

**Coolies and Capitalism**  
PECO 5502 (PSCI 5502/SOCI 5505)  
2025 Winter Term  
Institute of Political Economy

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**Day & Time: Tuesdays 11:35-14:25**

**INSTRUCTOR: Professor Sumeet Mhaskar**

**Office Hours: Tuesdays 15:00-16:30, or by appointment**

**Email:** [sumeetmhaskar@cunet.carleton.ca](mailto:sumeetmhaskar@cunet.carleton.ca) I will generally respond to course-related emails within 48 hours

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## 1. Course Description

In the academic literature, the word coolie is used as a generic category for “unskilled” manual labour. While examining the category of “coolie”, this course will explore the rich body of literature on Indian labour from diverse theoretical and methodological positions. This course will explore the category of coolie and its relationship with capitalism in the South Asian context, and various forms of work regimes in colonial and post-colonial India, such as in the plantation economies, maritime and migratory labour, agricultural and artisanal work and factory labour. While examining the construction of concepts such as formal and informal labour, we will pay special attention to the social structures of accumulation, such as gender, caste, race and religion. We will revisit essential debates around the questions of ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour and investigate how the social bonds around caste, community and kinship are configured and re-configured in various historical contexts. While looking at the questions of gender, masculinity and the family, this course will examine the ways and spaces in which gendered identities—both female and male—are produced and reproduced. More significantly, this course will explore workers’ subjectivities through their voices and how they are made and unmade in the changing socio-economic contexts.

## 2. Learning Outcomes

- Students will learn about labour migration and its relations to political and social processes in the Global South.
- The course will train students to analyse the relationship between social structures such as gender, race, caste, religion, and ethnicity on the one hand and labour and work on the other.
- We will discuss the concepts of free labour and unfree labour and examine their utility in present-day labour relationships.

## 3. Course Format

This is a conversation-driven class and includes both in-person and classroom dialogue. The course will follow regular rhythms. Each week, we all independently read research papers that will be the focus of that week's conversation. We will begin class by going around the table and having each student share their response to the assigned texts. Students are responsible for ensuring they are familiar with the main arguments under discussion every week and can contribute to the critical commentary around the text. Following this, I will provide a short lecture, situating the text within the broader literature. Students are strongly encouraged to ask questions. Following the lecture component, there will be a short break. The second half of the class will be seminar discussion. We

will engage with the text's arguments, methodological approach, conceptual framework, relation to other course readings, and application of the text to particular student research projects. The class will conclude with each student allowed to make a final comment.

#### **4. Evaluation**

##### **Class Participation and Attendance: 15%**

Students are expected to come to class after completing the assigned readings and being prepared to participate actively in class discussions and group work. Each session will consist of a lecture, small group activities, and class discussions. Over the course of the term, each student should pose at least four questions or substantive, thoughtful comments in class on the assigned readings and connect them to class discussions and other course material.

##### **One Presentation from the readings provided in the reading list: 35%**

Presentation (35%): Each student is expected to choose two research papers from the reading list and present for about 15 minutes (not a second more!). The presentations will take place the same week that particular topics will be discussed in the class. You cannot fit all the content in, so you must be strategic about what you plan to include. You will be assessed on the coherence of argument, presentation delivery (including sticking to time), and engagement with other classmates' research. The presentations will be scheduled in advance.

##### **One written assignment of a minimum of 3000 words: 50%**

Final Paper (50%): Your final papers will be due on **11 April**. While the assignment will cover a topic of your choosing, it would be best if you contacted me to let me know what you are writing **before** beginning work on this assignment. All assignments should be 15-20 pages long, double-spaced, with 12 fonts. No separate title pages are necessary. Your name and the assignment title at the top of the paper will suffice. Please use the Chicago Manual of Style for citations.

##### **Final Grade Approval**

The course instructor determines standing in a course, subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until the Dean has approved them.

##### **Technology in the classroom:**

Students are requested not to use technology in class for non-classroom activities. Doing so may negatively affect your participation and attendance record.

