CHAPTER - IX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The history of jute mills and its workers is inter-related with the growth of the British Empire - having a symbiotic relationship between themselves. The growth of Calcutta as a major city of the British Empire was almost entirely dependent on the emergence and subsequent prosperity of the jute industry. The development and growth of the Indian industrial proletariat started in the jute mills of Bengal.

The environment of the jute workers, i.e. the living and working conditions in and around jute mills, was always regarded as a low-priority subject of discussion. The monitoring of the living and working conditions of the working class was necessary only to maintain the law-and-order situation in and around the mill. This was the spirit in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century documents regarding the environment of jute mill workers. Epidemics were discussed because they created large-scale absenteeism among the workers. To some extent, accidents were also monitored. The mill authorities, the Government, the philanthropic organisations and lastly, the trade unions - all ignored the plight of the jute workers and turned a blind eye to the inhuman conditions and squalor that prevail in and around the jute mills.

This study is an attempt to know the living and working environment of the workers and to explore the ecology of diseases present. To understand the problem in a proper
perspective, organisational as well as environmental hazards are studied.

Since health is closely related to the background of the worker himself, the demographic structure of the workforce has been studied. The study of workers by religion, caste and linguistic community provide some interesting insight regarding the present workforce. The study of the class background is quite necessary in understanding and subsequent explanation of the present-day condition of the worker's well-being. There have been a certain pattern in the composition of workforce and their migratory habits. Various features are recognised while discussing the background of the workers -

(a) [The majority of the jute mill workers are from a rural background.] The ruined artisans, labourers failing to get adequate employment and subsistence in the rural economy, agriculturists unsettled by the sort of changes taking place in the agricultural economy, unskilled of all trades, and peasants, artisans and labourers turned into destitutes and paupers... comprise mostly the working mass in the jute mills.

b) [The composition of the workforce is highly heterogeneous.] The workers belonged to a variety of castes and sub-castes, as well as various lingual groups and religions communities. The migrating workers represent a sample of the rural population in the migrating areas.
c) The most downtrodden in the countryside, the lowest in the social hierarchy and the untouchables formed a high proportion. But the Kapalis, the traditional jute spinning and weaving backward sub-caste of Bengal, were absent in the mills.

d) The recruitment from tribal areas of Bihar and Orissa is non-existent in the jute mills, though in the mines and plantations of Bengal tribal labour is quite common.

e) The predominance of Muslim workers and the comparative absence of Hindu workers were found in the early days of the jute industry. The Hindu caste-bound craftsmen are less mobile in the matter of change of occupation than their Muslim counterpart. When the village craftsmen and farmers had to change their occupation, the people from the Islamic community came to the forefront.

f) The newer recruitment pattern in the jute mills comprise of more Bengalis of the adjoining districts and Bangladesh. Though a steady stream of workers from villages of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar come to work in the jute mills, a small fraction of them are Muslims. It might be due to the shift of Muslim population to Bangladesh after partition.

g) The pattern of workers emerging in both mills are quite significant. The working population of Birla Jute Mill is predominantly migrant Hindu, whereas in Meghna Jute Mill most of the workers are Muslim migrants. This might be due to the locational difference in the
mills. The Meghna Jute Mill is situated in the core area of jute manufacture which traditionally acquire labourers from a specific area following a set pattern. On the other hand, the Birla Jute Mill is situated at the periphery of Calcutta Industrial Area and set up manufacturing jute goods at a much later stage. This mill did not get the privileges of being at the centre of an already thriving and over-saturated labour market. In the mill, there is a predominance of local people which is a new phenomena as far as jute industry in general is concerned.

While discussing the family type of the workers it is found that the workers from Bihar have a tendency towards nuclear families. They also have a sizeable number of joint families, but the percentages of extended families are small. Among the workers of Orissa, the nuclear families lead but the percentage of extended families are more than joint families. The workers of West Bengal repeat the same trend though Meghna Jute Mill shows an unusual high in the percentage of extended families. Among Bangladeshi workers most of them live in nuclear families followed by extended and joint families. The families of the workers from Uttar Pradesh show the same trend.

