, a foreman and a labourer, were from Noakhali as well.⁸³ These were the unions that fell out of the ambit of managerial favour, often described as 'red-flag unions', and came to rival the officially backed unions.

Though Pakistan had signed up to International Labour Organization conventions immediately after partition, the government and industries were often unfavourably disposed to the existence of trade unions.⁸⁴ Around 1952–53, employers had recognized only 71 of the 321 registered unions, and there were many that continued to operate unregistered.⁸⁵

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁸³ 'Meeting Report', 21 March 1954, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

⁸⁴ C. Candland, *Labor, democratisation and development in India and Pakistan* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).

⁸⁵ International Labour Organisation, *Report of the ILO labour survey mission*, p. 134.

Employers did not have to officially enter into negotiation with any unions that were not recognized. Workers who were suspected of organizing were frequently dismissed by employers under false charges of ‘unsatisfactory work’, ‘neglect of duty’, ‘agitation for strike’, ‘creation of disturbances amongst workers’, ‘insubordination’, ‘demonstrating against authorities’, ‘delivering of instigatory [*sic*] speeches’ and ‘shouting of slogans’.⁸⁶ Employers appointed work committees and labour officers to counteract any form of self-activity amongst workers.

After partition, the East Pakistan Federation of Labour emerged as the representative body for workers, with Faiz Ahmed as the principal labour leader. His close relationship with Aftab Malik, the first labour minister of Pakistan, who initially proposed the idea of a central labour organization, meant that he was someone that the government and industrial owners were willing to bargain with.⁸⁷ This use of trade unions to control and undermine self-organizing amongst workers can be traced back to the partition period. Subho Basu’s work demonstrates how, during the 1937 general strike in the jute-mill industry, the Muslim League set up the White Union to disrupt the activities of ‘red-flag’ union and the radical factory committees during the 1937 general strike in the jute-mill industry in Calcutta. The White Union, supported by the state and the British and native industrial lobby and funded by the mills, was able to effectively diminish the threat of labour militancy.⁸⁸

Over the 1950s, Faiz’s position as the sole representative of workers grew weaker among the competing demands and counterclaims of representation.⁸⁹ It was in this somewhat democratic atmosphere of unionization that the Adamjee Jute Mill Mazdoor Union and Chandraghona Paper Mills Workers Union emerged and solidarities were forged more strongly between Bengali workers of different regions. Though the unions may not have been established by workers, but by political outsiders, their location in the bazaars of the working-class neighbourhoods and their claims as an alternative to the officially backed union suggested a more familiar relationship with the life of

⁸⁶ ‘Dispute between the Government Dockyard Narayananj and their employees under section 12 (6) of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947’, Commerce (Labour) Department. B Proceedings, File no. 1, May 1947–January 1951, NAD.

⁸⁷ Ahmad, *Labour movement in East Pakistan*, p. 38.

⁸⁸ Basu, *Does class matter?*, pp. 225–273.

⁸⁹ ‘Industrial Disputes Act—appointment of District Judge, Dacca as Tribunal – Sonachura Workshop’, Commerce (Labour) Department, B Proceedings, File no. 1, July–August 1953, NAD.

labour. This enabled these unions to engage with workers in new ways and adopt a more uncompromising stance with management. S. A. Priddle, the labour adviser to the British High Commission in Karachi, noted in his report a week before the Adamjee riots the rapid growth of 'communist' influence in unions. Priddle described a depressed Abdul Currim Karawadia, general manager of the Adamjee Jute Mill, lamenting the strength of the new Adamjee Jute Mill Mazdoor Union, which he had been forced to recognize, and that he had not been able to get 'a decent day's work' out of Adamjee workers since.⁹⁰

