



TO STUDY THE REACTION, RESPONSE AND RESISTANCE TO THE LABOUR

MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Many elements of the working class struggle in Bombay followed the pattern of events after the First World War. The voiceless and the allegedly vulnerable segment of the sector had been able to project itself on the course of the trade union movement. With a new government and clear socialist ideology, the strikes in the first two decades of the 20th century propelled the aspirations and reach of the working class. The neglected class was now prepared to align itself with the imminent class war and the owners of the mill were now subjected to the hands of the external powers that were now increasingly taking the vital role of leading this class struggle.

A strong contrast between the conditions of workers in Russia and those of workers in Bombay produced a wave of fear and confusion among the native Indian capitalists. The shift in England's ranking on the world power index not only shook them in Europe, but now made them equally vulnerable in their colonies. Equally troubling to the colonial rulers was the intellectual support for the working class of Bombay from the newly emerging power block of Russia. Now the whole perception of the relationship in the industrial revolution and its mechanism of profit-sharing was about to be redefined, a logical battle of materialist ideals and the disputes of haves and have-nots was about to be discussed. For many trade unionists and their existing unions, the next few years were nothing but years of rise and fall. It was also the beginning of the implementation of the colonial government's numerous oppressive steps to maintain their tax monopoly and reform the Acts for better governance for both the imperialists and the native Indian capitalist class. The interesting phenomenon is that the native Indian capitalist was supported by the imperialist forces and the division between the native working class and the native capitalist class began to widen further. The shifting position of the owners of the mill and their growing instability has now paved the way for a new classless revolution in the country.



INTRODUCTION

International trends, such as Russia's widespread monetary, ideological and methodological support, the establishment of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the rise of the fascist movements in Europe shifted the political dynamics in Bombay, as the local government could feel its effect around the uprising of the working class. The colonial and the native capitalist didn't expect that the powers they had to reckon with would become more violent, coordinated and directed over the period of time. In a real sense, the labour movement experienced a phenomenal transition from 1925 to 1945. The discontent had reached the level of civil war, and the rising national consciousness in the country was partly fused with it. The Royal Commission of Labour had rightly pointed out that 'The nation in every country dwells in the cottage, and the well-being of the people must be the primary concern of any government'.

The perpetual decline of the cottage industry and the migration of labour from the villages to the industrial sector, established with the hope of job security, have also led to the city's prosperity. The city of Bombay, which thrived and grew at the expense of pure exploitation of the labour class, was the finest example of this. The selective promotion by the colonial rulers of the industrial revolution in Bombay led the town to the eventual function of 'disputes between employers and workers'. The evils of industrial growth do not distinguish between co-citizens and co-countrymen, so Bombay's employees were not an exception to this point. The 'jobs were not the first in times of immense income, but the last to get even a meagre rise, and that they were not the last but the first to be hit' in times of even a slight decrease in profits'³. The employees never asked or were shown about the international margins of the profits, but the owners of the mill were still prompt enough to deprive them of their bonuses or the reduction that caused the loss in the industry. Similarly, the mill owners declared economic recession after 1922 and expressed their helplessness under the pretext of the same in continuing some of the facilities provided to the workers in the pre-war era.

The general crisis was supposed to be shared collectively and particularly the ones who could hold the capacity of sustaining in this time were to have the greatest brunt, but instead of the employer facing this crisis, they transferred it to the labour class of Bombay. Consequently, during this time, it was not possible for the working class to obtain new concessions, but they had to engage in a concerted fight to protect what they had already accomplished'⁴. The other Asian rivals to the Indian capitalist emerging were the Japanese, who were now in the process of



transforming their post-First World War economy. With their competitive costs of production, they won the market; the Indian capitalist began to find it difficult to respond to such a competitive market that led to a further reduction in their prices. So they were thinking of a new idea of directing their workers to recover their margins by slashing their incentives and wages.