In both mills, the Hindus and Muslims show a trend of more nuclear families and less extended and joint families. It is quite clear that the joint and extended families are slowly giving way to nuclear families. The fairly large number of joint and extended families show the semi-
proletariat nature of the Indian working class. The variation in the different family types in both mills is due to the difference in the composition of the workforce - in terms of migrant and non-migrant workers and in terms of the variation in the number of Hindu and Muslim workers.

Various economic and social factors are responsible for the distribution of various family types. One very common explanation of single and broken-up households is that the social stigma against women coming out of their traditional home prevents the worker to set up his family in the industrial area. But it is also found that with better living conditions this social barrier is broken to some extent. The tendency to have more nuclear families is another indication of this.

A very important explanation of this phenomena lies in the composition of the earners in the household. In both mills, irrespective of religion, a negligible percentage of households (1.6%) with a female earning member is found. This is the most vital reason behind the absence of a large number of women because they do not figure in the earning workforce.

Various important features of the family size of the workers reveal some interesting conclusions. Firstly, the families show a trend of less children per couple. Secondly, the extended family is common. Thirdly, the prevalence of extended families show that the structure of nuclear family is yet to evolve properly. Fourthly, though the jute workers are facing abject poverty and squalor in
his family surroundings, the value system of the worker regarding family relations did not change. It implies that the consciousness of the jute worker did not change according to the newer status of a proletariat. Fifthly, the reason behind this unchanging value system lies in the fact that most of the workers have some link with the production process of rural India. The strong link with the village is displayed in the fact that the majority of the workers have a small amount of landed property, either a homestead or agricultural land, in their ancestral village. Since the worker is permanently settled in his ancestral village, he cannot be termed a proletariat. Though the worker cannot support himself and his family on that landed property, it helps him as a source of income either in cash or kind. There has been a strong tendency of acquiring agricultural land or livestock with the wages earned in the factory. Sixthly, this pre-modern family structure is the key reason behind the large percentage of income sent to the villages as remittances. The worker prefers to live alone in the city and keep his family in the village. Finally, the strong link with the village is evident in the fact that during strikes, lock-outs and in the harvesting season a large section of the workers go back to their villages.

The myth about Muslims having more children and consequently, bigger families have been disproved in this study. Though the feudal structure of the family persists, the impact of religion on family life is little. The caste system and untouchability is abolished among the jute
workers in everyday life due to the close proximity in which they live and work. Quite a few inter-caste and inter-religious marriages have taken place. The practice of one's religion and a religious way of life is not possible among the workers. Though the religious consciousness is present among the workers, everyday religious activities are quite redundant.

The occupational structure of the workers before joining the mills reveals that they were uneducated and untrained for a specific job. A large section came from agricultural background and from the unorganised sector. Most of the workers are illiterate. A considerable section of them studied till the primary level.

Though the jute mill workers migrated due to various reasons, the basic cause was poverty due to unemployment and under-employment. The main features of the migrant workers are -

a) They are mainly from Bhojpuri speaking areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh followed by Oriya speaking areas of coastal Orissa. The population from Chotanagpur plateau is singularly missing in the jute mills.

b) Most of the workers are illiterate and without any technical training. The majority of them were appointed illegally by a labour-broker or sirdar.

c) Since the workers generally hail from agriculturally rich areas of Bihar and Orissa, most of them migrated partially. On the other hand, migrant workers from Bangladesh have generally migrated totally.
d) The worker maintains a close link with his village. It is evident in the large amount of remittances he sends home. As soon as he saves some money or manages to get a long-term loan, he invariably buys some agricultural land or livestock. For the worker, acquiring agricultural land and/or livestock is synonymous to an improved social status rather than as a source of surplus income.

e) The workers' close link with village is again emphasized by the fact that his source of information is not the modern means of communication. He relies more on the channels of oral tradition.