Men in black

As the courtroom drama of the Karnaphuli riots unfolded, it became apparent that the main protagonists of the riot were not just the 49 Bengali labourers in the dock, but also 2,000–3,000 'unknown persons' involved in the disturbance. In the First Information Report (FIR) filed by the police, the deputy inspector general of police mentioned the difficulties in identifying the perpetrators: 'in continuation of the previous report, I am to state that 75% of the rioters were not workers at the mill.'⁹¹ That statement, however, was not entirely accurate. Under cross-examination, Prosecution Witness 25 disclosed that the 500–600 men who had started off the *hulla* (riot) had been dressed in black *genjis* and *lungis* (vests and sarongs).⁹² These men in black were part of the 2,000-odd contract labour force working and living in the northern hinterland of the factory, in an area known as Baragonia.⁹³ In conversation with the British trade commissioner, M. A. H. Ispahani, member of the Jute Board, PIDC, and one of the leading industrial families in East Pakistan, also hinted at the participation of the contract labour force in the riot as they faced unemployment after having recently completed their assignment.⁹⁴ These were men who had been employed by *majhis* (petty subcontractors) and worked under various

⁹⁰ 'East Pakistan labour review', 22 May 1954, Pakistan, Labour Attache Reports, Lab 13/525, UKNA.

⁹¹ 'FIR on Chandraghona', in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

⁹² High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, p. 62.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁴ 'Letter from UK Trade Commissioner Service', Chittagong, 25/3/1954, DO35/5336, UKNA.

thikadars (contractors) and were hired primarily as earth-diggers for road building, as well as in brick manufacturing.

The ILO Mission noted that industrial employers preferred to use contractors for the execution of projects where time was limited and a huge labour force required.⁹⁵ Ahmed Sofa's short essay, '*Karnaphulir Dhare*' ('The Banks of Karnaphuli'), offers a rare and detailed insight into the practice of the contract labour regime in the postcolonial space and, more importantly, at the Karnaphuli Paper Mill. Various *thikadars* were employed for the building of roads into the hills. These *thikadars*, who were usually not local, would enter into agreements with local *majhis* for labour recruitment. The *majhi* would receive an advance of money and a promise of a percentage of the daily wages of the workers.⁹⁶

Traditionally, the *majhis* have been Santhal chiefs—members of one of the oldest tribal communities in north-east India. Since the colonial period, the Santhals have been involved in circulating labour, moving from one area to another doing railway work, earthwork, and mining.⁹⁷ *Majhis* operated within kinship and caste structures to recruit and supervise workers. According to Ian Kerr, these earthworking communities were 'marginalised, even criminalised by the authorities and local inhabitants in the areas through which they moved. They became the quintessential social outsiders, the feared, despaired or degraded "others" despite their importance to local economies'.⁹⁸

In the postcolonial period, we know little about the background of the *majhis* and the contract labour force. It is possible that Santhals and other tribal or lower-caste communities continued to engage in contract labour. However, the increasing availability of circulatory labour in postcolonial Pakistan meant that it was no longer necessary for the petty contractor to retain their deep and familiar previous connections with labourers. The *majhi* now simply rented out eight to ten shacks in working-class neighbourhoods, laid out coarse mats, came to an arrangement with the local shopkeeper for the supply of food and other goods, and then

⁹⁵ International Labour Organisation, *Report of the ILO labour survey mission*, p. 21.

⁹⁶ Ahmed Sofa, '*Karnaphulir dhare*' (1965), available at <http://arts.bdnews24.com/?p=2972> [accessed 23 December 2015].

⁹⁷ Kalinkinkar Datta, 'The Santhal insurrection of 1855–6 (Part II)', *Bengal: Past and Present*, vol. 51, pt. 1, no. 101, 1936, pp. 19–35.

⁹⁸ Ian J. Kerr, 'On the move: circulating labour in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial India', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 51, no. S14, 2006, pp. 85–109.

set out to recruit workers. Ahmed Sofa, in his description of this recruitment process, stated:

Many of these *majhis* are thieves. They plough the entire city. If they find a suitable person, they bring them to shacks. They will never gather more than four and five person at once for work, they'd be taking great risks. That is why they are drawn to the one person.⁹⁹

Having convinced the men that their new employer was 'a devout person, prays 5 times daily and doesn't squander anyone's lawful earnings', they would be taken to the shacks. Once the *majhi* had his required number, they were handed over to the *thikadars* to work long hours, in unpleasant working conditions, for low wages.

