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THE  
INDIAN PEASANT UPROOTED

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NEW IMMIGRANTS TO THE TEA GARDENS IN ASSAM



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THE  
INDIAN PEASANT  
UPROOTED

*A STUDY OF THE HUMAN MACHINE*

BY

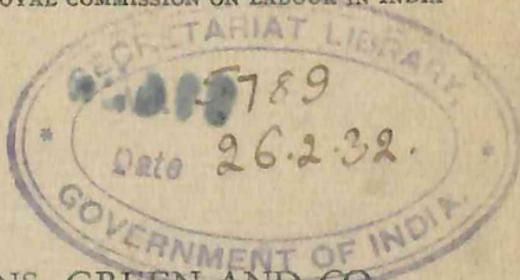
MARGARET READ

M.A. (CAMBRIDGE)

AUTHOR OF "FROM FIELD TO FACTORY"

WITH A FOREWORD BY

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CHAIRMAN OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON LABOUR IN INDIA



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To  
THE INDIA THAT IS TO BE



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## FOREWORD

A BLUEBOOK is necessarily dull and dry: for the men, women and children, on whose lives it is based, must be counted in percentages and classified in groups. So it is apt to miss its appeal to public opinion and to rest, little heeded, in official pigeon-holes.

Miss Read deserves thanks for a remarkable achievement. She has taken the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, with its formidable eighteen volumes of evidence and retranslated them into terms of individual lives. The result of her work is a book which should appeal to the general reader and should be read widely both in India and in Great Britain.

Legislatures and Governments are slow to take action unless they are moved by groups of men and women who care intensely about the welfare of their less fortunate fellow-citizens. One result that may be hoped for from this book is the formation of such groups determined to overcome every obstacle that may make for delay in the application of the Commission's proposals.

J. H. WHITLEY.



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## PREFACE

THE scientist in his study, watching the seismograph, sees a series of small jerky lines on the paper before him. These lines indicate earthquakes which are taking place in some part of the globe, some of them beneath the surface, others altering the face of the earth. In the modern social-economic world industrial commissions and surveys are like a seismograph and their findings record the changes that are taking place. These are seen most clearly in the former agricultural countries where modern industry is changing the face of the earth by creating industrial cities and up-to-date mining plants. Yet beneath the visible changes seen in factories and steel rolling mills and city slums are unseen forces affecting the lives of the human beings involved in these upheavals. These human beings are for the most part peasants who are uprooted from their fields to work in the mills and mines.

What are the invisible forces which are influencing the weavers in a cotton mill in Bombay, the miners in a colliery in Bengal? Which of the great world forces of capitalism, communism or co-operation are penetrating to the workers, and which are influencing them? Does the Indian peasant, uprooted from his village and struggling for a livelihood in mill or mine, care about becoming more efficient and want to raise his standard of living by earning higher wages? What will be the effect of the greater national freedom which Dominion Status will give India on the development of industry and on the relations between capital and labour?



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These are some of the fundamental questions underlying the work of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, which was appointed in 1929 and issued its report in 1931. In the report and the evidence of witnesses before the Commission is recorded the recent growth of modern industry in India, and the changes which are affecting the lives and work of the workers. The changes which are taking place in the mentality and outlook of the workers are much more difficult to estimate. Like the peasant in the Punjab, the Indian factory worker stands "between the old light and the new . . . dazzled by the headlights of the new age." Some attempt has been made in this book to discover what effect the upheaval due to modern industry has on the individuals who have exchanged the village for the slum, the plough for the pick. The work of this Commission was unique as, for the first time in any industrial inquiry in India, the workers themselves were interviewed by the Commission, and thus made a direct and vital contribution to the report. It is therefore partly from the workers themselves that some knowledge has been gained of the effects of modern industry on their lives and outlook. The characters in this book are with one or two exceptions men and women interviewed by the Commission during their visits to factories, mines and plantations. The circumstances in which the characters are depicted are either taken from the evidence or from the author's own experience during a period of residence in India.

Reasons of space have made it necessary to omit certain industries and fields of industrial development covered by the work of the Commission. It is hoped that any interest which may be aroused by this book will send readers to the Commission's report<sup>1</sup> for a much fuller and more detailed survey. The quotations given are taken from the evidence before the Commission and from

<sup>1</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India. Cmd. 3883. His Majesty's Stationery Office. Price 4/6.



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the Commission's report, except where other sources are cited. Any italics used in quotations were inserted by me for the sake of emphasis. For the views expressed in the text I am alone responsible.

