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**Pioneers in  
Indian Labour Studies, 1900-1930**

J. Krishnamurty



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# Pioneers in Indian Labour Studies, 1900-1930

J. Krishnamurty



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Tel: +91 11 41064676, +91 9871177540

E-mail: [mail@ihdindia.org](mailto:mail@ihdindia.org)

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the work of early Indian professional economists in the field of labour. They undertook wide-ranging studies of labour in factories, mines, and plantations as well as of the condition of rural and agricultural labour and of urban labour outside of industry. Between 1918 and 1930, a major body of work had emerged on Indian labour, with contributions by both Indian and foreign scholars. This work was mostly based on government data, but, in addition, and with telling effect, some scholars also conducted field investigations and came up with disquieting findings.

The latter part of the paper examines the contributions of a British statistician-economist, Findlay-Shirras, and of an Indian labour economist, Rajani Kanta Das. The former, despite some excellent work, was probably responsible for giving a misleading picture of rising agricultural wages, perhaps to suit the views of the colonial government. R K Das, through his extensive work on labour economics, before and during his service with the ILO, contributed much to the work of the Royal Commission on Labour (1931), but this went unacknowledged. Also, his work on plantation labour in India earned the ire of a British official in the department of industries and labour probably, for highlighting the negative role played by foreign (British) capital.

Given his numerous substantive contributions to Indian labour economics, the paper concludes that Rajani Kanta Das should be given due recognition for his pioneering role in the development of labour economics in India.





# Pioneers in Indian Labour Studies, 1900-1930

J. Krishnamurty<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

With the growth of plantations, factories, and mines in India from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, issues relating to labour in these establishments gained attention. Early Indian economists began to study this facet of modernization and growth as part of their analyses of the impacts of British rule on India. Similarly, interest in rural economic conditions led to studies into the incomes and particularly wages of agricultural and rural labour. Nationalists like Dadabhai Naoroji highlighted the issue of poverty under British rule, a condition seriously affecting the labour classes.

In the case of economics, exhortations of Ranade to create an “Indian” economics, failed. Similarly, a discipline called Indian labour economics did not emerge. The tools of economics developed in the west were used by the first generation of professional economists in the early part of the twentieth century, seeking at the same time to identify the institutions and practices that were uniquely Indian.

The condition of labour was a highly charged issue, with nationalists on the attack and apologists on the defensive. Concepts widely used today, like the labour market or the informal sector, did not explicitly figure in the discourse, although they may have existed in nascent form in the minds of the economists of that time. The concept of surplus labour was present. The emphasis was on finding out the facts, rather than on building theories and models to explain the situation.

These early Indian professional economists with interests in labour issues worked on a wide canvas. Major areas of study were factories, mines, and plantations. There was some interest in the condition of rural and agricultural labour and of urban labour outside of industry. They took up such issues as education and training; labour supply and demand; housing, health, occupational safety, and

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1. Visiting Professor, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi

sanitation; migration; recruitment practices; earnings and benefits of workers; stability of employment, as well as detailed characteristics of workers in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. They, like other Indian economists of the time, depended on government data in the form of reports, including periodic reports on factories, plantations, and mines. In addition, and with telling effect, some conducted field investigations and came back with disquieting findings.

### **Disquieting Findings**

The findings of early Indian labour economists were generally negative, whether they related to earnings or to conditions of work and life of workers in what we would today call the organized sector. The governments of the day and other organized interest groups like employers, especially expatriate employers, often tried to suppress adverse findings from the public, to massage the data, and to promote studies and reports that were more to their liking. They feared that adverse findings would provide ammunition to groups hostile to British rule and would reveal the truth about British rule in India. Some examples are provided later in this paper. This sensitivity of governments and interest groups to adverse findings is not just under colonial rule, but continues to this day.

### **Narrowing the Search**

I have narrowed down my search for the pioneers of Indian labour studies to make it more focused and manageable:

*First*, I have excluded those whose work did not explicitly contribute to our understanding of labour markets, labour conditions, labour welfare, employment and unemployment, women and child employment, and migration, both internal and international.

*Second*, I have concentrated on the period from 1900 to around 1930, as this was the period when economics as a profession developed in India. Also, modern features like the factory system and organized labour were present during this period, although some of these had come into being in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. I stop at around 1930 as subsequent work is well known and was greatly influenced by the Report of the Royal Commission of Labour, published in 1931.