The unity between the millworkers and earth-diggers during the riot appears to arise for several reasons. First, the continuing segmentation and dominance of the labour force along religious and ethnic lines, with Biharis in better-paid, supervisory, and piece-work jobs and the Bengali, tribal, and low-caste Hindu workers in inferior, poorly paid jobs with limited mobility, united these different groups of workers.¹⁰⁰ Second, the overlap of the informal with the formal sector, demonstrated through the presence of work gangs employed by subcontractors in the mill space, highlighted the precarity of all the workers who were not permanent, organized, and protected by labour legislation.¹⁰¹ Finally, what united the workers was the new set of expectations and hopes that the postcolonial context generated. On the morning of the Karnaphuli riot, news that the contractor Amir Bin Rashid (later killed in the riot) was at the Pay Office receiving his bill was relayed to the earth-diggers. Over 300–400 earth-diggers laid down their tools, picked up bamboo sticks and spare pieces of rod, and moved towards the heartland of the mill. As they approached Gate No. 1, they shouted, '*hum lok ka bichar karlo*' (give us justice); their appeals were directed not at the contractor, but at the senior manager, Khurshid Ali. However, their cries fell on deaf ears, as Khurshid Ali left the office in his jeep whilst labourers continued to shout '*humara bichar karlo*' (do us justice). When Mudassar Khan and the other Pathan

⁹⁹ Ahmed Sofa, '*Kamafulir dhare*'.

¹⁰⁰ Arjan de Haan, 'Migration in Eastern India: a segmented labour market', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1995, pp. 51–93.

¹⁰¹ Jan Breman, 'The study of industrial labour in post-colonial India: a concluding review', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 33, nos. 1 & 2, 1999, pp. 407–431.

durwans sought to disperse the crowd, the rejected workers turned on them and the Pay Office instead.¹⁰²

The *majhis* who had been so critical to the labour-recruitment process fled the area after the riots and could not be traced by the investigators.¹⁰³ While very little is known of the involvement of the *majhis* during the riots themselves, their subsequent disappearance raises important questions. Had the *majhis* fled because they were afraid of the earth-diggers or was it because they, too, had participated in the riots? Their possible participation narrates a complex solidarity between two groups, given that this relationship was fundamentally based on exploitation. In many ways, the *majhis* and *thikadars* functioned like the *sardars*, *mukadam*, *maistry*, *ghat serangs*, and *arkattis* that appear in the labour historiography of colonial South Asia as intermediaries between labour and management, responsible for the recruitment, control, and supervision of workers. The jobbers were instrumental for workers in the provision of employment, credit, and information, but their power was also dependent on how well they served the workers.¹⁰⁴ Thus, during the course of the Karnaphuli riot, a *majhi* who did not demonstrate loyalty to the workers might have been considered a Bihari and thus liable to attack.

The neighbourhood

During the riots, the working-class neighbourhood emerged as a space that challenged the authority of the mill. There were two men in the Karnaphuli court case who had stood out amongst the accused: Aminullah Patwari of Noakhali and Gunu Mia Sawdagar of Chandraghona. Whilst the rest of the accused had been workers at the mill, these two men had been traders of Dobaashi Bazaar. Aminullah

¹⁰² High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, pp. 62, 145.

¹⁰³ 'FIR on Chandraghona', in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

¹⁰⁴ The historiography on the role of labour contractors in colonial South Asia is particularly rich; see Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'The decline and fall of the jobber system in the Bombay cotton textile industry, 1870–1955', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2008, pp. 117–210; Samita Sen, 'Commercial recruiting and informal intermediation: debate over the *sardari* system in Assam tea plantations, 1860–1900', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2010, pp. 3–28; Nitin Varma, *Coolies of capitalism: Assam tea and the making of coolie labour* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2017); Ian J. Kerr, *Building the railways of the Raj: 1850–1900* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Patwari, the owner of Haji Stores, a tea and groceries shop, was accused of playing a major role during the riots. He was charged with having 'repeatedly instigated and exhorted' the earth-diggers and labourers of Baragonia, and supplying them with sticks during the riots. Aminullah Patwari was heard shouting that he would 'consume 4 tins of kerosene oil to set fire to the houses of outsiders', which had gestured to the fact that he was a man of means and of his power and status amongst workers.¹⁰⁵