##### **Content Warning:**

Some of the texts we will read in this course might contain language that is significantly different from current norms and include references to sensitive issues of violence, race, sexuality and gender. If we

encounter such language in the sources, it will be placed in its historical context and discussed in an atmosphere of respect and consideration.

## 5. Statement on [Academic Integrity](#)

Academic integrity is an essential element of a productive and successful student career. Carleton's Academic Integrity Policy addresses academic integrity violations, including plagiarism, unauthorised collaboration, misrepresentation, impersonation, withholding of records, obstruction/interference, disruption of instruction or examinations, improper access to and/or dissemination of information, or violation of test and examination rules. Students are required to familiarise themselves with the university's academic integrity rules.

### Plagiarism

The University Academic Integrity Policy defines plagiarism as “*presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one's own.*” **Plagiarism is a serious offence which** includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source. Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn include but are not limited to books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, artworks, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, constructions, computer reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations.

Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to:

- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else, including the unauthorised use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT)
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, paraphrased material, algorithms, formulae, scientific or mathematical concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgement in any academic assignment
- using another's data or research findings without appropriate acknowledgement
- submitting a computer program developed in whole or in part by someone else, with or without modifications, as one's own
- failing to acknowledge sources with proper citations when using another's work and/or failing to use quotations marks.”

### Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI):

Generative artificial intelligence tools—software that creates new text, images, computer code, audio, video, and other content—have become widely available. Well-known examples include ChatGPT for text and DALL•E for images. This policy governs all such tools, including those released during our semester together. You may not use generative AI tools on assignments in this course. If you choose to use generative AI tools in violation of this policy (or in another class that permits them), please remember that they are typically trained on limited datasets that may be outdated. Additionally, generative AI datasets are trained on pre-existing material, including copyrighted material; therefore, relying on a generative AI tool may result in plagiarism or copyright violations. Finally, remember that generative AI tools aim to produce content that seems to have been created by a human, not to make accurate or reliable content; therefore, relying on a generative AI tool may result in your submission of inaccurate content. It is your responsibility—not the tool's—to ensure the quality, integrity, and accuracy of the work you

submit in any college course. If you use generative AI tools to complete assignments in this course in ways I have not explicitly authorised, this will constitute academic dishonesty. As a student in this course, you must understand when and how generative AI tools can be used to complete your assessments and activities. Please contact your instructor for guidance if you do not know whether an online resource or tool can be used in this course. Please act with integrity for the sake of both your character and your academic record. The student must fully prepare every element of each course assessment in this course. **Generative AI is not permitted, and its use may be considered a breach of academic conduct.**

### **Intellectual property**

Student or professor materials created for this course (including presentations and posted notes, labs, case studies, assignments and exams) remain the intellectual property of the author(s). They are intended for personal use and may not be reproduced or redistributed without prior written consent of the author(s).

### **Submission and Return of Term Work**

Papers must be submitted directly to the instructor according to the instructions in the course outline. The departmental office will not accept assignments submitted in hard copy.

### **Procedures in Cases of Suspected Violations**

Violations of the Academic Integrity Policy are serious offences that cannot be resolved directly by the course's instructor. When an instructor suspects a violation of the Academic Integrity Policy, the Associate Dean of the Faculty conducts a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student. Penalties are not trivial. They may include a zero mark for the assignment/exam in question or a final grade of "F" for the course. More information on the University's Academic Integrity Policy can be found at <https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>.

## **6. Statement on Student Mental Health**

As a student, you may experience a range of mental health challenges that significantly impact your academic success and overall well-being. If you need help, please speak to someone. There are numerous resources available both on- and off-campus to support you. For more information, please consult <https://wellness.carleton.ca/>

### **Emergency Resources (on and off campus)**

- Suicide Crisis Helpline: call or text 9-8-8, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- For immediate danger or urgent medical support: call 9-1-1

### **Carleton Resources**

- Mental Health and Wellbeing: <https://carleton.ca/wellness/>
- Health & Counselling Services: <https://carleton.ca/health/>
- Paul Menton Centre: <https://carleton.ca/pmc/>
- Academic Advising Centre (AAC): <https://carleton.ca/academicadvising/>
- Centre for Student Academic Support (CSAS): <https://carleton.ca/csas/>