*Third*, I do not specifically consider well-known government sources which contain useful information on labour studies. They include:

- Census reports and similar publications which look at employment growth and changes in structure. Some census reports also deal with such topics as

disappearing industries or educated unemployment and are well worth reading even today.

- The Government of India in the year 1920, established in Shimla, the Labour Bureau, originally known as the “Indian Labour Bureau”. The main functions of Bureau were the collection of all information on labour in India, interaction with the ILO and other similar institutions in other countries. It was to act as a reference centre for all interested in labour related subjects and for officers of government and private sector, which were to deal with labour.<sup>2</sup> The Labour Bureau did not contribute much to our knowledge of labour problems in the 1920s.
- Reports of various committees, commissions and inquiries deal with labour issues typically tangentially. Important exceptions to this include the Dufferin Inquiry<sup>3</sup> of 1887-1888, the K L Datta Enquiry into the Rise in Prices (1914), and, of course, the Royal Commission on Labour, which reported in 1931.
- There are useful studies in the government-published *Journal of Indian Industries and Labour* starting from 1921, but I have not been able to examine these volumes in any detail and I am also not sure how many volumes were produced.

*Fourth*, I do not examine here the impact of international institutions like the International Labour Office since its inception in 1917. The ILO and its work were well known in India among the intelligentsia and stimulated work on Indian labour.<sup>4</sup>

*Finally*, I do not examine the numerous village and small-scale studies undertaken in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During their research, the authors typically examined the conditions of workers and small holders in the village. However, their generally adverse findings were rejected by the government as being unrepresentative.

2 For a history of the Labour Bureau see: <http://64.227.179.246/history-bureau>

3 Undertaken in response to the claims of Dadabhai Naoroji and others, the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, launched an “inquiry into [whether] the frequently repeated assertion ‘that the greater proportion of the population of India suffer from daily insufficiency of food’ is wholly untrue or partially true.” Despite the rather biased terms of reference for this internal inquiry, the results were disturbing and had to be suppressed for many years. See Shireen Moosvi: “Agrarian inequalities in colonial UP: The Dufferin inquiry, 1887-1888,” *Social Scientist*, Vol.43, Nos 1-2, January-February 201, pp. 9-21.

4 For a discussion, see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, J Krishnamurty and Gerry Rodgers (eds): ‘India and the ILO in Historical Perspective,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.46, No.10, 05 March, 2011.

## THE CONTRIBUTORS

A few names stand out among the early contributors on Indian labour issues. I am sure that further search will reveal more names. I shall focus on contributions which were made before the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1931. The latter became the repository of what was known on Indian labour as well as the starting point for much subsequent work on the subject. I briefly discuss below the work of those I have identified:

**B.R. Ambedkar (1918):** In his paper “Small Holdings in India and their Remedies,” Ambedkar articulated the notion of surplus labour and some of its implications for agricultural reform and industrialization.<sup>5</sup>

**V.G. Kale (1918):** V G Kale was probably the first person anywhere in the world to use the term Economics of Education, in his paper<sup>6</sup> in the *Journal of the Indian Economic Society*. This paper addresses education problems in relation to employment in the Indian context.

**Harold H Mann (1919):** Mann published a *Report on Investigations with Regard to Social Welfare Work in Jamshepur*. Apparently, his findings were damaging and a full report has never been released.<sup>7</sup>

**J.P. Srivastava (1919):** This was an important paper on labour supply from Allahabad and adjoining districts.<sup>8</sup> He was a knowledgeable observer, having overseen labour supply at the Pench Valley Collieries in the Central Provinces. He concluded:

If the laborers are sympathetically trained, properly treated, housed, fed and are provided with the various amenities of life the centres of industries will be made more attractive and the workmen will be induced to live there permanently in spite of their attachment to their village homes.

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5 Reproduced in J Krishnamurty (ed): *Towards Development Economics*, Delhi 2009, pp.19-52. Also see J Krishnamurty: “The Indian Antecedents of Disguised Unemployment,” *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, January 2008.

6 V G Kale: “Economics of Education in India,” *Journal of the Indian Economic Society*, 1918

7 See Daniel Thorner (ed): *The Social Framework of Agriculture: Indian, Middle East, England*, London 1967.

8 J P Srivastava, “Labour supply from Allahabad and adjoining districts,” *Indian Journal of Economics*, Volume II No 4, November 1919, pp. 676-688.