The home environment of the workers' i.e. the living condition in the coolie lines and his day-to-day standard of living gives a clear picture that has direct impact on the worker's health. Poverty and poor housing are mutually inclusive. Various infectious and environmentally created diseases are more prevalent in poor housing than in better housing condition. Overcrowding with insanitary condition inside the house create various stresses such as noise, improper lighting, lack of ventilation, the presence of various insects and rodents and a variety of solid waste. The individuals living in substandard housing with these problems have higher infant mortality rate, a greater level of disease, poorer health, various nutritional problems and a variety of other health defects.

The insensitiveness to the workers' needs is reflected in the present-day housing conditions and housing facilities
of the jute mill workers. In Meghna Jute Mill this insensitiveness is more apparent than in the Birla Jute Mill. The workers' quarters are nothing but overcrowded insanitary hovels, without any adequate ventilation facilities whatsoever. The floor and the roof are made of concrete, but are often leaking and damp. They do not have separate toilets, kitchen and drinking water facilities. The workers cook inside their rooms and collect drinking water from the nearby tap or pond. The factory does not provide any drinking water for the workers. The workers staying in rented houses generally reside in slums or shanties. The living conditions in these slums are worse than in the coolie lines. The slum or the makeshift shanties are found along the railway lines and along the river or canal banks or beside waste-lands used as garbage dumps. They are almost invariably built on public land and are often evicted at the shortest notice. The contractors who build these houses or the local mafia who collect the so-called "rent" are usually given protection by the factory owners and they help them evict the workers if necessary. Hence the workers living in the coolie-lines and in the slums are both controlled by the factory owner. The workers of both mills stay in a variety of dwellings and the ownership status of accommodation is widely different. While analysing the differences in the accommodation pattern of both mills some interesting features are found. They are -
a) Since Meghna Jute Mill is situated in the extremely congested area of Jagaddal municipality, a part of Calcutta Conurbation - the price of land is high. This is the reason behind a comparatively less number of workers having own houses than in Birla Jute Mill.

b) In both mills, wherever there are pucca houses, generally they are the quarters provided by the factory. Among the rented houses, kachcha and semi-kachcha houses are most common.

c) In Meghna Jute Mill the people of the broken families prefer to stay in sub-let houses, which are mainly kachcha houses. In Birla Jute Mill, the same workers prefer to stay in the company quarters as a sub-tenant. It shows that the company quarters in Birla Jute Mill are cheap as well as comfortable. On the other hand, rented houses in the slums around Meghna Jute Mill are considered better than the coolie-lines.

The wide difference in living conditions are due to various reasons. Some of them are socio-economic as well as locational reasons. These factors are all interlinked, and, though they do not have a direct cause-and-effect relationship, they influence the standard of living to a great extent.

The workers tend to acquire landed property and gold/silver jewellery. Though they buy quite an amount of consumer durables, their basic craving is to acquire land or jewellery. This does not indicate the level of affluence or the presence of dispensable income. Since in the jute mills
the job security is practically nil and where the jute mills are on the verge of closure - the acquiring of jewellery is nothing but a desperate attempt to acquire some security in times of necessity.

The expenditure pattern of the worker reveals that most of the income is spent on food. A considerable portion of income is spent as remittances sent to the villages. Whenever a little bit of extra income is managed, it is promptly sent to the villages. The worker tries to spend as little as possible on himself. The close family ties of the worker is revealed by his expenditure pattern. Clothing, medicine and medical fees, house rent, expenditure on addiction, education and recreation are having the least priority in the expenditure pattern. Interest and repayment of debt is a major channel of expenditure. The reasons of indebtedness are varied and range from natural calamities, personal expenditures to acquiring wealth. During slack season and unemployment the workers usually pawn their valuables and acquire loan from various sources. The workers are almost permanently on debt. The whole life of the worker is spent in a vicious circle of lack of income and indebtedness.