The work of Chandavarkar, Basu, and Gooptu demonstrates the importance of working-class neighbourhoods in sustaining the material, social, and political life of workers: the energy, buzz, activities, and relationships in the neighbourhood shaped by workers' needs for housing, credit, employment, sex, and leisure. Chandavarkar writes: 'The material needs of the working class were not the only factor in the constitution of their neighbourhood connections. Leisure and political activities also contributed to the development of street and neighbourhood as a social area.'¹⁰⁶ The worker built relations in the narrow alleys that led to their houses, the *messes* (shared housing) they lived in, the brothels they visited, and the tea stalls they stopped at for a chat. At times, the neighbourhoods were an extension of the workplace and, at others, they were the location of power and patronage that competed with the mill space.

The life of labour was all-important in the working-class neighbourhoods of Adamjee and Karanphuli Paper Mills. The union meetings, located in the bazaar, provided for the public airing of grievances by labourers against the authorities. The undercover agent of the Special Branch, who had been attending the Chandraghona Paper Mill Workers Union meetings at Dobaashi Bazaar, remarked that, though 90 per cent of the attendees were workers, the rest were members of the public.¹⁰⁷ Thus, on the eve of the Karnaphuli riot, more than 100 attendees out of the 1,200–1,500-strong audience were members of the public. These meetings presented a forum for discussion not simply on issues specific to the mill, but also on life in the neighbourhood, whose fate was so closely intertwined to that of

¹⁰⁵ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, p. 161.

¹⁰⁶ Chandavarkar, *The origins of industrial capitalism in India*. For discussions on the working-class neighbourhood, see also Gooptu, *The politics of the urban poor*; Basu, *Does class matter?*.

¹⁰⁷ 'Meeting Report', 21 March 1954, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

labourers in the mill. Abdur Rahman, employee in the chipper section of the mill, was a speaker at the meeting on 21 March, where he disclosed that the mill authority had closed down the premises of ‘poor shopkeepers’ and demanded that the mill help reopen the shops. This was not, however, a charitable gesture that was being made on behalf of ‘poor’ shopkeepers: these men had their own resources and played the critical role of providing credit at times of deprivation, and therefore posed a challenge to the mill’s monopoly of local authority. The neighbourhood may have forged solidarities between different workers and groups leading to new relationships of power and authority emerging to challenge the hold that the mill management had over its workers.¹⁰⁸

Men like Aminullah Patwari came to acquire a powerful position in the neighbourhood; he was not simply the teashop manager, but also a credit-lender, landlord, contractor, and a financial patron of the union as well.¹⁰⁹ Aminullah Patwari was a lifeline for many workers, particularly for those confronted with job insecurity or, even worse, unemployment. His interest in their labour meant that Aminullah was able to wield influence and set the agenda for workers in ways that the management could not. The influence of Aminullah Patwari could be discerned in the cries of labourers as they darted in and out of the Dobaashi Bazaar, saying, ‘*Amir Bin Rashid ko mari felaitechi*’ (we are killing Amir Bin Rashid).¹¹⁰ Amir Bin Rashid, a rival Bihari contractor, provided competition to Aminullah Patwari that needed to be eliminated. There was none better to help him in this than his debtors, tenants, and chai-drinking friends—the aggrieved Bengali workers.

‘No to race’, ‘no to retrenchment’, ‘no to prostitution’

What turned this seething underbelly of discontent into a full-blown riot? This section examines more fully the immediate provocations of the Karnaphuli riot, in particular the dismissal of one Md. Ekhlas, a Bengali chemist, and the slogans that were shouted by workers before and after the riot.

¹⁰⁸ For broader discussions of the role of neighbourhood, see Chandavarkar, *The origins of industrial capitalism in India*; Gooptu, *The politics of the urban poor*.