**Gulzari Lal Nanda (1922):** Later twice India's Prime Minister, he worked under the supervision of WS Jevons in Allahabad and produced two papers on Labour Unrest in India.<sup>9</sup>

**Janet Harvey Kelman (1923):** She visited India from December 1920 to March 1921 with the intention of studying women's labour, but decided to expand her work to cover factory labour in general. In 1923 she published *Labour in India: A study of the conditions of women in modern industry*<sup>10</sup> The title is misleading as the work relates to both men and women working in factories. The work is based mostly on secondary data.

**Gladys Broughton (1924) :** Born in India in 1883, she had a DSc in Economics from the London School of Economics which she published as *Labour in Indian Industry* in 1924.<sup>11</sup> She had gone to India in 1913 to work as a welfare officer in the ministry of munitions. From 1920 to 1923 she was the "lady" adviser in the Labour Bureau of the government of India. She was an extraordinary person who was the first woman to be awarded the OBE. This was for her work on the welfare of women in Indian and English munition factories.<sup>12</sup> Like Kelman, her book was based largely on secondary data, but it was reinforced by her own experience and work in India.

**R.N. Gilchrist (1924):** Gilchrist, a political scientist, published a volume on payment of wages and profit sharing.<sup>13</sup>

**Alexander Burnett-Hurst (1925):** His *Labour and Housing in Bombay: A study in the economic conditions of the wage-earning classes in Bombay*, published in 1925 was a major contribution focused on industrial labour in one city.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this work, which was for an MSc (Econ) degree at the London School of Economics, was funded by the Ratan Tata Foundation.

9 Gulzari Lal Nanda: "Labour unrest in India," *Indian Journal of Economics*, 1922, Vol .III, pt 4, pp.461-480.

10 Janet Harvey Kelman, *Labour in India: A study of the conditions of Indian women in modern industry*, London, 1923.

11 Gladys Mary Broughton: *Labour in Indian Industries*, London, 1924.

12 See <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/women-in-the-law/a-woman-ahead-of-her-time/5105485>. article. There are slight inconsistencies in different accounts of her life and work.

13 R N Gilchrist, *The Payment of Wages and Profit Sharing, with a Chapter on Indian Conditions*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1924.

14 See Alexander Robert Burnett-Hurst: *Labour and Housing in Bombay: A study in the economics of the wage-earning classes in Bombay*, London 1925.

**Margaret Read (1927):** An anthropologist, Read published her book, *From Field to Factory*, in 1927. This was a study of the problems of Indian peasants turning into factory hands.<sup>15</sup>

**Raj Bahadur Gupta (1930):** *Labour and Housing in India* was the first PhD of Lucknow University, and he was supervised by Radhakamal Mukherjee.<sup>16</sup> It is an important contribution to the study of labour conditions. Gupta stressed the importance of housing, sanitation and other environmental conditions affected labour. One significant finding was that a quarter to a half of children born in the chief industrial towns died with a year of their birth. He linked this to poor housing conditions and facilities. Following his teacher, Radhakamal Mukherjee, Gupta advocated better town planning for the industrial centres.

**Ahmad Mukhtar (1930):** Mukhtar, professor at Annamalai University, published his book on factory labour in India in 1930<sup>17</sup>. This was an extension of his London PhD thesis of 1928 and very similar to another book he published in 1929, on factory labour in the Punjab. Mukhtar had been an industrial investigator with the Punjab Board of Economic Enquiry in 1920 and had first-hand knowledge of labour conditions in Punjab industries. Apart from his extensive use of evidence based on his own work and other sources, what is remarkable is his strong espousal of the workers' cause. He shows how, in an odd way, the interests of the workers and of Manchester coincided in pressing for an increase in wages in the Indian cotton textile industry. He also anticipated Morris D Morris<sup>18</sup> in arguing that supply problems of labour were related mainly to working conditions and instability of employment.

**P.S. Lokanathan (1929):** His book<sup>19</sup>, *Industrial Welfare in India*, was an early but important contribution which appeared in 1929. His emphasis was more on

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15 Margerat Read, *From Field to Factory: An introductory study if the Indian peasant turned factory hand*, Student Christian Movement, London 1927. She also published another book: *The Indian peasant uprooted: a study of the human machine*. Longmans, Green & Co, London 1931.