My thanks are due to the Chairman of the Commission for his foreword and for his encouragement in a difficult task; to Miss B. M. le Poce Power, a member of the Commission, for reading the manuscript and for lending photographs; to Mr. John Cliff, Assistant General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, also a member of the Commission, for reading the chapter on the relations between employers and workers; to Mr. N. M. Joshi, M.L.A., also a member of the Commission, for helpful advice and suggestions; to Dame Adelaide Anderson, D.B.E., for reading the chapter on women workers; to Mr. Iyao Ayusawa of the International Labour Office, Geneva, and to Mr. Clifton Robbins, of the International Labour Office, London, for providing me with material from the International Labour Office; and to the Government of India for permission to reproduce the photograph of women mine workers published by the Chief Inspector of Mines in his Annual Report for 1927. Throughout the writing of the book, Professor Malinowski of the London School of Economics and Miss Agatha Harrison have given invaluable help and advice.

MARGARET READ.

LONDON, *August*, 1931.



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## CHAPTER I

### FROM FIELD TO FACTORY

“So far we have seen repeated in India almost the whole of the blunders that attended the beginnings of the industrial era elsewhere, in the failure to realise the needs of the workers as human beings. The process of transferring millions from agriculture to industry calls for a large statesmanship, if irretrievable blunders are to be avoided.”

*Times of India, 1928.*

#### HUMANITY UPROOTED IN ASIA

NOVEMBER 15TH, 193- . . . Soon after daylight a small coasting vessel rounded the southern headland and came into the docks at Bombay. It was crowded with deck passengers from Ratnagiri, mostly men, hollow checked and thin legged, looking patiently towards the city. The gang planks down, they trooped off, each shouldering a bedding bundle and carrying a small tin box. In silent small groups they threaded their way through the shouting and hustling of the docks, and boarded a tram for the mill section of the city.

\* \* \* \*

Out of the early mist, two wheelbarrows, loaded with bedding and household goods, appeared round a corner of one of the main roads leading into Shanghai. Pushing each barrow was a man dressed in the faded blue shorts and large round hat of the peasant, and behind him two



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or three women and several children shuffled through the dust. They paused a moment to inquire from a passer-by the way to a big cotton mill. Then the little procession passed on, silent save for the creaking of the barrows.

\* \* \* \*

In the cold dawn, on to the railway platform at Osaka, a number of Japanese girls descended from a train, each carrying a small bundle. They huddled together in patient silence till an older woman came along, who shepherded them into a lorry. In this they rattled through the streets to the cotton mill, the country girls staring with amazement at the crowded traffic in the factory quarter.

\* \* \* \*

Into every city in Asia where the factory chimneys are smoking and the factory whistles calling, comes a stream of migrants from the countryside. Silent and patient, reluctant and bewildered they come, by boat, by road and by train. They come from the village, whose long history is written in custom and in mutual co-operation, to the city whose brief history is written in change and in cut-throat competition. These immigrants are the meeting place of two civilisations, as the sandbar at the mouth of the river is the meeting place of the calm flowing waters of the river and the turbulent waves of the open sea. The civilisation of the west with its industrial system, its individualism and its rapid changes is throwing wave after wave against the sandbar and the quiet waters of the eastern civilisation based on agriculture, on community life, on established custom. These human beings on the boats, the roads, the trains, are the prey of forces which they do not understand, of forces which are just as impersonal and relentless as the waves of the sea on a sandbar. These forces can only be seen and understood by those who have eyes to see and whose sympathies are attuned. For the immigrants to the city the change comes as a vast upheaval



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in which they are uprooted from their past and shaken from the stable basis of their lives. The old and stable basis of eastern life rests on village organization and an adequate food supply. Both are threatened by the clash of the two civilisations. Increase in population, unchecked by wars and pestilences, threatens the food supply. The thrusting in of the greedy fingers of modern commerce, and the factory whistles of the modern mills increase needs and offer relief, disintegrating village life in the process. This widespread upheaval, economic in its origin, shows itself in political, in social, in cultural changes. Everything is in the melting pot. The people's livelihood, drawn for centuries from their fields, is no longer sufficient for their needs. They must take the only escape which offers. Hence they migrate by boat to Bombay, by wheelbarrow to Shanghai, by train to Osaka.

### "PUSHED NOT PULLED TO THE CITY"

What was the motive which made the men from Ratnagiri leave their villages to journey by boat to Bombay? Was it the attractions of factory work and the lure of town life? Or was it that they were forced to leave their villages because there was no food or work for them or their families, and they were driven therefore to seek work elsewhere?

The report of the recent Royal Commission on Labour in India attributes the migration from village to city to three causes: economic pressure, the decay of village crafts, and the social disabilities of the outcastes. The first cause, that of economic pressure, is the most important. It was emphasised by the Royal Commission on Agriculture: "The numbers who have no other employment than agriculture are greatly in excess of what is really required for the thorough cultivation of the land." In the following conclusion reached by the Royal Commission on Labour



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We see a portrait of a reluctant immigrant to the city—a portrait whose lines recall the silent patience with which the men on the Ratnagiri boat regarded the mill chimneys of Bombay :

