

India: Interview: Labour historian Dilip Simeon recalls dark tales from Tata history

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The business group's founder was commemorated with a special coin earlier this year but its early history is more disputed than is commonly known.

Not only the victorious but also the rich rewrite history to suit their interests by extolling their virtues and suppressing their vices. This is the conclusion you are likely to draw on reading labour historian Dilip Simeon's seminal book, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism – Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur 1928-1939*, published way back in 1995.

Against the backdrop of Prime Minister Narendra Modi releasing a special commemorative coin early in January to mark the 175th birth anniversary of the Tata Group founder, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, Simeon's book restores to popular memory stories about the Tatas that are remarkably different from the narrative projected by the business group and the government.

Simeon's meticulously researched book narrates the many untold stories about the steel plant run by the Tata Iron and Steel Company in Jamshedpur. These stories counter the image that the Tatas have created about themselves as being model, humane employers. They allegedly oppressed workers, tried to crush working-class movements through deplorable tactics, conspired to imprison labour leaders, deployed goondas, and forever swung between supporting the nationalist movement and siding with the British, belying their nationalist credentials that all of us have been taught to accept.

In this two-part interview to Ajaz Ashraf, Simeon paints a picture of the past not really known beyond narrow academic circles. Excerpts:

The Modi government has issued a special coin to commemorate the 175th birth anniversary of the Tata Group founder, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata. In honouring him, what is the message the government is seeking to convey to the people?

The government may have honoured other corporate houses in some other manner, but to take out a commemorative coin of the Indian Union honouring a corporate house is indeed unique. I suppose the message is that the Tatas are model employers, builders of modern India, etc. In short, [it takes] on board everything the Tatas would probably like to say about themselves.

Isn't this also linked to Modi's Make-in-India project?

Perhaps the message being conveyed through the commemorative coin is part of a political agenda. This is because the Tatas are supposed to be a national industry. In the 1920s, there was much talk about how the Tatas needed to be patronised by the Indian national movement. In 1924, they obtained Swarajist support [from Motilal Nehru and CR Das] for tariff protection in the Central Legislative Assembly, in return for their recognition of the first workers' union, the Jamshedpur Labour Association. However, at other times such as in the 1930s, the Tatas would assume a less

national demeanour because the extreme tension between the colonial government and the national leaders made it wise for them to maintain a distance.

When the coin was issued in early January, both Modi and the Tata website spoke of Jamsetji's vision of making India an industrially strong country. To what extent do you think this is true? Could his vision, however defined, have been executed without the help of the British?

To be fair, the two things are not necessarily counterposed to each other. It may well be that Jamsetji was a visionary industrialist. I won't go into the background of Tata Sons, which began as a shipping concern in the nineteenth century and was involved in the opium trade with China.

But it is claimed that the opium trade was legitimate and, therefore, it wasn't ethically wrong for the Tatas to have got into it.

Fair enough, and we don't have to go into that debate. The two positions, as I said, may not necessarily be contradictory – that Jamsetji was a visionary and he also took the assistance of the British. If, however, you were to go deeper into it, you will realise that strategic interests influenced the British support of the Tatas in every possible way, including securing land [in Jamshedpur] located close to coal mines and iron ore deposits and the river, all of which were necessary for a steel plant.

The construction of the Tata Iron and Steel Company began in 1907, and it started production in 1911. Soon thereafter, World War I broke out. Almost 100% of the steel that TISCO was producing went towards the British war effort. I presume these were consumed by the railways or for the manufacture of building materials, armaments, etc. One can see that for strategic-military purposes, the British were clear about maintaining a strong industrial base in India.

In other words, the Tatas had no option but to work with the British?

They had to. Let us have no illusion – if you want to build a gigantic steel plant like TISCO with geostrategic importance, which requires infrastructure such as railways, then you have to work with the power that exists. We cannot fault the Tatas for doing that. They had to do it.

Did this prompt the British to extend special privileges to the Tatas? For instance, Jamshedpur was acquired under zamindari rights. Your book says they got 25 square miles in return for paying Rs 12,000 as compensation to the raiyats, or peasant cultivators. The Tatas were also not required to pay revenue to the government. Was the compensation money adequate?

Frankly, I would need to do more research to figure out whether or not Rs 12,000 can be classified as adequate compensation. But you can figure out – 25 square miles and the Rs 12,000 payment for the loss of livelihood involving thousands and thousands of people. It was arguably not adequate.