¹⁰⁹ The Union President of Chandraghona Paper Mill Workers Union, Ali Akbar of Noakhali was a subcontractor under Aminullah Patwari. See fn. 104 for labour historiography on jobbers.

¹¹⁰ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, p. 83.

At the time of the riot, Md. Ekhlās, the most senior of Bengali officers in the mill, had only just returned to work at the Soda Boiler Recovery plant of the paper mill, having been sent to the United States of America by the PIDC for further training and education. His return was marked by a strained relationship with the operative director, Khurshid Ali. The chief accusation against Md. Ekhlās was his allegedly extravagant ambition to be the ‘No. 1 in management’.¹¹¹ Other complaints, no less serious, were to do with his friendship with the prominent labour leader, Zahur Ahmed Choudhury of Chittagong Town, and attendance of union meetings in the bazaar.¹¹² On the morning of the riot, an already aggrieved Khurshid Ali entered into an altercation with Ekhlās, which ended up with him firing Ekhlās on the spot.

It was after the dismissal of Md. Ekhlās that the riot broke out. Amidst the din of riots, shouts were heard of ‘*Ekhlās Sahib Ẓindabad*’ and ‘*Khurshid Ali Murdabad*’ (death to Khurshid Ali). These shouts were a continuation of the slogans chanted by workers the night before after the union meeting in the bazaar. Little is known about Md. Ekhlās’s relationship with trade unions or the workers, but the significance of these slogans can be understood in terms of the possibilities that his position offered to labourers. Three weeks prior to the riot, a vacancy had arisen in the boiler room. Ekhlās had introduced a man from his district to Mr Young, the mechanical engineer, for the vacant position. This person was later found to be participating in the riot.¹¹³ Ekhlās, therefore, was not just any employee, but a modern-day jobber, who employed his seniority and influence as a salaried officer in the mill to secure jobs for the precarious Bengali worker. His personal intervention on behalf of the Bengali workers produced an alternative vision of authority—one that was responsive to their problems and accessible to workers in ways that the mill management was not.

Khurshid Ali was a man said to be obsessed with paper, but also equally paranoid about sabotage.¹¹⁴ In 1953, the inspector general of police had been informed of mounting labour unrest in the mill, but little had been

¹¹¹ ‘Memo from Office of the Superintendent of Police, Chittagong Hill Tracts’, 2 April 1954, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

¹¹² ‘Report on visit on Wednesday 24th March 1954’, DO35/5336, UKNA.

¹¹³ ‘Memo from Special Police Investigation Centre on 21.4.54’, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

¹¹⁴ H. W. Glasgow, a New Zealand cost consultant deputed to the mills as part of the Colombo Plan, spoke of Khurshid Ali’s constant fear of ‘sabotage’ at the hands of his Bengali employees. See ‘Chandraghona Paper Mill’, DO35/5336, UKNA.

done by Khurshid Ali to resolve it. In this constant state of insecurity, he feared that any entertainment of demands made by workers would be seen as a weakness in the management armour. Bengali workers perceived the instant dismissal of Md. Ekhlas as proof of the brutal and autocratic nature of managerial power. The altercation, which was overheard and transmitted in various ways by different labourers, emphasized Khurshid Ali's excessive authority. Badaruddin, the personal assistant to Khurshid Ali, in his version of what transpired, stated:

Md. Ekhlas replied, 'you cannot ask to me go like that, I have been deputed by government, send me back to the government'. Khurshid Ali remarked: 'I am not going to send you back to government, I am going to dismiss you'. Mr Ekhlas said, 'you have no power to dismiss me'. To this Khurshid Ali replied, 'I have got all the powers. I have not used them up till now, but I am using them now'.¹¹⁵

Khurshid Ali's authority was not only excessive, but now transgressed the boundaries of legitimate authority. His supersession of the powers of government was viewed as having removed that fundamental layer of protection between workers and their employers, and a sign of his undisguised oppression and brutality. In effect, Khurshid Ali's power had become illegitimate. This, then, explains why workers invoked what they would have regarded as the supreme authority in matters of what was legitimate and illegitimate: God and the state. As workers moved from one section of the mill to another and attacked Khurshid Ali and his men, the slogans '*Naraya Takbir*' (Say, God is the Greatest), '*Allahu Akbar*' (God is Greatest), and '*Pakistan Zindabad*' provided the rhythm and lyrics of the riot.¹¹⁶