“The driving force in migration comes almost entirely from one end of the channel, i.e., the village end. *The industrial recruit is not prompted by the lure of city life or by any great ambition. The city as such has no attractions for him,* and when he leaves the village he has no ambition beyond that of securing the necessities of life. Few industrial workers would remain in industry if they could secure sufficient food and clothing in the village; *they are pushed, not pulled, to the city.*”

The result of this unwilling exodus to the cities is that the great majority of the thousands employed in the industrial centres are at heart villagers. The Commission lays stress on this as a truth of primary importance. In this respect the industrialisation of India is in marked contrast with that of the west. There the effect of the Industrial Revolution was to create very rapidly a permanent urban population, completely cut off from the countryside, dependent for their work, homes, health and recreation on the cities. In India, even after eighty years and more of industrial organisation in the chief centres, the factory population still continues to ebb and flow from village to city, and from city to village, preferring with the wisdom of the east the fields and open skies to the city alleys and the street lamps.

This does not mean however, as the Commission pointed out, that the “main industries of India are manned by a mass of agricultural workers, temporarily forsaking the mattock and the plough to add to their income by a brief spell of industrial work in the city. This is not an accurate representation of the position, and it has been responsible occasionally for a mistaken attitude to labour questions.” What it does mean is that the factory workers who are villagers at heart maintain a continuous contact with their



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villages of origin. The maintaining of this close contact between village and city by the workers has certain important results.

The first, and from the point of view of industry the most important, result is that in the majority of the factories there is a constant changing of the labour force. In a large number of factories 5 per cent. of the establishment are newly engaged each month. Such a turnover, amounting in under two years to the total labour force, involves a serious loss of efficiency in the workers. It also means that in most factories there is at hand a supply of substitutes, or "badlis," to take the places of those who have gone away with or without giving notice. These "badlis" form a heavy charge on the wages bill, and their presence in large numbers among the regular labour force gives rise to much irregularity of employment.

The second result is, in the words of the Commission :

"The villages have hitherto provided a measure of insurance against the effects of the various changes which may reduce, interrupt, or destroy the earning capacity of the worker. In sickness and in maternity, in strikes and in lockouts, in unemployment and in old age the village home is a refuge for many."

The third effect is that factory work proves not only an invaluable outlet for the surplus population but an actual source of income to the village. The Ratnagiri men who leave their families behind, send them regular remittances, and in addition they scrape and save every anna in order to have a sum to take home after their eight or nine months' work in the city. The Commission adds :

"Nor are the benefits derived from migration entirely economic in character. The Royal Commission on Agriculture has observed that 'the life of the city should quicken the minds and enlarge the outlook of a far greater number of labourers than it corrupts.' Our experience tends to show that migration has this effect. The industrial



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worker . . . helps to diffuse throughout the countryside not merely his knowledge of a wider world, but a conception of liberty and of independence that is new to village society.”

Where are the industries which depend on this migration from the countryside? Which industrial centres are in touch with rural areas, and conversely which rural areas are affected by contact with large cities?

Cotton spinning and weaving, employing in all 337,000 workers in 295 factories, is found in many areas, the most important being Bombay City, where there are 118,000 workers. Ahmedabad in Gujerat has 70,000 workers and the other cotton centres in the Bombay Presidency 232,000. Other important centres are Madras, Madura and Coimbatore in the Madras Presidency, Nagpur in the Central Provinces and Cawnpore in the United Provinces. Of these centres all except Bombay recruit from relatively short distances, that is from the surrounding rural areas. Bombay alone of the cotton centres is dependent on immigrant labour from a distance, drawing it from Ratnagiri, from the Deccan, and from the United Provinces. Bombay, though the oldest centre and possessed of many advantages, is the only one which is not expanding at present.

Jute spinning and weaving has approximately the same number of workers as cotton, namely, 347,000, but it is concentrated in one area, round Calcutta, and in much larger factories, the total number of mills being ninety-five. A few mills employ local Bengali labour but the great majority of workers come from the west of Bihar, the east of the United Provinces and Central Provinces, and the north of the Madras Presidency, distances varying from 300 to 500 miles away.

The engineering industries are to be found in all the large cities and railway centres. The most important centre of the metal industry is Jamshedpur in Bihar, a township of 100,000 persons entirely recruited from other areas. Engineering and metal works together employ 315,000 workers.



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The greatest concentration of workers from rural areas is in the Hoogli district around Calcutta, which draws labour not only for the jute and engineering industries, but also for a number of smaller works, such as printing, paper mills, match factories, tanneries, etc. Approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  million workers out of the total of  $1\frac{1}{4}$  millions in perennial factories are to be found in this area.

The Commission raised a question of vital importance for the future of Indian industry when it asked: "Should efforts be directed towards building up an industrial population divorced from the villages, or should the existing contact be maintained and stimulated? *This is a question which must be faced in any intelligent attempt to view the problems of Indian labour as a whole and we are surprised to find how little attention it has received. . . .* Our considered opinion is that in present circumstances the link with the village is a distinct asset, and that *the general aim should be not to undermine it but to encourage it, and as far as possible to regularise it. . . .* Whatever view may be taken of the more distant future, we believe that at the present stage it is not advisable that this striking feature which marked the beginnings of Indian industry and has shown such persistence during its steady advance should be discouraged."