- Equity & Inclusivity Communities: <https://carleton.ca/equity/>

## **Off-Campus Resources**

- Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region: call 613-238-3311, text 343-306-5550, or connect online at <https://www.dcottawa.on.ca/>
- Mental Health Crisis Service: call 613-722-6914 or toll-free 1-866-996-0991, or connect online at <http://www.crisisline.ca/>
- Empower Me Counselling Service: call 1-844-741-6389 or connect online at <https://students.carleton.ca/services/empower-me-counselling-services/>
- Good2Talk: call 1-866-925-5454 or connect online at <https://good2talk.ca/>
- The Walk-In Counselling Clinic: for online or on-site service <https://walkincounselling.com>

## **7. Academic Accommodations**

Carleton is committed to providing academic accessibility for all individuals. You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. The accommodation request processes, including information about the Academic Consideration Policy for Students in Medical and Other Extenuating Circumstances, are outlined on the Academic Accommodations website ([students.carleton.ca/course-outline](https://students.carleton.ca/course-outline)). For an accommodation request, the processes are as follows: <https://carleton.ca/equity/wp-content/uploads/Student-Guide-to-Academic-Accommodation.pdf>

### **Pregnancy obligation**

Please get in touch with me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Department of Equity and Inclusive Communities (EIC): <https://carleton.ca/equity/>

### **Religious obligation**

Write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Department of Equity and Inclusive Communities (EIC): <https://carleton.ca/equity/>

### **Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

If you have a documented disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact The Paul Menton Centre (PMC) at 613-520-6608 or [pmc@carleton.ca](mailto:pmc@carleton.ca) for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send me your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term and no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with me as soon as possible to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. Please consult the PMC Website for their deadline to request accommodations for the formally scheduled exam (if applicable) <https://carleton.ca/pmc>

### **Survivors of Sexual Violence**

As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and survivors are supported through

academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support, visit: <https://studentsupport/svpolicy>

### **Accommodation for Student Activities**

Carleton University recognises the substantial benefits to the individual student and the university resulting from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform nationally or internationally. Please get in touch with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. <https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf>

For more information on academic accommodation, please contact the departmental administrator or visit: <https://students.carleton.ca/services/accommodation/>

**Additional information** on your requirements for short-term informal accommodations.

- If you require supporting documentation for short-term considerations, you may only request the Academic Consideration for Coursework form. You may **not** request medical notes or documentation.
- Consult the Academic Consideration Policy for instructors information page for more details.

## **SESSION PLAN AND READINGS**

### **THE INSTRUCTOR WILL PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL.**

#### **WEEK 1: COOLIES AND CAPITALISM - INTRODUCTION**

This session will give an overview of the course and introduce the importance of studying labour and its linkages with capitalism. There are no readings for this session.

#### **WEEK 2 AND 3 THE WORLDS OF LABOUR**

This session will engage with the concept of labour and its relation to the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Who is a labourer? Blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, security guards, administrative officers, and doctors. What constitutes the world of labour (Inside the workplace and outside the workplace)? Formal sector and informal sector and formal conditions of employment and informal conditions of employment

#### *Readings*

\*Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. 2006. "Introduction." *International Review of Social History* 51 (Supplement S14):7-19.

\*Van Schendel, Willem. 2006. "Stretching Labour Historiography: Pointers from South Asia." *International Review of Social History* 51: 229-61.

Bhowmik, Sharit K. 2009. "India: Labor Sociology Searching for a Direction." *Work and Occupations* 36: 126-44.

Vanamala, M. 2001. "Informalisation and Feminisation of a Formal Sector Industry A Case Study." *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 30.

Breman, Jan. 1999. "Industrial Labour in Post-Colonial India. I: Industrializing the Economy and Formalizing Labour." *International Review of Social History* 44 (02):249-300.

