

Azhar, Ahmad: *Revolution in Reform. Trade-Unionism in Lahore, c. 1920–70*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan 2019. ISBN: 9789352876129; 248 S.

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In histories of labour in South Asia the city of Lahore has received limited attention. In 1947, when the British left India, they carved out two states and the city of Lahore became part of Pakistan and so its history tends to be siphoned off and rendered invisible within the nationalist historiographical current of the formation of Pakistan as a Muslim state. Ahmad Azhar's important book *Revolution in Reform: Trade Unionism in Lahore, c. 1920–70* shows that labour in Lahore cannot be understood fully through this lens. The book focuses squarely on Lahore's railway workers of Mughalpura, one of the largest and most important railway workshops in South Asia, in the decades immediately before and after Partition.

The central importance of the workers of Mughalpura and the power that they were able to command makes it even more striking that their history is all but overlooked. For instance, in just one of the many examples of workers' strike action discussed in the book, in April 1920, striking workers numbered 15,000. The numbers themselves are staggering because they clearly show that not only were these workers organised, they could pull large crowds out into the street. The 1920s in British India were a time of increasing anti-colonial sentiment and so an organized force like the Mughalpura workers would have been much sought after by nationalists who were trying to wrest power from the colonial state. Explaining this aspect is where Azhar's work really shines. He makes it clear that nationalist leaders did approach and work with the workers of Mughalpura, but through most of the time period he describes the railway workers managed to retain their agency. For instance, as Azhar discusses in Chapter 2 of the book, Mughalpura workers, in their interaction with Congress emphasized their autonomy as railway workers who were not just a

subset of the nationalist cause.

One of the more specific examples of the interaction of railway leaders with nationalists comes across in one of the most interesting worker leaders who we meet in the pages of this book – J.B. Miller. He is introduced to the reader as a working-class, Irish-born Englishman who was a railway guard who became one of the most important, popular worker leaders of the interwar period. Miller was supported by Mughalpura workers (who even marched under the Union Jack with him) even during this interwar period when nationalism was on the rise. Azhar is careful to point out that the building nationalist movement never consumed the workers actions as workers. For instance, Azhar describes an incident where Zafar Ali Khan, an important leader of the Khilafat movement, came to give a speech to the workers of Mughalpura. Khan's and Miller's actions are narrated as a performance complete with cues for the workers telling them when to clap. Throughout the piece, it was Miller who is compared to „the conductor of an orchestra“ (p. 23). This incident shows that Azhar's project is not just a recovery project seeking to tell a story that will render workers visible. He has a clear agenda that is backed by rigorous archival research, and that agenda is to show how the workers of Mughalpura had a distinct and internally variegated politics, and political culture that did not neatly map onto the larger stories of nationalism, anti-imperialism and communist ideology. This is also not a story of traditional trade union politics because the Mughalpura workers had a trade union, but the fact that it was constantly banned did not deter from its popularity. In other words, without the objective existence of a legally acknowledged trade union, trade union politics still existed, powered not by the legal institutions of the state, but by worker action and belief.

The timing is also important. Worker actions were taking place in a time when the weakening power of the British in India was becoming apparent and communist ideology gave workers a central place in the free world that was being imagined. It is in this context that the competition between workers to be considered a genuine labour

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leader was so intense. This is something Azhar describes in considerable detail drawing on his rich research that combines archival sources with interview accounts, autobiographies and fiction. For instance, part of the struggle throughout the time of the Meerut Conspiracy Case trial (discussed in Chapter 5) was over the question who has the exclusive right to represent workers. For the workers themselves, their identity was not defined by communism or anticolonialism as ideology. Azhar explores this by unpacking the ideological motivations of two prominent labour leaders, Bashir Ahmad Bakhtiar and Mirza Ibrahim. Both of these figures had a larger than life presence in histories of labour particularly in the Punjab from the interwar period onward. Tracing their lives and ideological predilections, Azhar shows us that the idea of who was a legitimate worker leader was contextual and temporally contingent. The term „genuine trade unionist“ had more specificity. It was what Bashir Ahmed Bakhtiar used to describe himself as opposed to the more radical Mirza Ibrahim who would become, Azhar tells us, the face of communism amongst workers in Pakistan in the period immediately after Partition (p. 93). Even today, older worker leaders in what is now Pakistan still debate whether Bakhtiar (who was very willing to work with the colonial state) was too reformist or why Mirza Ibrahim (in his later years) ceased to be the revolutionary figure he initially was. For Azhar, such discussions miss the point – that the workers of Mughalpura in their own actions retained their autonomy through this politically turbulent time.

Crucially, for Azhar, the workers did not represent one uniform political voice that was articulated in the moment of militant action. Indeed, one of the many interesting points he makes is how historians' focus on strikes and moments of upheaval often means that things that detract from the imagined idea of a pure working class consciousness are dismissed as „inconvenient facts“ (p. 116). Throughout, Azhar pays careful attention to divisions within railway workers and their allies by poking holes in binaries that labour historians will be familiar with such as the line between outsider/insider and intellectu-

als/grassroot worker. For instance, when discussing the various splits between the Punjabi communists and their different approaches to labour, Azhar highlights that the most successful approach used by communists was one that established direct contact with workers and their everyday lives in the neighbourhood by setting up labour schools. In effect then the divide between communist intellectuals and ordinary workers was not a wide ideological gulf at all if it could be resolved by a strategy that allowed for more localized, personal connections with workers.

The book presents this autonomous domain of political action and identity as dominant all the way until Partition. Indeed, it is remarkable that the communalization of politics enters the space of Mughalpura after 1947 because it was not there a year earlier, in 1946. This comes across in Chapter 6 of the book when Azhar describes a major railway strike that took place that year. A passage that particularly stands out from the book is where Azhar narrates how Mirza Ibrahim described the strike as a time when stories abounded of „Hindus and Muslims burying the hatchet [...] and Sikh railway men acting first as railway men, and second as Sikhs“ (p. 125). There must be, of course, a considerable amount of nostalgia interlaced in the telling of this story, nonetheless it is an important incident because shortly after this, the violence of 1947 would enter the railway workshops. This represents a turning point in the book. With the formation of Pakistan, workers were cut off from the rest of India and in what Azhar describes as the „abyss of isolation“, their politics weakened. The book traces this decline of worker power through to the 1980s drawing attention to how the local context of worker participation in politics (such as their involvement in the progressive, anti-military Movement for the Restoration of Democracy in the 1980s) made workers briefly important at sporadic moments in a longer narrative of declining power.

The only thing that specialists and other readers may want to hear more about, that was not covered in much detail in this book, would be about the participation of women workers (or the lack thereof) in the politics of railway labour in Mughalpura. We see

some snippets of the involvement of women, such as Azhar's description of the 1946 railway strike which mentions that some women flouted gender norms (p. 124), but this is an exception which is not described further. To be fair, it must also be acknowledged that sources for understanding the involvement of women in histories of South Asian labour, particularly in Lahore, are extremely limited so this may be an avenue for others interested in the topic to explore further.

Overall, Azhar's study is an important contribution to our understanding of labour in South Asia with particular reference to the period around Partition. It is absolutely essential reading for those seeking to understand working class politics in Punjab and subaltern and plebeian politics in South Asia more broadly.

HistLit 2020-2-079 / Anushay Malik über Azhar, Ahmad: *Revolution in Reform. Trade-Unionism in Lahore, c. 1920–70*. New Delhi 2019, in: H-Soz-Kult 21.05.2020.