The dietary pattern of the workers in both mills is more or less identical. The jute mill workers' feeds are few and far between. The food routine is highly irregular and follows the working hours of the specific shift. The rest of his family also follow that routine because it is customary in Indian society to eat after the head of the
family eats. The regional differences in food habit are not found generally. The inter-meal snacks are especially consumed by the working members of the household. No specific food for the children, aged and sick are consumed. The monotony of the eating habit can be attributed to lack of income as well as the feudal patriarchal structure of society which is basically non-changing and anti-variety.

The condition in the workplace is studied extensively. In the jute mills, the machineries are obsolete, environmental hazards continue, facilities like canteens and drinking water are scarce, precautionary measures against various health hazards and accidents lack. There is a complete lack of wage standardization and the nature and quality of supervision is corrupt in general. All these reasons, directly and/or indirectly create a condition that leads to a large number of accidents among the workers.

In the jute mills, from the very beginning, the system of recruitment and training were informal in nature. The worker does not receive any training. Since the workers are all self-trained, individual workers remained highly replaceable as long as the labour supply is adequate. The task of structuring a labour force was always a supply proposition to the mills and not a question of skill formation, training and efficiency. Since the sirdar was the actual employer, the workers are often recruited following a typical religious and racial angle favoured by the sirdar. Hence the very structure of the labour market in the jute industry created conditions conducive to the
growth of racial and religious conflicts which create tension in the workplace. All these factors jointly create a situation where tension and unrest are the rule.

The instability of the job, the obsolete machineries, erratic hours etc., combined with various environmental hazards in the workplace create a variety of physical, chemical, ergonomic and psychological stresses that affect the workers and their family members to a large extent. The physical stress include excessive temperature, humidity, noise and vibration. Chemical stresses include jute dust and batching oil which cause various diseases. Ergonomic stresses include unusual body position and unusual body movement. These factors, along with lack of various facilities and lack of precautionary measures cause ill-health and accidents.

Various stresses and accidents are so common in the jute mills that the employer as well as the worker consider them as a part of work and a part of day-to-day life. The unusually high rate of accidents are often reported as "due to human error". But actually this high rate of accident is due to the obsolete machinery and technology combined with the faulty work-process in the mill.

In the records of various Government bodies, health of the workers was always judged in terms of the absence of epidemic or not. It was never a question of diet, nutrition or standard of living. In the jute mills, health care for workers was traditionally aimed at prevention of epidemics. Since epidemics means large scale absenteeism, only those
diseases were taken care of which are potentially epidemic in nature. So ingrained is the kind of apathy towards the health problems are, that health is a problem of secondary attitude towards the jute people.

In this study, various demographic components of health (e.g. age at marriage, fertility pattern, child mortality, live birth etc.) are discussed. The feudal structure of the family, lack of income, illiteracy and insanitary living conditions give rise to an unusually high rate of child mortality and ill-health of the family in general.

In this study, the morbidity pattern of the worker and their household members is analysed. It should be kept in mind that only those persons getting medical care come under the study. Among the jute mill workers, quite a number of illnesses are undetected. The workers try to evade medication as long as possible, partly because of poverty and partly due to lack of knowledge about general health. When the disease turns chronic and does not respond to home remedies then only he visits a doctor. The doctors are often not qualified and there is hardly any follow-up of the cases. The women and children are often not getting any medical care whatsoever. Moreover, it is often found that various diseases affect people at different degrees under similar conditions. The reasons are various - ranging from genetic characteristics and childhood upbringing to recent living and working conditions.