Breman, Jan. 2000. "Industrial Labour in Post-Colonial India. II: Employment in the Informal-Sector Economy." *International Review of Social History* 44, no. 03 (2000): 451-83

#### **WEEK 4 AND 5 LABOUR , ITS ENTANGLEMENTS WITH CASTE, GENDER, & RELIGION**

This session will explore the concept of labour and its relation to social institutions such as gender, caste, religion, and region. Are individuals free to choose their labour?

##### *Readings*

\*\*Harriss-White, Barbara, and Nandini Gooptu. 2001. "Mapping the India's World of Unorganised Labour." *Socialist Register*, 89–118.

\*\*Thorat, Sukhadeo, and Katherine S Newman. 2010. "Introduction: Economic Discrimination - Concept, Consequences, and Remedies." In *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination and Social Exclusion in Modern India*, edited by Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S Newman, 1-34. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Harriss-White, Barbara. (2005). *India's Socially Regulated Economy*. ODID Working Paper No. 133. <https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/publications/indias-socially-regulated-economy>

#### **WEEK 6,7 AND 8: LABOUR RECRUITMENT, MIGRATION, GENDER & SEXUALITY**

This session will examine labour migration patterns and intermediaries' roles and gender and sexuality in the context of labour migration and industrial transformation.

##### *Readings*

\*\*Sen, Samita. 2005. "'Without His Consent?': Marriage and Women's Migration in Colonial India." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 65: 77-104.

Sen, Samita. 2009. "Commercial Recruiting and Informal Intermediation: Debate over the Sardari System in Assam Tea Plantations, 1860–1900." *Modern Asian Studies* 44: 3-28.

\*\*Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan. 1994. Chapter 4: Migration and Rural Connections of Bombay Workers In *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*, Cambridge South Asian Studies; 51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

\*\*Mohapatra, Prabhu P. 1995, 'Restoring the Family: Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860-1920', *Studies in History* 11/2, pp.227-260

\*\*Joshi, Chitra. 2002. "On De-Industrialization and the Crisis of Male Identities." *International Review of Social History* 47: 159-75.

Parry, Jonathan 2001. *Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh*. *Modern Asian Studies* 35(4): 783-820.

## **WEEK 9,10 AND 11 FREE-UNFREE LABOUR**

This session will discuss the issue of labour bondage and explore the free-unfree labour debate using historical examples.

### *Readings*

\*\*Ahuja, Ravi. 2013 *A Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude. The Unruly 'Lascars' of the SS City of Manila or a Micro-History of the 'Free Labour' Problem*. In Ravi Ahuja edited *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Tulika.

Ahuja, Ravi 2006, 'Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c. 1900-1960', *International Review of Social History*, 51, pp.111-141

Mohapatra, Prabhu P. 2004, 'The Hosay Massacre of 1884: Class and Community among Indian Immigrant Labourers in Trinidad', in Das, Arvind N./Van der Linden, M. (eds.) *Work and Social Change in Asia, Essays in Honour of Jan Breman*, New Delhi, Manohar pp. 187-230.

\*\*Breman, Jan and Isabelle Guérin 2009. "Introduction: On Bondage Old and New" In Breman, Jan, Isabelle Guérin, and Aseem Prakash edited. *India's Unfree Workforce: Of Bondage Old and New*. New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Banaji, Jairus. 2003. "The Fictions of Free Labour: Contract, Coercion, and So-Called Unfree Labour." *Historical Materialism* 11: 69-95.



Brass, Tom. 2003. "Why Unfree Labour Is Not 'So-Called': The Fictions of Jairus Banaji." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 31: 101 - 36.

## **WEEK 12, 13 & 14 CLASS, CASTE, COMMUNITY AND NATION**

This session will engage with the debates in labour history on the questions of labour and its relationship with class, caste, community and nation.

### *Readings*

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1989. Chapter 6: Class and Community In *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan. 1994. Chapter 9: Epilogue: workers' politics - class, caste and nation In *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joshi, Chitra. 2005. Chapter 7: Ties of Community In *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*, Anthem South Asian Studies. London: Anthem.

Bahadur, Gaiutra. 2016. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. London Hurst & Company.

Pawar, Daya. 2015. *Baluta*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger.