

TRENDS IN REAL WAGES IN THE JUTE TEXTILE INDUSTRY FROM 1900 TO 1951

K. MUKERJI

1. In this paper, an attempt has been made to derive the movements of the average real wages per worker employed in the jute textile industry in or around Calcutta for the years 1900 through 1951. On the basis of 1951 figures, as much as 93.01 per cent. of the labour force in the jute textile mills are employed in West Bengal, the movement in average wages in West Bengal may therefore be taken to be fairly representative for the whole of India, so far as jute textile industry is concerned. The figures for average monthly money-wages, the index number of working-class cost of living, the average monthly real wages and an index of real wages with base 1951 = 100, for the 52 years in question are presented in the basic tables. It may be mentioned at the outset that the concept of average wages adopted involve merely average actual money-earnings. No effort has therefore, been made to correct the money-earning figures in order to make them comparable on the basis of similar working hours and other changes in working conditions.

2. From the figures in column (5) of the basic tables it would appear that in spite of considerable year-to-year fluctuations, due apparently to inadequate or excessive corrections in the shape of periodic wage revisions to changes in cost of living, there was no general movement in real wages until the early thirties. From 1931 onwards, the real wages rose sharply as a result of cost of living falling faster than the very considerable wage reduction that took place. Thereafter, the price-rise during the second-world-war period affected the real wages adversely and the level fell to the pre-depression levels until the matter was rectified by two major awards in 1948 and 1951. Taking the period as a whole, the 1948 and 1951 adjustments seem to have placed the wage level about 60.5 per cent. above the 1900 level.

3. The primary material for constructing a comparable series in respect of average wages in jute textile industry is very unsatisfactory. The paucity of data in respect of wages in the jute mill industry was commented upon both by the Royal Commission on Labour¹ and the Rege Committee.² The quantum of information in this regard still continues to be inadequate. Nevertheless, the state in which absolutely no basis existed for discussing the wage position in the jute industry was rectified partially by the wage figures becoming available due to the operation of the Payment of Wages Act, 1936, from the year 1939 onwards. On the basis of

¹ References are given at the end of the article.