The delegitimization of mill authority did not simply happen as a result of the sacking of Md. Ekhlas. The evening before the riot, as the union meeting ended, a procession of 200 or more workers left the bazaar to march around the cricket fields of the mill. Various slogans were shouted, especially '*race chaina*' (no to race), '*retrenchment chaina*' (no to retrenchment), and '*randibaji chaina*' (no to prostitution).¹¹⁷ '*Race chaina*' was not against non-Bengali workers, but against their differential treatment—a demand for equality of labour. The difference between Bulu Meah, the Bengali *durwan* accused of murdering the head *durwan* Mudassar Khan, and his Pathan colleagues was not just on ethnic

¹¹⁵ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, pp. 26–27.

¹¹⁶ These slogans were a constant during the riot; *ibid.*, pp. 21–22, 39.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

grounds, but on the value that management placed on his labour.¹¹⁸ Despite sharing the same disciplinary responsibilities, the Bengali *durwans* were on a lower pay scale than their Pathan counterparts, who were paid Rs 80 compared with their Rs 60. At the union meeting, these differences were described as part of the ‘step-motherly treatment’ by the mill management, who had made ‘race’ matter.¹¹⁹ Analogous to the stepchild in South Asian fables, the Bengali worker felt a deep sense of rejection and denied of his rightful share, though not through any fault of his own.

‘*Retrenchment chaina*’ was an expected demand made by Bengali workers, against the frequent use of casual labour by the mill, but ‘*randibaji chaina*’ was a more complex demand, raising the question of whether workers were referring to prostitution in a literal or metaphorical sense. Was this a demand against labouring women at the mill or in the neighbourhood? Samita Sen’s work has highlighted the moralizing discourse around working women in the mills and working-class areas of colonial Calcutta in the late nineteenth century, and how the diverse marital, sexual, living, and work arrangements of these women were equated with prostitution; lodging housekeepers, washerwomen, barbers, sweepers, and midwives were reported as prostitutes.¹²⁰ Little is known about the composition of the workforce in terms of age or sex at the Adamjee and Karnaphuli Mills or the presence and role of women in these working-class neighbourhoods. However, the University of Dhaka report found that many of the young men working in semi-urban or urban areas made use of the readily available drinking dens and brothels.¹²¹ Thus, the demand could have emanated from conservative reactions to the increasing visibility of women in public spaces as a result of urbanization and industrialization, as well as perhaps to their fear of Biharis ‘using’ and ‘dishonouring’ local women.¹²²

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹¹⁹ ‘Meeting Report, 21 March 1954’, in Government of East Bengal (1957), Chandraghona Files.

¹²⁰ Samita Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India: the Bengal jute industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹²¹ Hussain, *Human and social*, pp. 192–194.

¹²² For excellent work on women, sexuality, and the concept of honour in South Asia, see Nayanika Mookherjee, *The spectral wound: sexual violence, public memories, and the Bangladesh war of 1971* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Yasmin Saikia, *Women, war and the making of Bangladesh: remembering 1971* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The long partition and the making of modern South Asia: refugees, boundaries, histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Ritu Menon and

On the other hand, it may have been a call of solidarity for workers who fell prey to the more rapacious demands of those in power. The women and young boys hired as contract workers by the *majhis* were often subjected to sexual violence at the hands of *thikadars* and police:

Some of them [police] were the right-hand men of the *thikadars*. Year after year, they work in the Reserved Forests. The *thikadar* would arrange for all their comforts and conveniences. They would be given freshly fried rotis. They would get tea to drink morning and evening, soft cotton pillows and rich blankets. Young boys who had been enticed to work have to sleep with them every night. This is happening every day in the Reserves. The pitiful and distressed screams of these young boys do not let the coolies sleep.¹²³

It is also possible that the '*randibaji chaina*' referred more specifically to how Bengali workers felt about the worth of their labour and consequent emasculation of their bodies. The Bengali *durwan*, for example, grew physically weaker as a result of low pay and poor housing and sanitary conditions. This was used to justify the higher pay of the Pathan *durwans*, who were paid more for their heavily built physique. A management that differentiated between the bodies of workers was seen as illegitimate in the Pakistan that the workers envisioned.