The various diseases of the workers are generally classified under various groups. The are:
a) water-borne diseases e.g. typhoid, cholera, diarrhoea, amoebiaris, hepatitis, enteric diseases etc.
b) vector-borne diseases e.g. malaria, filaria, dangues, kala-azar, chicken-pox etc.,
c) diseases due to malnutrition e.g. anaemia, rickets, gastritis, tuberculosis etc.,
d) respiratory diseases e.g. asthma, bronchitis etc.,
e) ergonomic problems e.g. sciatica, arthritis, spondilits, nervous disorders etc.,
f) skin disease,
g) deafness and
h) miscellaneous diseases e.g. diabetes, cancer, heart problems, liver problems, urological diseases etc.

In the jute mills, water-borne diseases are outnumbered by respiratory diseases. It is followed by vector-borne, malnutritional and ergonomic diseases. Due to better living conditions, the occurrences of vector-borne diseases are less in Birla Jute Mill than in Meghna Jute Mill. In both mills, the diseases according to prevalence are respiratory, vector-borne, malnutritional and ergonomic diseases. The reasons behind the widespread respiratory and ergonomic diseases are mainly the presence of jute dust in the atmosphere at the workplace, insanitary living and working conditions and general polluted atmosphere at the mill area. The ergonomic diseases are mainly caused due to the extra workload and the bad organisation of the work process. It is interesting to note that the workers never
had any respiratory or ergonomic trouble before joining work in the jute mills. The vector-borne diseases are due to overcrowding, bad housing conditions, lack of housing facilities and insanitary living. The slum conditions prevailing in and around the jute mills add to the squalor. The malnutritional diseases are mainly due to poverty. The perpetual ill-health and weakness of the worker enhance the situation under which the diseases of malnutrition occur.

The past and present morbidity pattern of the workers - when compared - show very interesting findings. In the past, workers report of very few cases of malnutritional diseases. Past records of respiratory and ergonomic diseases are almost nil. But at present, these are the main types of diseases from which the workers suffer. This change in the morbidity pattern proves that the main reasons of workers' ill health are due to the living and working conditions of the workers. The diseases are inherent in the nature of their quality of life.

Among the household members of the jute mill workers, a striking growth in the occurrences of malnutritional, respiratory and ergonomic diseases have taken place. There is also a marked decrease in the occurrence of water-borne diseases as compared to the past record. The altogether increase in the occurrence of morbidity is remarkable.

There is a lot of similarity in the morbidity pattern of the workers and their household members. The reason of this may be attributed to the infectious nature of those diseases. It is often found that in a household many of the
inmates are suffering from the same disease. Due to insanitary living conditions people are affected easily, overcrowding increases the problems by spreading infectious diseases.

The health behaviour of the workers is a function of availability of health care facilities, health education, the kind of medical aid available, inoculation and family planning facilities etc. It is further influenced by the socio-economic conditions and the environment in which they reside and work. The cultural and social responses to health and illness are characterized by concern with people's conceptions of their own health and necessary preventive action to conserve or enhance it, their definitions and responses to symptoms or illness, and the effects of varying attitudes and behaviour on the course of illness and the success of rehabilitation. To understand the pattern of health behaviour of the jute workers, some indicators of health behaviour e.g. inoculation, family planning, addiction pattern, health care pattern, pluralistic use of medicine etc. are discussed. These are basic parameters of a person's interaction with the society in general and with modern medical sphere in particular.

Among the workers, the inoculation pattern is irregular i.e. the complete schedule of the inoculation process is not practised. Due to this reason the rate of child mortality is quite high in both mills. Family planning is practised by a small section of the workers. Non-availability of family planning and inoculation devices, lack of health-care
facilities, lack of counselling and follow-up practices, social and religious stigma etc. are root causes behind the unpopularity and irregularity in the practice of family planning and inoculation in general.