It is a particular 'colonial working class misfortune' that they ultimately have to fall victim to the intense rivalry between the imperialists and indigenous capitalists⁵. Among the mill owners of Bombay, this mentality was not fresh; the mill owners had done this unwittingly occasionally, without the workers knowing about it and under the garb of being the indisputable masters of the industry. The arrogant attitude of the mill owners is rightly reflected by Dr. T. M. Nair's in his note of dissent to the Indian Factory Committee, where he remarked that "my countrymen as a class were more unsympathetic and hard employers of labour than the European manufacturers. And some of the most enlightened and knowledgeable Indian gentlemen I addressed industrial issues with did not have to express a single word of concern for the workers. They were both willing to make up for lost time and to drive their manufacturing projects and accumulate wealth on a single one. But as for the workers, they were part of the manufacturing machinery and nothing more. To me, this finding came as an unexpected and disheartening surprise'. This was not a new discovery by the workers' sympathisers, but a popular finding by many in truth, it was the ignorance of these observations and lack of sympathy for the workers, the situation at both ends had reached the peak of misery.

More significant than the human element involved in it was the significance of machinery and its importance as a unit of output. The mechanical work in the mills and factories removed the social aspect of production economics. The working class, which was the main lever in this process, suffered more difficulties than they deserved. It 'converted labour into a mere appendage of an already existing material production condition'. The development of AITUC in 1920 gave the workers the legitimate voice and clear claims to debate on. In their opening session on 31 October 1920, the representatives of the AITUC retained the position and importance of staff on a high pedestal. As N. C. Kelkar commended in his resolution, describing the participation of the workers in the strikes in Bombay in 1918 and 1919, "This Congress condemns the attitude of the employers towards the strikes of the city of Bombay, which has courageously conducted the struggle for more than a month, remarkably free of violence, and urges our countrymen to give what they can to help the strikes." The AITUC's goal was to form



the unorganised movement of the working class in the city and in the world. They had the idea of inspiring the employees by representing them in the legislative councils and assemblies.

As the war would not be with the imperial powers, but with the local capitalists, the job ahead was rather more complicated for the workers. Unlike the Mill Owners Association, etc the AITUC representatives appealed to the British government to make arrangements for the inclusion of workers in the legislative bodies. This kind of demand was seen as a greater threat to the colonial government. The direct confrontation between the native capitalists and the workers' representatives was about to generate industrial disharmony, which would necessarily have affected the government's perennial source of income. Mr. B. P. Wadia, who chaired the reception committee of the first session of the AITUC, observed that the Indian workers today were better educated and had a better culture than the workers of England when they got the right to vote when they demanded this right of representation." There was no reason why workers did not have the right because capitalists had their exclusive representation on the legislative councils. The trade unionists' hopes that involvement in government would offer a strong voice to the workers of Bombay, and will be heard by the colonial bureaucracy and the native Indian capitalist. The attempts were true, but 'the history of India's labour movement reveals a black record of the employer's attitude towards it, just as it has been around the world'.

Workers were often fascinated by the reasons for the employers' insecurity; they struggled to understand how they are supposed to be trustworthy and honest at work in such an adverse environment. In 1875, perhaps for the same reason that they decided to unify their power over the labour class of Bombay, the mill owners had formed their association and eventually the workers would embrace it as a standard of industrial pattern. The statement given by one of the mill owners to the Indian Factory Labour Commission, September, 1890 was that "the overwhelming majority of the Indian manufacturing were against any interface of the authorities and any limitation of working hours, rather, they insisted that the workers should work from sunrise to sunset". The crucial aspect of these commissions was that they had provisions in place, but many of these enactments lacked implementation and implementation. After the industrialization in Bombay, the new class that had arisen alienated itself from the realities of the land and could not align itself with the sufferings of the workers. "As Dange rightly observed, "the capital cares little about labour power's length of life. It is literally and purely the maximum



of labour power that can be made fluent in a working day that concerns all. It achieves this aim by reducing the complexity of the life of the worker

WAGES

Whenever the mill owners were asked to increase the salaries of the employees, they diverted the subject by offering evasive responses and justifying the high manufacturing costs and poor financial condition, if that did not discourage the employees, they would overlook the benefits of decreased working hours, absenteeism, etc. Undoubtedly, they preferred to remain unaware of the workers' demands and were still hostile to organised labour. There was no outlet for complaints and the extreme discourteous treatment of the owners or individuals in authority was primarily responsible for the 'annual length and bitterness attack'. The post-World War I era witnessed that the owners of the mill were now able to grant the bonuses, but not to give the employees a raise in salaries. They would also often use the policy to pay the employees' dearness payments, but it would not have any effect on their consolidated pay structure. The estimation of the dearness allowance was that by paying this allowance, the employers would compensate for inflation, but when this provision of dearness is discontinued, it would also affect the allowance, so that the worker would not benefit from it regularly and indefinitely. Therefore, in the event of a decline in prices after the war and hopes to minimise workers' resistance to a minimum, the employer 'kept the way of retreat open and free'. Some of these technical calculations were beyond the reach of ordinary illiterate workers, so the rise of intellectuals as trade unionists increased the working class's bargaining power. A draught Convention on Minimum Wage Legislation was adopted by the ILO which proposed that any member of the International Labour Organization that ratifies this Convention undertakes to establish or sustain machinery through which minimum wage rates can be set for workers working in certain sections of trade in which there are no arrangements for the effective regulation of wages through collective agreements