The aftermath

As the news of the Karnaphuli and Adamjee riots spread, the business community and government grew more panicked and fearful about the possible flight of capital. However, for all the talk of sabotage, production was resumed at both mills quite soon after the riots. By the first week of April 1954, most of the European technicians had returned to Karnaphuli, workers had been screened and issued passes, machines were cleaned, and work had started. The Adamjee Jute Mill also began operations again within two weeks of the riots. During the riots, as workers in both mills had weaved in and out of the buildings, wielding weapons of various sorts, smashing windows, turning over furniture,

Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and boundaries: women in India's partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Urvashi Butalia, *The other side of silence: voices from the partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998).

¹²³ Ahmed Sofa, '*Karnafulir dhare*'.

burning down homes, and injuring and killing people, not a single loom or papermaking machine had been touched.¹²⁴

That there was no wrecking of machinery, even by accident, implies that this was a more selective kind of sabotage—one that allowed the workers to continue working once their demands were met. The fact that machines were the only things left intact during the riots appears to be a pointed statement, made by all those involved, that machines were not the problem. George Lamb, who was employed by the contractor Mr Hanson at the Karnaphuli Mill, described how earth-diggers had come into the stores, carefully laid down their earth-cutting equipment, picked up spare pieces of iron, and headed towards the mill.¹²⁵ The machines were seen as an integral part of their labour and of their future as labourers. As the rioters shouted '*Allahu Akbar*' and '*Naraya Takbir*', their actions were attempts to recover sovereignty over other elements of their labouring existence: in particular, over the restrictions imposed on them by the management, which the workers understood as weakening their new position in Pakistan—that of strong workers labouring over strong machines. As the populace of the East Wing decided on the Pakistan they wanted via the ballot box, workers were also choosing their own fate.

The Pakistani state, which had made a significant investment in the industrialization of East Pakistan, as an exhibition of their power and progress in the club of independent, postcolonial, and free nations, had not thought enough about the bodies that toiled within these mills and on those machines. The response of Central government to the riots was to humiliate those involved. The Communist Party was banned in both wings of the country, trade-union organizations were disbanded, and hundreds of trade-union leaders, communists, and other left-leaning political leaders were jailed. In East Pakistan, the East Pakistan Rifles moved into the industrial areas straight after the riots and Karnaphuli Paper Mill and Adamjee Jute Mill were listed in the *Dhaka Gazette* from 1 July as 'protected areas'.¹²⁶ Workers at the Adamjee Jute Mill and Karnaphuli Paper Mill found themselves incarcerated in open cages and gazed upon by the public as 'criminals' as they awaited their release or transfer to closed prisons.¹²⁷ Screening

¹²⁴ On Chandraghona, see UK High Commission, Karachi to Commonwealth Relations Office, 24/3/1954, DO35/5336, UKNA. On Adamjee, see 'Extract from Dacca report, for period ending 19.5.54', DO35/5336, UKNA.

¹²⁵ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, p. 82.

¹²⁶ 'Diary of chief events, 1954', File no. DO35/5324, UKNA.

¹²⁷ High Court, Dacca, 29 August 1957, p. 152.

boards came into operation to weed out ‘undesirable’ workers, leading to hundreds of workers being retrenched.¹²⁸ The local working-class neighbourhoods and bazaars lost the buzz and activity of labour.

In September 1957, as the Adamjee Jute Mill court case concluded, with many of the workers on trial being exonerated, a rather unnoticed report was also published: the Dacca-Narayanganj Police Committee Report. The report contained the initial proposals for a permanent industrial police force and intelligence agency to ensure prompt and effective action for the ‘maintenance of law and order’ and vigilance towards ‘communist infiltration into the labour force’.¹²⁹ The restoration of parliamentary rule by 1957 did not lead to any corresponding increase in faith in workers as important citizens of Pakistan.

