

The History Project Grant Report

Many Regimes of Apprenticeship: Skilling Artisans and Mechanics

Arun Kumar, PhD, University of Göttingen

Funds from the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking were used to research the history of artisanal apprenticeship in colonial India during the period of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The research questions of the project included: What was the nature of artisanal training in colonial India? How were skills constituted and transmitted to the next generation of artisan-workers? What morals, economic rationales, rituals, moral obligations, and rules guided the *ustād-shāgird* (master-disciple) relationship? The overall aim of the project was to understand the nature of artisanal training, the constitution of the labouring body, and the changing world of indigenous artisanal apprenticeship. The project has resulted in a research article which will be sent to an academic journal for review process in 2018 and a presentation at the 'New Economic History of India' conference, May 11-12, 2017 in Cambridge.

I used the History Project grant to work at the National Archives of India (Delhi), the British Library (London), and the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam). In the National Archives of India, I found files on the Apprenticeship Act of 1850. This little-known Act of the economic and labour history is an exciting piece of colonial legislation that shows how the colonial state relied on the contract ideology to create a labour force, produce a new category of worker (apprentice), and bind workers to learn specific trades. The act was used by the Indian colonial government officials and industrialists to employ and generate labour at public infrastructure projects such as at the bridge and road making, to bind criminal tribes to cotton mills, and to employ workers for the Bombay dockyards. I also discovered the notes of a census officer of the Central Provinces who, during his census surveys, collected work-related sayings and songs of artisans, i.e., stone-cutters, carpenters, blacksmiths, and masons. This one of a kind note gives a closer look into the knowledge economy of artisans of central India in the nineteenth century. It informs about their secret knowledge of arithmetical calculations, measurements, and trade tools and materials. It tells that artisans were worried that their inherited knowledge had become absolute due to the decline of patronage and was

in the danger of not getting passed to the next generation. For this reason, converting their oral artisanal knowledge into a written code has become essential. At the British Library, I further located the usages of the Apprenticeship Act. The city magistrates in Bombay used the Act to punish and reform orphans, vagrants, and criminal children during the 18050s. Stray children were picked up from streets and markets and were convicted and sent to the Bombay School of Industry to learn industrial trades such as pottery, carpentry, smithing, and to train for domestic service. These children were bound by the Apprenticeship Act and were forced to live on the premises of the school until their sentence was over. Desertion was made a criminal offence. The Act tied workers and the Western civilizational discourse in a peculiar way at the site of the school. Reports of the School (for the decades of the 1850s) give details of these juvenile delinquents, their crime and occupational status, and parental background (if any). The British Library was also used to look at the journal of the North India Notes and Queries which included ethnographic notes on the practices and notions of artisanal communities such as about the initiation rituals of artisan disciples and the process of artisanal training under the guidance of a master artisan. The time at the International Institute of Social History was used to refer the library and archives of the institute and read extensively on the non-South Asian works on apprenticeship and skills. Scholars at the Institute such as Jan Lucassen and the journal of the Institute, the *International Review of Social History*, have been central in opening the debate on the history of apprenticeship from a global comparative perspective.

A Short Abstract of the Written Research Article:

Labour process, in particular, the training of worker-artisans, mechanics, factory workers, and peasants, is a neglected theme of Indian economic and labour history. How was an artisan made into artisan, a factory worker into a factory worker, and a railway workshop fitter into a fitter? We do not know much. Labour historians have debated the supply of labour, the recruitment of labour, and the role of jobber but not the making of labour, the training of labour, and the power of master-artisans as a labour architect. It is precisely these discussions that are at the forefront of India's current economic policy through the discussion of 'Skill

India Programme' and the Apprenticeship Act. This paper explains how artisanal communities trained their labour and what changed its nature over the colonial period. How did artisans use the system of apprenticeship and craft-guilds to train and recruit the labour force? How did colonialism impact and manipulate the institution of indigenous artisanal apprenticeship? I focus on various sub-regimes of apprenticeship model in the indigenous crafts, that were pre-dominantly artisan or craft-guild led. I explore continuities and discontinuities of labour training over diverse materialities, i.e., thread, stone, wood, and metal. Beyond the material relationship of *ustád* and *shágird*, the paper goes deep into the worlds of artisanal cultures, rituals, morals, and ethics which, I argue, informed the economic production and the constitution of labouring bodies. Apprenticeship among artisans was both an economic and moral institution that guarded occupational secrets of artisanal communities, helped in constituting the community consciousness, and passed knowledge to the new generation. The paper shows that labour and economic interests of master-artisans were secured through long and slow training methods, and the apprenticeship period was a crucial mechanism in passing the values of respect, loyalty, and obedience along with trade and shop management skills among the disciples. In the second half of the paper, I shift readers attention to the features of the Apprenticeship Act of 1850 that the colonial state introduced. I show that the Apprenticeship Act came to be used in varieties of contexts: for punitive measures and training strays, waifs, orphans, and criminals, for securing labour for the state projects, and for generating skills among workers who did not come from artisanal castes.