

My paper will talk about the scavenger's strike in Calcutta in 1920s and in doing so it will reflect on the urban working class politics of colonial Calcutta. the Dhangars, mostly adivasis from Chotanagpur plateau, had traditionally been employed in Calcutta for scavenging. they were perhaps brought in the city when Calcutta was established for forest clearing. then their predecessors became the scavengers. their service was essential to the urban population. but they lived in utmost poverty and had no social standing in the society. they lived in most unhygienic quartets, their children had no access to education and the Calcutta Corporation was most oblivious to their condition. important nationalist leaders like C.R.Das, Jyotindramohan Sengupta and Subhash Bose had been mayors of Calcutta Corporation. but none of them had paid any attention to the condition of scavengers. but they were strong in numbers. according to an estimate, in 1880 Calcutta had 11000 scavengers who had to dispose the waste of around 24000. communists were the first to mobilise this group. in 1920s the politically conscious and socially sensitive urban educated class began to pay attention to the conditions of the city scavengers. Begum Rokeya was one of the first social activist to draw attention to them. she encouraged the Muslim women to visit the Dhangar quarters to get a first hand idea of their situation. in 1924 C.R. Das was forced to meet their representatives to hear their demands and grievances. important intellectuals and litterateurs of the city like Satyendranath Datta and even Tagore began writing about them. under the leadership of the trade union leader Prabhavati Debi the first union of scavengers was established in 1927.

1928 was a historic moment for the scavengers rights movement. For the first time they observed strikes in Calcutta and elsewhere. There were two rounds of strike: a) between March 4 and March 9 and b) between June 24 and July 5. Around the same time, the Congress leadership was organizing a movement against the Simon Commission. Jute mill workers and railway workers of Kharagpur and other workshops were also observing strike around the same time. The reasons for their protests were financial difficulties and general economic decline. Therefore it was a tumultuous period. The reasons behind the Dhangars' strikes are difficult to ascertain. They wanted recognition as labourers. When the scavengers of Calcutta initiated their movement, they found allies in their counterparts at Dhaka, Maimansingh, Bombay and other parts of India. As they provided the essential service of waste disposal and garbage management, their strike meant a total breakdown of the city life. Though their strikes were not successful (none of their strikes

were successful before 1940) and there was a heavy crackdown on them by the Congress leadership, the twin strikes of 1928 went a long way in giving the scavengers a “visibility” in the labour politics of the time. It is therefore very important to read the pamphlets issued during this time as it will help us to study the popular consciousness around urban poor, labour issues and the role of the political class towards them.