16 Raj Bahadur Gupta, *Labour and Housing in India*, Longmans, Green & Co, Calcutta, 1930. Radhakamal Mukherjee's introduction is well worth reading.

17 Ahmad Mukhtar, *Factory Labour in India*, Annamalai University, Madras, 1930 and *Factory Labour in the Punjab*, Huxley Press, Madras 1929.

18 Morris David Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India, A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947*, California University Press, 1965.

19 P S Lokanathan: *Industrial Welfare in India*, Methodist Publishing House, Madras, 1929.

welfare measures and he argued that raising workers' earnings and living standards along with industrial peace and harmony would contribute to greater productivity.

**C N Vakil (1930):** His paper, "The Economic Basis of the Communal Tension in India," delivered as lecture in December 1930, is an early contribution to the work on reverse discrimination in the labour market and job reservation based on religion and depressed class status. He explores the link between educated unemployment and communal tension.<sup>20</sup>

## **A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF THESE CONTRIBUTIONS**

A common point in most of these works was the extensive use of government data, although some attempt was made by some of the authors to draw upon their experience or to collect data independently. The emphasis was on the numbers of male, female and child workers, wages, working conditions and housing. The importance assigned to the last may surprise modern Indian specialists on labour studies, but at the time it was regarded as important in determining not just worker welfare, but productivity as well.

No new theoretical framework to explain labour market behaviour was attempted, but labour supply and demand issues were highlighted by several writers, in particular Gulzarilal Nanda, B R Ambedkar, J P Srivastava, and Ahmad Mukhtar. Srivastava and Mukhtar anticipated Morris D Morris in recognizing that low wages and bad working conditions, not labour supply constraints, were the real problem.

I have deliberately omitted two economists, George Findlay-Shirras and Rajani Kanta Das, from the discussion so far as they deserve a more extended treatment. Their contributions to the subject were numerous and substantial; and their influence on policy was significant.

Findlay-Shirras contributed in positive ways to our knowledge of the economic conditions of workers, but the value of some of his earlier work is questionable. Rajani Kanta Das, on the other hand, is the unsung hero of Indian labour economics who spent much of his life working on the subject. During his own life and later he has not been given adequate credit for his contributions to Indian labour economics. In the subsequent sections, we focus on the contributions of Findlay-Shirras and Das.

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<sup>20</sup> Reproduced in J Krishnamurty (ed): *Towards Development Economics*, Delhi 2009, pp.107-122.

## GEORGE FINDLAY SHIRRAS (1885-1955)

George Findlay Shirras was born in Aberdeen on 16 July 1885 and graduated from the University of Aberdeen, obtaining his MA in 1907. He entered the Indian Educational Service as Professor of Political Economy at Dacca College in 1909, and was “on special duty” with the Finance Department of the Government of India from 1910 to 1913. He was Reader in Indian Finance and Currency in 1914 and a Fellow of the University of Calcutta.<sup>21</sup>

In 1914 Shirras was appointed Director of Statistics with the Indian Government.<sup>22</sup> In 1921 he was appointed Director of the Labour Office in the Government of Bombay, and from 1926 to 1940 he was Principal and Professor of Economics at Gujarat College, Bombay. He was also for a while member of the Bombay Legislative Council.

He returned to Britain in 1940, where he became Dean of the Faculty of Economics at University College, Exeter. This was followed by a short period as Professor of Political Economy at Dublin University, 1950 - 1951, and 2 years in the USA, as visiting Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois, and the University of Florida.<sup>23</sup> He died in 1955.

Shirras was a prolific writer and produced many books and articles during his tenure in India. Several were on Indian currency and public finance and on wages and conditions of work in the Bombay textile industry. He also produced work on income, wealth, and poverty.

As Director of Statistics, he was quite pro-active, participating in international meetings and conferences. He organized a conference of ruling princes and chiefs to improve statistics in the Indian States. Among the important publications he produced were a manual on the preparation of crop forecasts; a collection of orders relating to the registration and publication of statistics relating to the sea-borne trade, and a guide to the statistical publications of Government of India.

21 See G Findlay Shirras, *Indian Finance and Banking*, London, 1919, cover pages. Also available as an e-book : <http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/g-findlay-shirras/indian-finance-and-banking-rih/1-indian-finance-and-banking-rih.shtml>

22 S Subramaniam, “A brief history of the organisation of official statistics in India during the British period,” *Sankhya, The Indian Journal of Statistics*, Volume 22, No. 1-2 (January 1960), pp. 85-118. See in particular paras 74, 79 and 98.