### BUYING THE RIGHT TO WORK

Among the Ratnagiri men who disembarked at Bombay were Narayan and his two nephews. Narayan had already worked in a mill in Bombay, and hoped after his four months absence to be taken on in the same mill, and places found for his nephews. At the mill gates he asked for the mukadam<sup>1</sup> under whom he had worked previously. After some delay the man came and looked them up and down appraisingly, saying finally: "Twenty rupees<sup>2</sup>: ten for you and five each for your nephews." Protests and

<sup>1</sup> Overseer.

<sup>2</sup> The rupee is valued at one shilling and sixpence in English money.



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entreaties were of no avail. The mukadam stood for every anna of his demand, merely conceding that as they had only a quarter of the sum in cash he would lend it to them at an anna in the rupee interest per month, which sum they would add to his regular monthly commission. The boys nudged their uncle and suggested trying elsewhere where the bribe might be less. The mukadam's long ears heard this, and turning away, he said over his shoulder: "I tell you you will find no lesser price. Behold there are many in the city who cannot buy work at all, because there is none for them." Narayan knew from hearsay the truth of the last remark, and proceeded much against his will to make his agreement with the mukadam. Buying thus their right to work, the three entered the mill.

From all over India, from employers, from trade unions, from social service agencies, and from Governments, evidence was forthcoming that a bribe to the jobber<sup>1</sup> was the only means to the worker to get employment. The Government of India memorandum to the Commission stated:

"The methods of recruitment in India have received general condemnation, even from the employers. . . . Owing to the illiteracy of the workers and the variety of languages spoken by them, employers in India find it almost impossible to maintain any direct touch with their work-people. This accounts for the presence of intermediaries, who are largely responsible for the abuses which have sprung up in connection with recruiting. . . . The ignorance, simplicity and poverty of the Indian peasant renders his exploitation an easy matter." Hence the intermediary or jobber is established in a position of power for which he has neither mental nor moral equipment, a position which he uses to tyrannise over and exploit the workers. The Commission thus describe his position:

"The jobber, known in different parts of India by

<sup>1</sup> Overseer.



different names, such as sardar mukadam, or maistry, is almost ubiquitous in the Indian factory system, and usually combines in one person a formidable series of functions. He is primarily a chargeman—responsible for the supervision of labour while at work. . . . He has also to act as assistant mechanic, and to help to keep the machines in running order. So far as the worker is given technical training, the jobber is expected to provide it. He is not however merely responsible for the worker once he has obtained work; *the worker has generally to approach him to secure a job, and is nearly always dependent on him for the security of that job* as well as for a transfer to a better one. Many jobbers follow the worker even further than the factory gate; they may finance him when he is in debt and he may even be dependent on them for his housing. As important as any of their functions is the duty which the jobbers perform in their capacity as intermediaries between employer and employee. It is to the jobbers that the employer generally goes when he wishes to notify a change to the workers; it is from the jobbers that he derives most of his information regarding their needs and desires. . . . There are few factories where a worker's security is not to some extent in the hands of a jobber; in a number of factories the latter has in practice the power to engage and to dismiss a worker. *We were satisfied that it is a fairly general practice for the jobber to profit financially by the exercise of this power.*"

To get past the Apollyon of a jobber who straddles the mill gates, the would-be worker must pay his price. What if behind Apollyon are only two vacancies and in front of him twenty men applying for them? His price goes up accordingly. They must pay heavily to squeeze between his legs. In the words of a mill worker in Bengal: "Paying a bribe is a question of self-preservation."

In former days there was a scarcity of labour for the mills and factories. The Government of India memorandum stated:



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The Industrial Commission of 1918 referred to the growing scarcity of labour in most parts of the country, and the U.P. Census Report of 1921 stated that the success of the factory organised on modern lines is limited in one and that a vital respect—by the difficulty of obtaining and retaining labour. The scarcity of labour is due not to any deficiency in numbers but to the various factors which prevent potential labourers from being drawn into industrial areas. *The true explanation of the scarcity of labour is to be found chiefly in the unattractive conditions of employment.*”

The Labour Commission found that several causes were now contributing to assure to industry a plentiful supply of labour. These causes included the present industrial depression, improved communications, amelioration of factory conditions, and excessive pressure on the land. They say in their report: “Up to five years ago labour tended to have the upper hand in that there was competition for its services; since then the tendency has been for the workers to compete for jobs. *It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the change.* . . . The new conditions will give to the employer a greater power, for good or for ill, than he has had in the past. At the same time they will deprive labour of what has hitherto been its main defence against oppression. . . . The new situation is found to raise new problems for all concerned in questions of labour administration, and to demand the adoption of a new attitude and new methods.”

Labour's defence against oppression referred to above was the freedom to change masters and to move from one mill to another in search of better conditions and better pay. Under the new conditions however, Narayan was forced to give the mukadam in his former mill a large bribe because he knew that there were many men in Bombay, walking from mill to mill desperately searching for work. A Bombay trade union stated to the Commission: “After a fruitless search for employment in the town a number of men return to their villages, finding it im-



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possible to hold on any longer in cities where the cost of living is much higher."

Much conflicting evidence was received by the Commission on the extent of unemployment. The trade unions asserted that it was causing serious hardship; the employers were inclined to make light of it, saying that workers were agriculturists first and mill workers second, and that they could always go back to their villages. The conclusions reached by the Commission were as follows:

"In the absence of accurate statistics it is not possible to gauge precisely the extent to which unemployment exists. The tendency of the factory worker to return to his village when he fails to secure employment prevents the growth of any large reserve of unemployment in the city; but the man who returns to his village *is not assured of any employment there. . . . Within the last few years genuine unemployment has made its appearance in some centres and industries.* In Bombay City there has been a serious contraction of employment in the cotton mills. In the year 1926 the average daily number employed was 148,254. In 1929 it was 118,368. A second centre in which unemployment has recently emerged is in Tata's Iron and Steel Works at Jamshedpur, where the numbers have decreased from 32,521 in 1926 to 28,660 in 1929. . . . The only other group of factories in which we found evidence of unemployment on a recognisable scale was the railway workshops. . . . Thus unemployment is certainly not unknown among Indian factory workers but in the past it has been on a comparatively small scale."

The Commission also point out that *the new situation, where labour is competing for jobs, demands a new attitude and new methods.* In this new situation the power of the jobber has greatly increased and with it his opportunity of exacting bribes. The workers on the other hand are in a weaker position, because it is by no means certain that the villages can absorb large numbers of unemployed. Between the upper and the nether millstones of pressure in the villages



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and competition in the towns, Narayan and his fellows are being ground. They are caught and they are helpless. To meet this new situation the Commission make two very important recommendations, dealing with a new system of engaging workers and a new method of assisting the unemployed in the cities :

“We believe that by systematic effort bribery can be substantially reduced, if not eliminated, with great profit to all concerned. The present power of the jobber is given by the employer who permits him to select or engage labour and to influence or procure its dismissal. *We advocate for all factories the exclusion of the jobber from the engagement and dismissal of labour. This can best be achieved by the employment of a labour officer, and this is the course we recommend* wherever the scale of the factory permits it. He should be subordinate to no one but the general manager of the factory, and should be carefully selected. Integrity, personality, energy, the gift of understanding individuals and linguistic facility are the main qualities required. No employee should be engaged except by the labour officer personally, and in consultation with departmental heads, and none should be dismissed without his consent, except by the manager himself, after hearing what the labour officer has to say. . . . The system here recommended has already been tried in a few Indian factories and big industrial enterprises, and where the right type of officer has been employed it has generally met with conspicuous success. . . . Where it is not possible to employ a whole-time labour officer, the manager or some responsible officer should retain complete control of engagements and dismissals.”

To meet the unemployment situation, trade unions had urged the Commission to establish labour exchanges and unemployment insurance. The Commission's decisions are as follows :

“It has been suggested that the establishment of employment bureaux would, apart from other advantages, provide means for measuring the extent of unemployment. We



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cannot accept this view, for we do not believe that a bureau which was unable to offer any definite relief to persons genuinely unemployed would provide any index to their numbers. . . . So far as the relief of the unemployed is concerned, we received some suggestions for the establishment of a statutory system of unemployment insurance, but we cannot regard any system of insurance with which we are familiar as feasible at present in India. . . . The responsibility of the State has long been recognised in India ; but the system of unemployment relief was recognised before organised industry had developed and has been evolved with reference to the rural population. The principles and method of the system seem to us to be more likely to be successful in dealing with urban unemployment under present conditions than those of any western scheme of insurance. The essence of the system, as we understand it, is the preparation beforehand of schemes of work for the workless, and the putting of these into operation when the flow of labour to test works has demonstrated the need of relief. . . . There should certainly be no difficulty in providing such work in urban areas. The industrial areas in particular offer great scope for improvements in the way of slum clearance and the construction of roads and drainage. . . . We recommend that along these lines Government should examine the possibilities of making preparations to deal with unemployment when it arises, and of taking action where it is now required."

### THROUGH THE EYES OF THE WORKER

Narayan pushed into the city by hard necessity found work with difficulty, and at a price, in one of the big cotton mills. Look at him now as he stands beside the frame, tending the endless lengths of cotton fibre that pass over it. He stands listlessly, moves slowly, wipes the sweat off his brow with his forearm, starts apprehensively whenever he hears the rasping tones of the mukadam's



voice. He seems almost as much part of the machine as the fibre moving over it. He shows no sense of being in command of his job, of making the machine obey him. He is tied to it, as he is tied to the jobber, and there is an unconscious furtive look in his eye as though he cast about for an escape from both machine and jobber.

In many books on Indian industry Narayan and the rest of Indian labour is designated as "lazy," "inefficient," "migratory," "casual." The general inefficiency of labour is given as the chief brake on the Indian industrial machine. In reviewing the progress of agriculture the Agricultural Commission in 1928 declared that "of all the forces making for prosperous agriculture, by far the most important is the outlook of the peasant himself." The same is true in industry. The outlook of the industrial worker makes or mars his efficiency. Why is it that Narayan neither has, nor appears to desire to have, the outlook of one who aims at mastery over his job? The answer is sought in the rest of this book. The peasant turned factory hand is the victim of a great uprooting. He has to make an entirely new adjustment of his life and of his outlook on life. He has to adapt himself to factory work and to city life with no light to guide him. Too little attention has been paid in the past to the complexity and difficulty of social adjustments of this nature. Not only has the peasant no light to guide him, but very few other people have any light to shed upon his path.

Moreover, in addition to the adjustments of which the worker cannot help being aware, there is another adjustment of which he is quite unconscious. He is not only fitting himself to become a factory worker, but also to become part of an international industrial system. While in a Bombay mill Narayan is making a half-hearted struggle to turn himself into a factory worker, his work, his efficiency and his outlook are being measured in terms of the efficiency of factory workers in England, in America, in Japan. His employer and the general public, vitally



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Interested in the progress of industry, see him primarily as part of an industrial system which has to face keen competition. His inefficiency not only affects adversely his own earning power and the progress of the mill in which he is a hand, but also the place of India as a cotton manufacturing country in the eyes of the world.

### THE SEARCHLIGHT OF PUBLICITY

In the east, as in Europe, the war of 1914-1918 had far-reaching economic effects. To the cotton and jute mills and the engineering works in India it brought greatly increased activity in order to supply the needs of the Indian army overseas and to replace the goods which could no longer come freely from the west. The war brought also a fierce phase of competition with Japan, who by reason of her more advanced industries profited by the war situation more than India. Japanese cotton goods poured into India and into India's overseas markets in Malaya and East Africa. At the end of the war India found herself established as a country whose future depended on the development of her industries and mineral resources as well as on her agriculture. Her population was, and was likely to remain, predominantly agricultural; over 70 per cent. of her people were dependent on agriculture and nearly 90 per cent. lived in the villages.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless her own progress as a nation demanded that attention be paid to her growing industries. An Industrial Commission was appointed in 1918 to review Indian industries and to consider the best ways in which the State could help them to develop. The memorandum of India to the League of Nations, asking for a place on the Governing Body of the International Labour Office as one of the eight leading

<sup>1</sup> See 1921 Census figures. The figures available for the 1931 Census show a total increase in India of 10.5 per cent. in the population. The actual number of town dwellers is considerably increased, but the proportion of rural to urban dwellers is probably about the same.



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industrial nations of the world contains these significant statements :

“ The most important test of a country of chief industrial importance is the number of workers likely to be affected by decisions of the International Labour Office. Judged by this test, there can be no doubt that India is one of the eight countries of chief industrial importance. Even if no account be taken of agricultural labourers (who number 25 million) and even if from the 20 million returned as industrial workers the most liberal allowance be made for those employed in cottage industries and hereditary village occupations, the number of industrial workers of India, using the term in its narrowest sense, is still very considerable. Inasmuch as in regulating the conditions of labour throughout the world it is inevitable that the interests of western and eastern countries must clash, it seems desirable apart from all other considerations, that the eastern countries should be represented on a body which under the Treaty has been vested with important functions. And also as in eastern countries the conditions of labour are backward, the decisions of the Conference will affect the individual workers to a greater extent in eastern than western countries.”

In the years following the war the progress of industry in India was hampered by a series of industrial disputes which threatened the very basis of her industries. The causes and effects of these disputes will be considered in Chapter IX. The most important effect of this prolonged series of strikes was to call attention to the position and needs of labour in Indian industries. In 1918 the Industrial Commission had declared: “No industrial edifice can be permanent which is built on such unsound foundations as those afforded by Indian labour under its present conditions. The human being remains the most important machine in the production of wealth and in industrial development.”

The intervening ten years between 1918 and 1928



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forced home the truth of this statement. The need became imperative for a strong searchlight to be turned on to the needs and outlook of the workers in the factories and on to the conditions under which they worked. As a result, in July 1929 a Royal Commission was appointed with these terms of reference :

“ To inquire into and report on the existing conditions of labour in industrial undertakings and plantations in India, on the health, efficiency and standard of living of the workers, and on the relations between employers and employed, and to make recommendations.”

The source of information about this Commission and its work is to be found in the Report<sup>1</sup> and in the volumes of evidence, written and oral, collected during their visits to India and published in July 1931. The work of this Commission is outstanding and its Report, despite its “blue book” cover, is a story of a human endeavour to understand human needs and to meet them in a humane spirit. Its importance for India, and indeed for the rest of the world, lies along three main lines.

First the Commission has collected, put together and pronounced on detailed inquiries into labour conditions and the lives of industrial workers. These inquiries are unparalleled in any eastern country. The Commission say in their report: “The volumes of evidence which accompany the Report constitute a source which for years to come should yield a wealth of information, not available elsewhere, for the study of labour questions.” These volumes are a mirror in which is seen the life of the peasant turned factory hand.

Secondly the Commission has given publicity not only to the situation as it exists but also to the very varied interpretations of it held by Government, by employers, by workers and by private individuals and societies. The full searchlight of publicity was turned on to every

<sup>1</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Cmd. 3883.



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corner of the world of labour. In the volumes of evidence can be read the questions put and the answers given, the defence of the situation and the admission of its shortcomings. The "unsound foundations" of Indian labour are laid bare, and in the recommendations of the Commission are to be found the plan and the structure for the rebuilding.

Thirdly, the Commission in its membership and in its method of working was a living witness of that co-operation which is essential to the growth of healthy industry. Health in industry depends on the willing co-operation of three factors : the employers, the workers and the public, the last both Government and private individuals. The membership of the Commission included representatives of Government, of employers and of workers from both India and Great Britain. In their report they say : " We have come to our work from very different fields of experience. This has been most valuable in ensuring that every question is seen from several differing angles. . . . We are happy to record the fact that political controversies have not prevented many who hold widely differing views in politics from co-operating with us for the benefit of labour." When meeting witnesses in India the Commission gave time and opportunity to employers, workers, Government representatives and private individuals and societies to present their views. For the first time in the history of Commissions dealing with labour in India individual workers were called as witnesses, and many were interviewed by the Commission while at work and in their homes. It was thus possible for the trade union member from England to catechise the Indian employer on his attitude to labour organisations, for the European employer in India to question Government officials on policy in industrial disputes, for the Indian labour representatives to examine housing schemes by employers, for the Government representatives to examine wages and hours registers, for the woman member of the Commission to find out the way factory work affected home life, and to observe the



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physical effects on children of long hours at carpet looms. The chief ground, indeed the only ground of hope that some solution can be found for the confused mass of problems affecting the work and life of the workers, lies in the co-operation shown by the work of the Commission. The future of Indian industry, as well as the welfare of the individual worker, depends on a continuance of that co-operation and of the goodwill harnessed to expert knowledge which inspired it.

### BOMBAY, SHANGHAI AND OSAKA

Narayan arrived in his mill in Bombay on the same day as Ming Wong in his mill in Shanghai, and Yuki in her mill in Osaka. None of them was known to the other. Yet each, as a unit in the total number of workers in the cotton industry of the three countries, was known to the captains and financiers of the cotton industry throughout the world. Narayan was one of the thousands of cotton mill hands in India, Ming Wong one of the thousands of cotton mill hands in China, and Yuki one of the thousands of cotton mill hands in Japan.

In the past the Indian industrial worker has generally been compared with the factory worker of the west, and Indian progress and methods measured against those of the west. The true comparison for the present and future is with the east and not with the west. In the cotton industry in particular, but in other industries also, India has to measure herself against China and Japan. She has to test the capacity and productivity of Narayan with those of Ming Wong and Yuki. All three countries have two main motives for encouraging modern industry. With all three it is an economic necessity, caused by the pressure of population on the land and the inadequacy of agriculture to support that population. With all three it is a matter of national pride and national status to develop a modern industrial system.



Chinese students in 1919, standing guard on the docks in Canton, opened case after case of goods unloaded from the ships and threw over into the river all those marked "Made in Japan." Having laboured thus in the day, in the evenings they held meetings in the town, where with fiery arguments they called on their fellow townsmen to follow the principles of Sun Yat Sen, and develop Chinese industry in order not to rely on foreign imports. In spite of all the disturbances of the past twelve years, this driving force of nationalism has been the dominant factor in the spread of modern industry in China, and also in the recent efforts made to bring the conditions of that industry up to international standards. In 1919 there were in China 54 cotton mills with 1,650,000 spindles; in 1928 there were 120 mills with 3,850,000 spindles. Of these 120 mills 73 were owned by Chinese firms, 44 by Japanese, and 3 by British.