The Act also limited the position of employers and imposed limits on their management of the employee pool. Under the Act, the Badli mechanism was also covered. The worker no longer had to live under the worker's master ship, even without the help of the worker, he could get the job independently by merely registering himself and collecting the card, which became his identification and also a testament to the work done each month. Each substitute was now enrolled under a pattern and they were called to work according to the requirement. Among the



workers, it brought discipline. For the workers have been put into action in the letter and in the spirit, and without any mistake whatsoever in Bombay City and Island mills, the Act was called a 'charter of independence'.

In the other hand, the Act threatened to limit employees by requiring them to give notice almost fifteen days before their absence, and the employer was allowed to impose fines and provide legal deductions in the case of more than ten or more individuals being absent without notice. This clause was a strong sign that trade union operations on industrial premises should be dampened. So if the workers were to go on strike, they would lose eight working days' salaries. This made the 'role of strikes and employers unhappy and prevents a strike from running smoothly'

COMPENSATION

The working environment and the health index can be attributed to being bad within the factory or mill premises. It may be due to thorough work, under-ventilated premises, dimly lit workplace or extensively strenuous criteria for work. In 1929, there were 888 deaths and 1,345 permanent disabilities, contributing to 16,632 temporary disabilities. The compensation paid to 888 workers who died in 1929 was approximately Rs.5, 87,390; the average amount of each deceased is only meagre Rs.661, in which the entire family was compensated for the breadwinner's loss. The permanent disability ratio was 1,345 in 1929 and the compensation paid was Rs.3, 97,177, with an average value of just Rs.295 per case. The hardships the worker would face for the lifetime was compensated in this amount. There were situations where, due to their disabilities, the staff encountered more difficulties in finding another employment or job. Similarly, in 1929, temporary disability was 16,632 and the compensation paid was Rs.12, 60,164, while the average compensation was only Rs.75, some of these disabilities would also result in permanent disability or even loss of life, which was not covered by the employer's compensation policy.

The compensation paid to 598 employees who died in 1934 was Rs.3, 71762, with only a mere Rs.621 the average payment for each deceased. The ratio between the permanent In 1934, the worker's disability was 1,287 and the compensation paid was Rs.2, 94,131. The total amount was only Rs.228 per case and the worker's temporary disability was 15,005 in 1934 and the compensation paid was Rs. 8, 86,847, the average compensation was only Rs.57. The compensation paid to 832 workers who died in 1939 was Rs. 5, 81,080.



The ratio of permanent disability to workers in 1939 was 1,929 and the compensation paid was Rs.5, 16,444. The average amount was only Rs.267 per case and temporary disability to workers in 1939 was 35,920 and the compensation paid was Rs.15, 09,327. The average compensation was only Rs.42. The compensation paid to 1,253 workers who died in 1945 was Rs.13, 30,644. The ratio of permanent disability to employees in 1945 was 3,943 and the compensation paid was Rs.20, 30,576. The total sum was only Rs.514 per case and temporary disability to the worker in 1945 was 62,194 and the compensation paid was Rs.8, 64,119, the average compensation was only Rs.13. The compensation paid to 1,162 workers who died in 1949 was Rs. 18, 77,929. The ratio of the permanent disablement to the workers in 1949 was 3,904 and the compensation paid was Rs.18, 79,822 the average amount was only Rs.481 per case and temporary disability to the worker in 1949 was 88,746 and the compensation paid was Rs. 49, 95,259, the average compensation was only Rs.56. The compensation paid to 888 workers who died in 1929 amounted to an average of Rs. 621 and in 1945 it was Rs.1, 061 paid to 1,253 workers who died, the number of casualties leading to deaths increased by almost 50 percent, but the amount paid as compensation grew to just about 40 percent in individual cases, similarly the compensation paid to 1,345 permanently disabled workers was average If the contrast drawn for the number of temporary disability in 1929 was 16,632 with the average compensation of Rs.75 and the temporary disability cases increased to 62,194 in 1945 with the reduction in the compensation amount to average Rs.13 only, while then temporary disability cases increased by 400 percent, the average amount paid experienced a sharp decrease of 400 percent.