Was it extraordinary for the Tatas not to pay revenue?

It was extraordinary. The land was granted to them under zamindari right, and zamindars were normally required to pay revenue to the government. The Tatas were exempted from that payment. They were also given full municipal control over the city.

Was the Tatas' architectural conception of Jamshedpur remarkably unequal, in contrast to the relatively more recent accounts about the family's intrinsic humanity? Your book talks of executives residing in bungalows lining the boulevards and TISCO employees living in

makeshift houses in the bastis.

The attitude of the elite and the industrialists then was that, well, they were doing a favour to people by giving them jobs. That attitude persists even today. For instance, people in Bawana, in Delhi, live in near-destitute conditions right now. So a hundred years ago, workers of Jamshedpur might even have been slightly better off than they are today.

Having said that, yes, they did have a very elitist approach to the architectural layout of Jamshedpur. The areas designated for housing workers soon got overcrowded because of the vast influx of informal labour.

Your book mentions high incidence of dacoity, killings...

This was because there was a huge growth of population with the expansion of TISCO and other ancillary industries in Jamshedpur. There was a large influx of people from outside Singhbhum district, in which Jamshedpur is located.

As I found out from the records, the Tatas had a deliberate policy of hiring people from all around the country. In fact, Jamsetji suggested that the Tatas follow a policy of recruiting workers from a wide catchment area in order to prevent strikes. This was the same attitude that the East India Company adopted vis-a-vis the army after 1857, that is, they didn't wish to raise an army composed of soldiers speaking the same language who could congregate. At least partly, the Tatas' hiring policy was aimed at ensuring that the workers did not combine easily.

However, as it happened, the workers did unite and combine despite the best efforts of Tatas. Questions of language, region, caste and religion did not matter to Jamshedpur's working class. From my studies of over 20 to 25 years of Jamshedpur's working class, I can say that they were not subject to the divisiveness of caste and community.

Your book talks of managerial despotism in TISCO's early years. The American TW Tutwiler, who was TISCO's general manager between 1916 and 1925, was particularly notorious. What was this despotism all about?

The philosophy was that the manager ought to be able to throw out a workman at will, any time. The hiring and firing of people on the spot was what, in essence, managerial despotism meant, so that people could never assume that they had a stable job. This became part of managerial culture in Chota Nagpur and lasted till the early forties. The manager's right to hire and fire workers conducted to an atmosphere of anxiety and fear.

For instance, it was known those days that Tutwiler could not tolerate anyone overtaking his car. Of course, people remarking upon that time say that this was typically the robust attitude of managers in those good old days. But how all this must have appeared to workers is quite another matter.

In his book *The Story of Tata Steel*, Verrier Elwin notes, "But perhaps it [despotism] was the only way to get the Steel Works going." Do you agree with Elwin's view?

I don't think the managerial attitude at TISCO would have been markedly different from industry in other parts of India. Managerial despotism existed everywhere in the country. It took the workers many years to win job stability and the right to choose their own leaders.

So the Tatas were behaving just like anyone else?

Yes, there was no exceptional virtue in the management style of the Tatas. From my studies of the

early phase of TISCO's life, the Tatas were quite despotic in those days, even afterwards. There was nothing remarkable in their attitude towards workers. Over the years, of course, things got tempered because there was a national movement, and there was pressure on management from within a section of the national movement. But the rights that the workers won were all hard fought for. It was not because of the generosity of the Tatas.

From 1920 onwards, labour-management relations in TISCO deteriorated, largely because of the mutual suspicion between them. From your book, it appears that among the initial triggers was RD Tata's duplicity - he claimed the company's finances didn't permit an increase in wages, yet the balance sheet, published in 1922, showed a net profit of Rs 88 lakh. Why did the Tatas take recourse to such an action?

I cannot answer this question specifically. I'd need to study this more because it involves the very specific issue about profit and the capacity to pay wages and so on. But if we shift a little ahead, say, to the late 1920s, then it is a fact that there was unrest among workmen and on the other hand, the Tatas were keen on shedding a proportion of their workforce. There is evidence that the Tatas were keenly aware of the monetary advantages that would accrue from a strike. The managers expected an increase in profits, and the police noted that the directors would rather welcome a strike. I've placed the historical evidence for this in my book.

Are you saying that the Tatas were letting strikes happen?

Not exactly. To begin with, there was only one major strike, between May and September of 1928. Trouble was brewing from 1927 - I won't go into previous cases of workers unrest, in the early 1920s. But 1927-'28 was when they were seized of the requirement to reduce the wage bill. This was because demand had dipped after the first boom period during WW I. Then the British were purchasing almost all the steel that TISCO was producing and there was profitability. In addition, the early phase of construction, when large numbers of workers had been hired, was long over. The Tatas were therefore keen to reduce the workforce.

Simultaneously, there was tension at the workplace - between workers and supervisors. Some of the crane-drivers were particularly militant. Archival data shows that behind the scenes, TISCO management was keenly aware of the advantages that might accrue to them if a strike were to occur. So we can't say that the 1928 strike was absolutely inevitable. The strike did happen and ultimately, a certain proportion of the workforce was reduced and the Tatas did indeed achieve their main goals.

So did the Tatas tacitly encourage a section of workers to strike? Or was it that they, by design, refused to accept the demands of workers in the hope they would strike?

Historians have to stick to facts as far as possible. Let me say that such situations are always very complex, as are motivations. One can't even come to a conclusion about motivations simply by reading documents. You have to have intuitions. One intuition I have is that the workers' leader, Maneck Homi, and the Tatas had a special animus towards each other. The workers chose Maneck Homi as their leader. We can understand this as the desire of workers to be represented by someone whom Tatas disliked. People used to refer to TISCO as a Parsi industry. Homi was also a Parsi. A counter-Parsi to the Tatas.

The situation got exacerbated because the Tatas didn't want to have anything to do with the strike committee led by Homi. Management said they would deal only with the Jamshedpur Labour Association, or JLA, which was itself the creation of workers, but which, over time had been domesticated, shall we say. In addition, it's clear that workers were becoming too "intractable and

impertinent”, as a senior police officer noted. In one noting the General Manager complained that *‘even the sweepers say they should share in the Company’s profits... men are talking of having their own committees which must be consulted in giving increments, promotions... in other words, pucca Bolshevism.. they must be put back in their proper place.’* It is interesting that apart from economic interests, emotional, psychological factors could also be seen at play in the tension between workers, managers, supervisors and leaders.

Despite the Leninist mythology that workers are incapable of thinking about their actions, and need political guidance, the evidence from the history of TISCO tells another story. In 1928 its workers formed a strike committee when they realised the JLA was not willing to or able to represent their interests. They realised they needed someone who was literate in English, who could read and draft documents, who was a lawyer, who could take on the Tatas. They found Homi.

What was Maneck Homi all about? Why did the Tatas dislike him?

Maneck Homi’s father was a mechanical foreman and Tata employee. He fell afoul of the Tatas and was dismissed in 1925. I assume the young Homi must have heard embittered comments about Tata management. Homi himself went to study iron and steel manufacturing in America. He was denied financial assistance by the Tatas; nor did he secure a job with them upon return.

Who knows, TISCO managers may have turned down Homi because they didn’t like his father. One can’t surmise, but it is a possibility. Thereafter, Homi became a bitter critic of the Tatas. He appeared before the Tariff Commission, which dealt with the levying of governmental duties on export and import, and made adverse remarks against the Tatas. Ironically, he even suggested reductions in the workforce.

In March 1928, the workers got in touch with Homi and requested him to represent them. There was tension between the JLA and the strike committee. But the workers weren’t keen on displacing the JLA. As a speaker said at one of the strike meetings, “we must mend it, not end it.”

Then things began to get worse with departmental strikes, including sweepers and boiler-men. On May 1, 1928, TISCO locked out 4,000 workers, and activist-workers congregated around Homi’s leadership. They demanded that management negotiate with him. But the Tatas refused to negotiate with the strike committee. Shortly afterward, 1,500 skilled workmen were dismissed – the district commissioner JR Dain thought this to be a deliberate provocation. TISCO said they wouldn’t negotiate with any committee that had Homi as its leader. Then it became a question whether or not workers had the right to be represented by an outsider. And Homi was an outsider. However, outsiders had represented workers before.

This question of whether the workers had the right to choose their representatives, regardless of them being insiders or outsiders, became an ego issue between them and the management. The workers resented the management’s refusal to deal with Homi.

Ajaz Ashraf is a journalist based in Delhi. His novel, *The Hour Before Dawn*, is available in bookstores around the country.

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