Conclusion

Joya Chatterjee notes that pre-partition histories of Bengali Muslims have focused on the process of ‘Islamization’, while post-partition writing has been a history of triumphant ‘Bengali-ness’.¹³⁰ Existing historiography has treated the Bengali Language Movement from 1948 onwards, and in particular the police killings of the protesters on 21 February 1952, as the pivotal movement that augured the break-up of Pakistan. Ahmed Kamal’s excellent book argued that the historiography of East Pakistan had become stale; ‘all there is to know about is known, history has become predictable.’¹³¹ The 1954 riots are an example of the lesser known and unpredictable narratives of East Pakistan, which do not sit comfortably with the nationalist historiography.

¹²⁸ See Government of East Bengal, *Eastern Pakistan Labour Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3, September, 1954 (Dhaka: Labour Directorate). In the second fortnight of August, a representation is made by retrenched workers of Adamjee Jute Mill asking for reinstatement to their old positions; the Labour Directorate had yet to take on their case as the management was yet to ‘screen’ the workers.

¹²⁹ Government of East Pakistan, ‘Augmentation of the investigation staff of Dacca and Narayanganj Towns’, Home Police, B Proceedings, File no. 170, August–September 1960, NAD.

¹³⁰ Joya Chatterji, ‘The Bengali Muslim: a contradiction in terms? An overview of the debate on the Bengali Muslim identity’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 16, no 2, 1996, pp. 16–24. There has been plenty of excellent scholarship since that has complicated the ‘Bengali-ness’ of the Bengali Muslim identity; see Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the region: language, culture and Islam in colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Tariq Omar Ali, *A local history of global capital*.

¹³¹ Ahmed Kamal, *State against the nation*, p. 6.

The year of reckoning between the state and the nation was 1954. The election and two riots presented alternative visions of power and sovereignty, which unnerved the Centre and led to the suspension of democratic rights in both wings. Following 1954, the Communist Party of Pakistan was banned until 1973. The riots at Adamjee and Karnaphuli, predominantly understood as a 'Bihari–Bengali' riot, have been used to tell a narrative of state paranoia and oppression, and Bengali self-determination. In contrast, this article argues that a closer reading of the riot disrupts the 'communal angle' and offers a narrative of postcolonial labour solidarities, hopes, and tensions.

Pakistan invested money, machines, and managers in the East Wing to create the biggest mills in the world. These mills were integral to the state refugee-rehabilitation programme, state power, and ambitions for postcolonial Muslim futures. But the desire for progress came at the cost of the workers. These riots were a result of labour–management tensions. The mill management exploited ethnic division between Bengali and Bihari workers to manage and discipline them in their new spectacular project. My argument dismantles the image of the Bihari as a powerful and willing collaborator of the state. I suggest that partition immobilized 'Bihari' refugees and turned them into a truly urban, landless, and precariat class.¹³² The mill management provided work, housing, and money in return for a loyal, docile, and trustworthy workforce, who were expected to turn on Bengali co-workers when needed.

Contrary to scholarship that posits Bengali Muslims as a homogenous entity, this was not their primary identification in their social relations at the workplace or in their neighbourhoods. The life of labour defined their everyday political, economic, and social activities, and brought them together in instances of labour militancy. Complex solidarities were formed between *badli*, casual, and contract labourers, between workers from different regions, and between workplace and neighbourhood on grounds of job security, ethnic bias, and material impoverishment.

The state might have perceived those who rioted as 'anti-nationals', but the rioters did not see themselves as such. Their shouts of '*Pakistan Zindabad*' and '*Allahu Akbar*' validated their vision of themselves as the owners of the mill and machines, and deserving citizens of the new state of Pakistan. The 1954 riots tried to recover this project of possible Muslim futures from the danger of going awry.

¹³² Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais, *The Bengal diaspora*.