23 For further details of his career, and of his publications see *Who Was Who, 1951 – 1960*. See also his obituary in *Aberdeen University Review*, 36 (1955 - 1956), 219. See also <http://archiveshub.ac.uk/data/gb231ms2795andgb231ms2876>



As Director of the Bombay Labour Office, Shirras was instrumental in collecting and analysing data relating to workers in the Bombay cotton textile industry, including wages, hours of work and family budgets. In 1923 he published two important studies on Bombay: on working class budgets and on wages and hours of work. In 1924 he published a study on agricultural wages in the Bombay Presidency. The value of this material is widely recognized even today.<sup>24</sup>

A look at some of Findlay-Shirras's other work confirms that he tended to give little or no importance to the work of contemporary Indian economists. His books carried very few references to the work of Indian scholars and he produced two reports, one on economic theory in India and the other on Indian (international) migration, neither of which carried citations of the works of Indian economists. As Brij Narain observed, Shirras was so enamoured by his own work that he neglected to see the worth of the work of others, especially Indian economists.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Findlay-Shirras's publications at the Bombay Labour Office deserve recognition as good contributions to labour economics.

One of Findlay-Shirras's earliest "contributions" was to the K L Datta Enquiry into the Recent Rise in Prices (published in 1914). It is this work that we turn.

### **The K.L. Datta Committee 1910-13**

A Committee on "the recent rise in prices" was set up in 1910 and reported in 1913. It headed by Mr K L Datta "a senior and experienced official of the Finance Department." He was "assisted" by two others: George Findlay-Shirras, at that time a professor at Dacca College and a member of the Indian Educational Service, and Mr S D Gupta of the Finance Department. This was obviously not intended to be an independent inquiry.

The government its Resolution in October 1914, described the Report and Statistical Appendices as providing a complete survey of the progress achieved in the last 22 years and as a very valuable contribution to the economic and financial

24 Not surprisingly, no similar effort was mounted in Bengal to set up a Calcutta labour office or to officially study wages and working conditions in the jute mill industry.

25 See Findlay-Shirras' chapter in Hans Mayer, Frank Albert Fetter, Richard Reisch (eds) *Die Wirtschaftstheorie der Gegenwart*, Vol.I, Vienna, 1927 cited by Brij Narain in his *Tendencies in Recent Economic Thought*, Delhi, University of Delhi, 1935, pp.3-4. Also Findlay-Shirras' chapter on India in Walter F Willcox (ed) *International Migrations*, Volume II, Interpretations, NBER, 1931, reproduced in <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c5120.pdf>

history of India<sup>26</sup>. The contemporary Indian view was that the Report overstated the role of supply shortages, underplayed the importance of the non-automaticity of the gold exchange standard and gave a rather rosy picture of economic progress under British rule.<sup>27</sup>

During my research on rural wages in the nineteenth century, I examined this report closely and found something very strange in the way wage trends were determined. This is important because many contemporaries and even later economists have depended on the findings of the Committee. As I show below, these findings may be seriously questioned.<sup>28</sup>

For the historical series, the best-known source of serial statistics was the *Prices and Wages in India*. This began in 1861 and from 1873 price data was also collected making it possible to measure real wages. While this series had been used by many analysts for the period 1873-1914, the K L Datta Committee rejected this data series arguing, with some justice, that the methodology used was defective; it did not take account of different hiring and paying practices and that there were problems in converting wages paid in kind to cash.

Datta and his associates developed an alternate series based on other sources. The exact method that was followed is not fully explained in the Report. However, under Annex G, “The Collection, classification and compilation of wage statistics,” the procedure followed is briefly explained:

The process of compilation has been briefly as follows.: - The statistics furnished from all sources were examined and quotations which were prima facie unreliable

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26 See Government of India Finance Department, Resolution No. 1614, dated 24 October 1914, cited by S Subramanian, “A Brief History of the Organisation of Official Statistics in India during the British Period,” *Sankhya: The Indian Journal of Statistics*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (Jan., 1960) p.106.

27 The literature on the Datta Committee Report cannot be summarized here. The interested reader is referred to the following to get some idea of the reactions of contemporary and more recent scholars in India and abroad. See Arun Banerji, “Revisiting the Exchange Standard, 1898-1913, III – Rise in Prices: An Unsettled Controversy,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 37, No. 43, October 26, 2002, pp. 4455-4465; Jadunath, Sarkar, *Economics of British India*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Longmans, Green and Co/M C Sarkar and Sons, Calcutta 1917, particularly, pp.253-263; and Brij Narain, *Indian Economic Life, Past and Present*, Delhi, Low Price Publications, 1996 (1929 edition), Chapter VIII.

28 See for example Tirthankar Roy, “Globalisation, factor prices, and poverty in colonial India,” in *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 2007, pp 73-94.

were discarded; the statistics which were not rejected were then posted into separate statements for each class of labour for each district...<sup>29</sup>

I think a cherry-picked series was developed, probably by Findlay-Shirras, aimed at showing improvement under British rule. The Datta series starts from 1890 and goes on to 1913. It showed an increase in real wages, compared to the *Prices and Wages* series which indicated some decline. Taking 1890-1894 as base, the Committee concluded that the real wages of agricultural labourers and of village artisans rose by 38 per cent by the year 1912.<sup>30</sup>

The role of Findlay-Shirras in producing this favourable outcome for the British side cannot be conclusively established, but seems most likely. He was the economist-statistician on the Committee and hence most likely to have a decisive say in the selection and interpretation of data. The fact that, unlike the other two members, he was British was also important. The findings must have made the government very happy indeed! In 1914, he was appointed Director of Statistics by the government. Sadly, nobody drew attention to the arbitrary way in which wage data was chosen.

The work of the Datta Committee offers us a lesson in labour economics of how data can be used (or misused) to obtain a desired result. It gives little satisfaction to know that this has been going on for a long time. I picked on Findlay-Shirras to show how a statistician and economist, who was capable of good technical work, may have been used by the imperial government of the day to do its bidding.

### **RAJANI KANTA DAS (B.1881)**

Das was India's first trained labour economist and devoted much of his life to the study of labour problems. A pioneer of Indian labour economics, he was probably the first Indian to secure a PhD in Economics from the US. He obtained his degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1917, just a year after John Matthai and Pramathanath Banerjee obtained theirs from London. His supervisor, Professor John Commons was famous for his work in labour economics and institutional economics.<sup>31</sup>

29 See K L Datta, *Report on an Enquiry into the Rise in Prices in India and a Resolution of the Government of India Reviewing the Report: Resolution and report with appendices*, Calcutta, 1915, Annex G, Para 8, p. 248.

30 See K L Datta, *Report on an Enquiry into the Rise in Prices in India and a Resolution of the Government of India Reviewing the Report: Resolution and report with appendices*, Calcutta, 1915, Volume I, page 169.

31 For a fuller account of Das see J Krishnamurty: "Indian Officials in the ILO, 1919-c 1947," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI, No. 10, 5 March 2010, pp.57-58.

Among his early publications, starting from 1923, were works on a wide variety of labour problems. These included books on labour legislation in India, based on his PhD thesis; on factory labour in India, on the labour movement; on industrial efficiency, and his study, *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*. To form an idea of the extent and range of Das's contributions until 1930, see Annex I.

The last study was specially commissioned by the US Department of Labour to find out more about Indians (so-called Hindoos) who had migrated to the west coast of the US. It was a pioneering work which objectively analysed the problems faced by Indian migrants and emphasised the need to improve understanding between Indian migrants and the local population.

In the early 1930s, Das published two major papers in the *International Labour Review*, the official journal of the International Labour Office, of which he was an official. These were respectively on women labour and child labour in India. Both are articles full of ideas original for the time.<sup>32</sup>

In his work on women workers Das broke new ground. He explained the low participation of women in factory work in terms of social customs, their preoccupation with household industry, the role of labour laws in restricting their participation and their lack of skills. He argued that if woman enjoyed the rights and privileges as well as the duties and responsibilities of society, they and their communities would gain. He believed that India should adopt policies to equalize social, political, and economic opportunities for men and women alike. He proposed free and compulsory general and technical education for girls, the creation of new industrial opportunities by regulating working conditions to meet their requirement, the abolition of child marriage, the purdah system and the caste system, and the political enfranchisement of women. [This in 1931!]

His work on child labour in India was probably one the earliest in the field and is remarkable for its emphasis on the need for an integrated policy for the well-being of children in India. He identified three main elements: (i) the encouragement of voluntary but responsible parenthood; (ii) the development of compulsory primary education; and (iii) the adoption of progressive social legislation. I am struck by

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32 See Rajani Kanta Das: "Woman Labour in India," *International Labour Review*, Vol 24, 1931, pp. 376-397 and 566-572. Reprinted (partially) in J Krishnamurty, *Towards Development Economics*, Delhi 2009, pp. 127-153. Also see Rajani Kanta Das: "Child Labour in India," *International Labour Review*, December 1933-January 1934.

the emphasis he placed on measures other than punitive factory legislation. Yet he did have faith in labour legislation, evident in this quotation from his preface to his publication in 1938:

In connection with his studies in labour conditions in plantations and factories in 1912 and 1913 respectively, the author came to realize the importance of legislation as a means of ameliorating the working and living conditions, not only of those working under it, but also of the general masses of which they formed a part.<sup>33</sup>

### **R.K. Das and the Royal Commission on Labour (1931)**

Das was an excellent labour economist who was afforded the opportunity to carry on his technical work on labour problems from the late 1920s, when he was with the ILO's Asian labour programme. This gave him access to materials and resources to undertake a thorough study of Indian labour problems, a subject on which he had already made major contributions.

As a staff member of the ILO, Das contributed reports and other material which were used by the Royal Commission on Labour in India in its 1931 Report. In a letter dated 22 April 1954 to Director General Morse, Das noted that following a resolution by N M Joshi at the Seventh Session of the International Labour Conference in 1925, he had been specially appointed to undertake a study by the ILO of labour conditions in Asiatic countries. In his words,

I was specially appointed by the ILO to undertake the task and completed, among other things, a report on the historical background of industrial labour, when the appointment of a Royal Commission on Labour in India was announced. I decided to postpone further study on my report until the publication of the Commission's report and the lapse of a reasonable period of time. But my published volumes, e g, *Factory Labor and Plantation Labor*, as well as my MS report on *Industrial Labor* to the ILO were fully utilised by the Commission in outlining the programme of investigation and writing the historical background of its report<sup>34</sup>

Again, the ILO's annual report on Das dated 31 March 1930 noted that the preliminary manuscript of the Indian part of the Asiatic Enquiry (which he had prepared) was placed at the disposal of the Royal Commission on Labour in India.

33 R K Das: *Principles and Problems of Indian Labour Legislation*, Calcutta, 1938, Preface, p.vii-viii.

34 For details see J Krishnamurthy: "Indians in the ILO, 1919-c 1947," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI, No. 10, 5 March 2010, pp.57-58.

According to P P Pillai, director of the ILO Delhi office:

The vast store of material collected by the office on conditions of labour in India was placed at the disposal of the Whitley Commission, to which the office also sent a comprehensive memorandum on social insurance”<sup>35</sup>

Das had a somewhat different position on this, as he was to note later (in third person):

He might, however, also add that his work on labour and especially manuscript on the elaborate and exhaustive survey of labour conditions in all classes of organized industry are known to have been of considerable value to the Royal Commission.<sup>36</sup>

An examination of the several books and articles written by Das, including some that were prepared before, but appeared after, the Report of the Royal Commission, generally support the view that his work contributed significantly to its findings. The material provided through the ILO was probably very useful to the Commission. However, the report itself made no mention of Das’ contribution in its acknowledgements, but thanked “the Director of the International Labour Office, who placed the resources of that office at our disposal and readily responded to our requests for information”.

I think we may conclude that R K Das as an ILO official and through his several publications, before and during his service with the ILO, was an important contributor to the work of the Royal Commission. However, there was an allergy to giving due credit to Indians which existed in some quarters of the colonial administration.

The problems of Das with the Indian colonial bureaucracy did not end there. In 1932, A G Clow, joint secretary, department of industries and labour, and a former member of the Royal Commission, complained to Pillai, Director of the ILO Office in India about the contents of a book published by Das in 1931, *Plantation Labour in India*. This was, in fact, a very detailed study of the plantation industry highlighting the poor conditions of work and welfare. It pinpointed the role of employers in perpetuating bad labour conditions and advocated more state action.

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<sup>35</sup> This would have included material collected by the Indian branch office.

<sup>36</sup> R K Das: *Principles and Problems of Indian Labour Legislation*, Calcutta, 1938, Preface, p.ix.