The simple and inexpensive availability of employees and labour contributed to the neglect of such a serious problem and neither the colonial rulers nor the native Indian capitalists addressed it. Such accidents were not even reported many times, and the employees were not made aware of their rights to seek compensation. The growing number of accidents also highlights the lack of on-site medical facilities and perhaps the loss of the golden hour of treatment to be given to victims of accidents. Because of these figures, the most critical aspect of working conditions shows that the life of the worker was less valuable than the high-speed machines. The lack of a worker-friendly compensation programme and the decisions on the sum of compensation were an arbitrary matter or were based on the boss or the worker's suggestions.



The Fines / Unclaimed wages

The other group was the enforcement of fines on workers, which was not only used to obtain monetary penalties, but was also used as a way for workers to create fear and economic instability. The Labor Commission (RCL) has categorised fines into three categories³⁰, namely fines levied on disciplinary grounds, deductions for harm caused by the employer and deductions for the use of the products and instruments and other benefits offered by the employer. The collection fines had no stipulated rules and it ranged from mills to mills. In the form of fines, there was no responsibility for the amount received. The sum may have been used back in the welfare programmes of the worker or for wages, but the owners of the mill never reported the specifics of annually collected fines.

Non-payment or forfeiture of the unclaimed wages was the other issue. The employees would work for the short term several times and would quit the job without warning due to any emergencies and their unclaimed wages would be accrued, which was not permitted to be claimed by the owners of the mill. This way, the staff has been continually put under pressure, and several times we see them losing their short-term working wages. In 1917, Hitwardhak Sabha's Kamgar had to petition Hon. E. Montagu, Secretary of State for India, who addressed the question of the unclaimed salaries and the forfeiture of the Bombay Textile mills. The unclaimed amount was, according to their estimate, to be 'Rs. 2,000 per mill per year, not less than Rs. 174,000'³¹. The mill owners responded in negative when the Sabha demanded that the sum to be used for the welfare of the workers.

The reason provided by the Mill owners association was that some unclaimed wages were due to the workers' exit without giving any notice after the machine's damage or breakage and that the money should be put against machinery depreciation'

The Contention of the Bonus

The demand for the bonus was another matter of dispute in Bombay between the owners of the mill and the working class. The definition of bonus is that it is an extra remuneration paid to workers if they produce more than the standard or prescribed quantity per standard time'

Unfortunately, the working class had to plead and register their opposition to claim their fair share of the mills' profits. The demand was granted by a few mills, but others were not equally enlightened. But all employers insisted that the bonus was an ex-gratia payout and that as a matter of right, employees should not assert it'. Somehow the employees never knew that the



bonus was simply part of the sharing margin and that it was not the monetary favour on them that the mill owners were doing. Indeed the endless mercy at which the workers were kept for the entire year's abuse was miserable. It also relied on their service period and also the quality of the job status, noting that all the employees did not qualify to receive the bonus.

Badli employees have never earned any kind of benefits from this clause. Such was the greed of the owners of the mill that they refused to accept that a trade dispute could arise out of a bonus demand.' Then there was the resistance of the colonial government, many of whose officers were inclined to consider trade union as 'seditious activity. If the meeting was convened it was 'shadowed by policemen', the mill owners would not allow any gatherings, assemblies or working class delegations in their industrial premises. The mill owners would approach the colonial government to defend them from workers' strikes and assemblies and in some cases the government would ban all strikes under Section 81 A', of the Protection of Ind However it would try to give scope to the labour class by the means of Adjudication of disputes, between the employers and the employee, but very often the results of the Adjudication would be not in favour of the workers and if the workers continued their struggle or would attempt to go on strike, they or their union leaders were arrested and would face judicial trial, which adversely affects the cause of the workers. Since they were the key source of income for the colonial government, the legislation favoured the mill owners unconditionally.