Workers in the jute mills are addicted to various drugs and drinks, most of which are cheap and country-made. Drunkenness and intoxication of various types are not considered a vice among the workers; it is a phenomena. Addictions of various types are their only source of pleasure. Many workers of both mills listed expenditure on alcohol and tobacco as expenditure on recreation. The modes of addiction are more or less following the traditional Indian pattern of addiction. Smoking and chewing tobacco, country liquor, ganja, bhang and pan are widely used. The addiction generally starts from early adolescence; in fact most of them started regular habits of smoking and drinking with the first week's pay. Physically the worker feels the need of an external stimulus, the social needs are satisfied only in the comradeship of fellow-addicts. Apart from the chiefly physical influences which drive the working man into addiction, there is the example of the peer group, the neglected education etc., which influence an individual into a lifelong addiction. Often the addiction weakens the undernourished body of the workers and makes him more prone to illnesses. Apart from the jute dust and general pollution, smoking habits cause and aggravate respiratory problems among the workers.

Among the Indian population in general and the workers
of the jute mills in particular comprehensive health care facilities are still quite a remote phenomena. Since the workers suffer from various types of diseases, they need various types of specialized health care, which are not always available in the general hospitals. As treatment in the hospitals is a time-taking process, the workers are usually forced to go to a private clinic and buy the prescribed medicines from the market. On the other hand, in case of diseases needing hospitalisation, the worker prefers to go to the hospitals.

The workers use a variety of medicines. It is often found that different types of medicines are taken for different diseases at the same time. The type of medicine taken is generally disease-specific. The consumption pattern of a certain type of medicine depends upon various factors like the effectiveness, availability and market price of that medicine. Among the workers of both mills, allopathy is widely consumed. In both mills, it is the only type of medicine which cuts across age-groups and diseases. Children are generally taking homeopathic medicine. For minor ailments like cough and cold, fever, headache etc., people generally prefer to take homeopathy medicine. The use of ayurvedic medicine is mostly in the case of gout and skin diseases. There is no gender bias regarding the use of different types of medicine. The criteria for using different types of medicine and health care is mostly disease-specific and sometimes age-specific. The health behaviour of workers reflect the general poverty, ignorance
and squalor of their surroundings. The non-availability of basic amenities and medical facilities force the workers to adopt a lifestyle which is harmful to themselves and the members of their households. The health behaviour of the workers is the end result of this unhealthy existence.

The basic reason behind the worker's ill-health is poverty. This, accompanied with ignorance, is the root cause of all kinds of hardships they face. Health cannot be achieved without a certain level of income and education. Without the help of the Government and the joint effort and persuasion of the trade unions and the masses, this goal can never be achieved.

In India, health and education of the masses had always been a subject of low priority to the policy makers. This attitude is carried on even today by the forces in the power. The Government, the political parties, the trade unions, the philanthropic organisations, the educated elite - in short, everybody have turned a blind eye towards the plight of the workers. The rootless workers, away from their familiar surroundings and family members, living in an alien city in a totally alien culture, trying their best to keep their body and soul together, try to survive in the face of hostility, unhealthy competition and insecurity of income. They try to send almost all of their pay to their home, eat the bare minimum and live in a place where no human can exist. His mind and body, facing so much hardship are often prone to serious and chronic diseases. He often does not afford to get himself treated and continue in this
condition as long as possible. They are deprived of the basic human right to survive. In order to improve the conditions of the workers of the jute mills, these following changes are recommended:-

a) The organisational factors like wage rates, working hours, methods of employment etc. should be made regular and universal.

b) The practice of recruiting "badli" or ghost-workers should be stopped.

c) Basic training should be given to the workers before starting work on the machines.

d) The provisions in the Factory Act should be made available to every worker.

e) Obsolete machineries should be changed to avoid accidents.

f) The housing conditions should be improved, especially in the case of Meghna Jute Mill.

g) Health facilities should be made available free of cost to every worker.

h) Benefits like bonus, provident fund, gratuity, compensations against accidents, old age pensions etc. should be made available.

i) A general awareness and literacy programme should be conducted to help the workers fight against various injustices prevailing in their society.