

Workshop:

“Wage Politics - Material and Political Transformations“

Centre for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen

Venue: Heyne Haus, Papendiek 16, 37073 Göttingen

September 15-16, 2023

Friday, September 15

8:30-9:00	Registration and Welcome Tea
9:00-09:30	Introductory Remarks <i>Ravi Abuja (CeMIS)</i>
09:30-12:30	Wages and Social Mobilisation The Second World War, Question of Dearness Allowance and the General Strike of 1940 <i>Robert Rahman Raman (CeMIS, online participation)</i> TBA <i>Mayur Chetia (Delhi University) and Naveen Chander (CeMIS)</i> Bonus <i>Aditya Sarkar (University of Warwick)</i>
12:30-13:30	Lunch Break
13:30-15:30	Regulating the Labour Market Seeking Equilibrium – The Government of India and the Estate Labour Market in Malaya, 1927-1942 <i>Siddharth Sridhar (University of Toronto)</i> Rural Labour Relations in India: An Exploration of the Changing Nature of Wages <i>Abhishek Shaw (Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad)</i>
15:30-16:00	Coffee Break
16:00-18:00	Workplace Organisation Rationalisation and the Politics of Labour in Post Independence India: the Case of Kanpur <i>Chitra Joshi (Delhi University)</i> Women’s Labour and Welfare in the Extractive Industries: A Comparative Analysis of Coal and Iron Mining in India, 1941-2015 <i>Dhiraj Nite (Ambedkar University Delhi)</i>

Saturday, September 16

8:30-9:00	Registration and Welcome Tea
9:00-12:00	Minimum Wages and Household Reproduction ‘Sweated’ Industries, ‘Unorganised’ Occupations, and the Right to Subsistence: Legislating the Minimum Wages Policy in Madras <i>Asbath Ramesh and Karuna Dietrich-Wielenga (Azim Premji University)</i> Negotiating Needs – Budget Surveys as a Basis for Minimum Wages in Ahmedabad <i>Catharina Hänsel (CeMIS, Scuola Normale Superiore)</i> Minimum Wages in the Indian Bidi Industry – A Journey from Ahmedabad to Geneva <i>Silke Neunsinger (Swedish Labor Movement Archives and Library)</i>
12:00-12:30	Pre-lunch break
12:30-13:30	Joint Discussion and Concluding Remarks

● Concept Note

Economic and social historians have generally studied wages in India as exchange relations, labour markets and their geographical variations (e.g. Lucassen and Seshan 2022), and as indicators of living standards over time (e.g. Tirthankar Roy). However, these analyses fail to take into account the qualitative transformations which took place after the First and Second World War. These changes brought about contradictory tendencies with regards to wage payments unique to the subcontinent, such as the establishment of dearness allowance as a fixed component of the wage bill. How were these claims articulated and how did political struggles for compensation constitute socio-economic realities?

As part of the DFG-funded project “Divisions of Labour”, the workshop aims at tracing the making of labour as a political category through the regulation of wage politics between 1920-1970 in India. Divisions occurred through varying definitions of workers, different payment scales, thereby reproducing and intersecting with cultural divisions of caste, class and gender. In other words, in this concept wages are not a one-dimensional line of conflict but rather mark various divisions: its composition (basic wage, dearness allowance and bonus), its functions (subsistence/minimum wage, living wage and fair wage) and its implications in the realm of the industrialization and nation-building project.

1. Legislation

With wages as the crucial demand of several strikes during the period of investigation, how did payment matters become embedded in political action within emerging institutions of the state and the judiciary? What was the effect on regulatory processes? The formalisation of wage labour law created “insiders” and “outsiders” by formalising some types of work but not all of it. Laws applied to certain sectors, certain enterprises and groups of people who became incorporated into the legal framework. This poses a question on the dimensions of the idea of “tripartism”, as well as the scale and the number of institutions involved (municipal, regional, national, international). How can the process of juridification of wage relations be methodologically traced in court cases at each level?

How did trade unions engage in these processes and how did their strategies vary between strike actions and “peaceful” cooperation in negotiations? With regards to employers’ interests within the political sphere, this refers particularly to the issue of the relation between welfare and wages. How was the distinction between workplace-based social security or citizenship-based relief conceptualised? How did these concepts develop between tensions of delegating responsibility and binding workers to the workplace? To what extent did this process play out certain social groups against each other?

2. Workplace Organisation

Legislative interventions, along with technological change led to an increasing scholarly interest in labour process matters. For example, attempts to standardise wages across certain industries and occupations required workload studies in order to determine “scientific” wage levels. Through which means was this process of setting qualitative standards for “fair” wages based on the amount of work to be conducted to obtain a certain level of remuneration politically moderated?

Workplace organisation was particularly affected in terms of working time modalities including attendance, as well as the organisation of shifts and breaks. The intensification of work resulted in contradictory effects on supervision of work. Direct control mechanisms were making way for more indirect, seemingly less coercive forms, determined by the machines. Which (contradictory) effects did this have on the organisation of breaks, shifts and attendance? Similarly, the project assesses the implications of a reordering of attendance and the organisation of shifts for those who enjoyed the status of a “permanent” worker vis-à-vis a “temporary” member of the workforce. How did supervisory changes impact the relation between paid and unpaid work as well as the rhythms of wage-payment, often irregular, fluctuating, deferred or withheld. In other words, how has the wage been composed, internally differentiated, and balanced across different contexts?

3. Household Reproduction

How did the category of the “working class household” emerge from legislative interventions as well as changes on the shopfloor? The positioning of the “working class” in the developmental state through the measurement of income and expenditure intersected with cultural divisions of caste and gender. This section further analyses how moments of crisis shaped these responses to price volatilities, ranging from (benevolent) need-based relief and production-based measures tied to notions of “efficiency”.

As one of the key mechanisms of workplace management, incentive systems became increasingly important for the regulation of quantity as well as quality. Such incentives took several forms - from annual to weekly bonus payments, as well as combinations of payments of both “basic” (time) wages and remuneration per piece. In the textile industry, this had peculiar gendered dimensions. With women working mostly in piece-rated occupations (e.g. in the winding department), technical change coupled with ideas of “family wages” crowding out piece-work significantly reduced women’s employment in the mills.

How can we then conceptualise the effect of both legislative measures and changes in the organisation of work on earnings, savings and debt? Certain legal interventions which were intended to determine “minimum” standards significantly altered modalities of wage payments, thereby determining not only *how much* income was available, but also *when* and in which form (cash vs. in-kind). This is particularly the case for dearness allowance payments emerging from the two World Wars as measures of (food) relief eventually becoming a permanent feature of the total wage bill, yet not forming a part of the basic wage. How were real wages shaped by political

discussions on the composition of wage, the choice of price indices and inflation? This would contribute to an understanding of wages in their forms of appearance and tensions which they unfold within the political economy.

•

This workshop is part of the DFG-funded project
“Divisions of Labour. Histories of formalisation and informalisation in the transition to postcolonial India”

Organising Committee: Ravi Ahuja, Catharina Hänsel, Naveen Chander, Aditya Sarkar

Should you wish to register, please contact Iris Karakus
iris.karakus@cemis.uni-goettingen.de