The Role of the Mill Owners

By the beginning of the 20th century, the mill owners in Bombay were actually native Indian entrepreneurs and belonged to indigenous groups. Not only did they respond to the call of industrialization in the city of Bombay, but with their vision, investment and hard work, they brought it to a new pedestal. They captured the overseas cotton market, and despite their losses in the 1860s and other global depression, they managed to retain the market and added more industries in the region.

The most prominent contribution of the mill owners was they got the world market around the city of Bombay, which gave the city international recognition, perhaps since then Bombay was known as the financial capital of the country (the tag which the city still retains with only the change in the name as Mumbai). The mill owners had their low periods as well and the workers never paid for their losses. The job of the worker would end with their working hours, but they



had to act internally and externally for the mill owners as well. The employees had one or two bosses, but the owners of the mill had to tend to the amount in the 100s or even in the 1000s.

In order to retain the objectivity of this report, the mill owners have had their own challenges and their side of issues must also be highlighted. Unlike the workers, their complaints were of similarly great importance. The biggest concern they had was the operative's involvement, the high number of absentees, even for close pay-day. "Mr. Engels, Chief Inspector of Factories, estimated that about 20 percent of the regular staff was on the average absent every day. The Bombay Labour Gazette reports that 15 to 20 percent of those on the salary book are generally away from work. Not only would the problem of absenteeism impact efficiency, but the other real employees would be indisciplined.

CONCLUSION

The struggle for the labour class became an endless phenomenon; but in due course of time, the experiences in these struggles made them fight more maturely with their employers. The more the workers' and management's resistance and opposition the more they protested, the more the agitation, the more rigid restrictive legislation, the more strict laws, the bitter the confrontation and widening of the divide between the industrial revolution's two most influential powers. It became a vicious circle in which both the owners of the mill and the employees were intertwined with the same value of discontent and faced each other.

More situational than circumstantial was the emergence of the labour movement in Bombay, what could easily have been avoided became an inevitable struggle for both, in which the intensity of their sufferings was divided and, naturally, the labour class always paid a heavy price for raising their dissatisfaction with the unjust conditions. The various attempts to suppress them proved to be more fatal to the colonial government as it combined at that point of time with the emerging national consciousness. In pre-independent India, the labour movement had to begin for the very reason that it revealed the tendencies and motivations of the native capitalist class. More of an assurance to the workers that they were going in the right direction was the repressive Acts. The country's democratic independence did not guarantee workers' economic liberation and social equality. In reality, the labour movement gained more insight into what kind of struggle it was facing in independent India. The factors that motivated the unions' inability to address the problems of the working class have now been analysed more pragmatically in order to prepare for a greater struggle.



The collective bargaining attempts in Bombay did not receive much support, for the sole reason that the capitalist was favoured by the colonial Acts and the machinery. This was a strong sign that even in post-independent India; the same pattern of collective bargaining could not succeed. As far as their strategies and tactics were concerned, the position of leaders was often introspective. They were equally able to sharpen their leadership skills by comparing the stipulated working hours across the globe.

Now the primary contention was the question of uniform salaries, periodic bonuses, workers' compensation and protection. The world was watching over how the British government handled India's labour. In order to ensure that the economy would not suffer, the arbitrary and illegal standards were regularised and the labour movement was also implicitly placed under different regulations. The colonial government's dual ambiguity can be very well understood by the episodes of framing and levelling conspiracy charges against some influential labour activists in order to slow their movement down. This finally revealed their vulnerability and weakness in meeting the working class's long-standing demands for improved working conditions.

Even those workers who were to some degree loyal or neutral to their industrial masters were upset by the sequence of colonial Actions. The indirect effect of all this was that it allowed the workers and the workers as an independent entity to themselves, who had created their own existence in the forthcoming dignities of nation-building. The change of guards was very near, but there was no change in the attitude of the native industrial masters. In fact, among the native Indian capitalist class, the scale of insecurity grew more with the very thought that they would have no colonial government support in the country's political freedom situation. The owners of the mill were not too keen on encouraging employees to engage equally in the post-production process or on sharing their income. They had survived the consequential damage due to the British government's interference and support so far, but they were not sure of their role and maintenance of their capital holdings with the advocacy of new democracy and socialist India. To a certain degree, the labour movement provided the prospect of a different kind of just society with a scenario of fair sharing.



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