Das had entered a debate on his findings in the pages of *The Statesman*, a daily newspaper from Calcutta, known to be supportive of British enterprise in India. According to Clow, this book used material supplied by the government to the ILO for use in the Asiatic Enquiry. In fact, some of the material had been collected in 1912 by Das much before he joined the ILO, and it had been updated by him prior to publication.

In the arrogant manner typical of a colonial official, without indicating any specific error in the book, Clow dismissed the work as “a bit of unfair propaganda.” However, since this propaganda was “futile and ineffective” the government had decided not to take serious note of it. Pillai attempted to explain that this was not an official publication but Clow retorted that it brought no credit to the office. He also noted that the government had strict rules about clearance for such non-official publications. In the end the ILO, quite rightly, chose to ignore the complaint and no action was taken.

The episode reveals some of the problems created by the extraordinary sensitivity of the colonial government to adverse publicity on labour conditions in British-owned plantations in India. Researchers like Das highlighted the exploitative practices of British planters. The resulting publicity through the press must have been very embarrassing to the government and its supporters among plantation owners. Its strong reaction was therefore not surprising.

## CONCLUSION

The study of labour problems has a long history in India. Concepts like surplus labour and the economics of education figure in the Indian literature from before 1920. Conditions of work and life of those working in factories, mines and plantations were the subject of several studies. Numerous village studies also took up the economic conditions of small farmers and agricultural labourers, in different parts of the country. The condition of women and children, workers and dependants were highlighted. Special attention was given to housing and sanitation and their impacts as well as on the quality of life of workers and their families. All this is quite remarkable, given the paucity of data and the need to depend greatly on data provided by the colonial government.

Labour issues are always a touchy subject for governments, whether colonial or otherwise. The suppression of adverse findings or the selective use of data has a long history and continues to this day. Again, in terms of labour conditions and

legislation, instead of just British interest groups, we now have international and national monopoly capital to contend with. All this renders the task of the Indian labour economist more daunting. The example of R K Das makes us remember that labour issues relate to human beings and we must not flinch from presenting the truth about them, whatever the cost.

To conclude, R K Das has the strongest claim to the title of pioneer in Indian labour studies. From the early 1920s he was producing volume after volume of work on different aspects of the labour problem, dealing with factory and plantation labour, woman labour, child labour and migrants. He examined problems of earnings, living standards, health and efficiency, sanitation and housing, productivity, the role of employers and the organization of worker unions. His contributions to national and international debates on labour issues has long gone unrecognized. Perhaps the time has finally come, when labour economists and related specialists should recognize his enormous contributions and honour him.

## ANNEX I

### **List of Publications of R K Das until 1930**

*Factory Legislation in India*, W de Gruyter and Co, Berlin, 1923.

*Factory Labour in India*, W de Gruyter and Co, Berlin, 1923

*The Labour Movement in India*, W de Gruyter and Co, Berlin and Leipzig, 1923.

*Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, W de Gruyter and Co, Berlin, 1923.

*Production in India: A comparative study in national productivity*, Viswa Bharati Bookshop, Calcutta, 1924.

*Industrial Efficiency in India*, P S King, London 1930,

*Labour Legislation in India*, Geneva 1930



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WP 01/2017	Tanuka Endow	Urban Development and Rural – Urban Linkages: Case Study of Six Towns in Bihar
WP 01/2016	Tanuka Endow, Sunil K. Mishra and Abhay Kumar	Urban Development and Rural-Urban Linkages: Case Study of Two Towns in Bihar
WP 04/2015	Alexandre de Freitas Barbosa, Maria Cristina Cacciamali, Nandita Gupta, Ian Prates, Gerry Rodgers and Priscila Vieira	Vocational Education and Training, Inequality and the Labour Market in Brazil and India: A policy Review
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INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT  
256, 2nd Floor, Okhla Industrial Estate, Phase-III  
New Delhi - 110020  
Tel: +91 11 41064676, +91 9871177540  
E-mail: [mail@ihdindia.org](mailto:mail@ihdindia.org); Website: [www.ihdindia.org](http://www.ihdindia.org)

*Eastern Regional Centre*

C-1, Patel Park, Harmu Housing Colony, Ranchi-834012  
Phone/Fax: +91-651-2242874  
Email: [ihd.ranchi@ihdindia.org](mailto:ihd.ranchi@ihdindia.org)