All new ideas, scientific and social, are being eagerly sought and applied in China. An Institute of Scientific Management has recently been established under the chairmanship of the Minister of Commerce and Labour, aiming at "studying the principles of scientific management, increasing efficiency in industry and commerce, and developing the earning capacity of the people." The Chinese Government is extremely conscious that the eyes of the world are upon industrial conditions in their country. They have therefore set up a branch of the International Labour Office in Shanghai and invited to visit them and advise on the practical application of labour legislation a Committee, of which Dame Adelaide Anderson, former Chief Woman Factory Inspector in Great Britain, is a member. A professor of economics in China who has served on more than one Famine Commission, commenting on the fact that China is set on the road to industrialisation, writes: "The Chinese are splendid industrialists. In relation to their low wages Chinese labour efficiency is high. The Chinese peasant is a much better factory



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hand than the Indian ryot, <sup>1</sup> with greater gifts as a mechanic, less impatience under the monotony and confinement of factory life, and with a stronger urge to secure a higher standard of life." <sup>2</sup> Ming Wong thus begins his factory career in Shanghai with better prospects as far as personal equipment goes than Narayan in Bombay.

What of Yuki in Osaka? She was one of 867,229 women who form the great majority of the textile workers in Japan. These women and girls who work a comparatively short time, three to seven years, until they go home to be married, are highly efficient workers and each tend on an average 5.5 looms as against 2 in India. Sixty per cent. of these women workers are housed by their employers in "dormitories" or hostels. Japanese industry is permeated by what is called the "family system, connoting benevolence in the head and loyalty in the members. . . . The paternalism of the feudal period still exerts its influence on the relationship between the employer and the employee in present-day industrial Japan. The payment of wages to the strikers during the period of striking, the payment of strike expenses by the employer . . . can only be accounted for as the reflections of paternalism."<sup>3</sup>

With such a cohesive principle underlying industry, and with the control of the employer over the workers who live in his dormitories, it is small wonder that the textile industry in Japan, assisted by the very latest scientific method, has made a notable advance. There is nothing in the Indian textile industry that can attempt to compete with such a compact organisation. The Bureau of Social Affairs in Japan reported in 1928: "An increasing number of employers are extending the benefits of the protective provisions (e.g. on working hours, etc.) of the law to adult male workers, taking into consideration the develop-

<sup>1</sup> Peasant.

<sup>2</sup> *From Farm to Factory in China*, by J. B. Taylor.

<sup>3</sup> *Labour Conditions in Japan*, by S. Harada.



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ment of industrial efficiency and the progress of social thought. The factory inspectors are endeavouring not merely to enforce the actual provisions of the law but to bring about a better understanding between employer and employed, so as to expand and fulfil the true spirit of the Factory Act to limit the hours of work.”<sup>1</sup>

Two very important influences have to be reckoned with in the labour situation in Japan. One is the existence of compulsory education which means that all the workers are literate and can be reached through the written word. The other is the knowledge, widely spread, of Japan's population problem, and the generally-accepted view that only by increased industrialism can the needs of the people be met.

The factory workers uprooted from their villages in India, China and Japan have certain common problems. Despite the very different political and social settings of these common problems, they all call for expert knowledge and goodwill for their solution. Nor can the solution be long postponed. Time presses. If revolution by goodwill be delayed, revolution by violence may follow. For all three countries the words of Mr. N. M. Joshi, spoken at the International Labour Conference in 1929 ring true, with a note of warning: “Just and humane conditions are still in India a far-off ideal, and if evolution is too slow the attractions of revolution are great.”

<sup>1</sup> *Industrial Conditions and Labour Legislation in Japan*, by I. F. Ayusawa.



## CHAPTER II

## SPINDLES, LOOMS AND FURNACES

“The long hours passed in the uncongenial, if not unhealthy, surroundings of a factory, from which the labourer returns at night to a dirty, crowded and insanitary hovel . . . are most unattractive to a man accustomed to rural life.”

*Indian Industrial Commission, 1918.*

“We are driven to the conclusion that one of the best ways by which industrial leaders in India can promote their own and their country's interests, is by devoting more thought and attention to the welfare of their workers, both at home and at work, and to their relations with those workers.”

*Economic Development of India, VERA ANSTEY.*

## THE UNWILLING EXODUS

TULSI stretched his cramped legs after the night journey and stepped on to the platform at Howrah. He lifted down the little girl, helped his wife with the baby, and balancing the bedding roll on his head, said to his wife: “Come, Tilasari, let us go. We will find the mill.” Through the station, strewn at that early hour with half-asleep humanity lying on their possessions, they picked a way, and saw before them the great bridge spanning the Hoogli. They stood to gaze with the countryman's incredulity at the crowds of people, the streams of traffic and the shipping below. Slowly and with much anxiety they crossed the bridge and turned north, remembering with difficulty the sardar's instructions



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how to find the mill, and not daring to ask their way of strangers.

Three hours later the exhausted little party arrived at the gates of the X. Mill, and told the chowkidar<sup>1</sup> that the sardar, Nur Mohammed, had bidden them come and told them that there was work for them. Nur Mohammed appeared, but seeing them burdened with all their possessions, he sent them away under the guidance of a boy to the bazaar and told them to come again to the mill to-morrow. Nur Mohammed owned a number of single-roomed huts in a busti<sup>2</sup> some distance from the mill, and was ready to let one of these to the family for a rent of Rs. 1.8.0 a month. Down a narrow winding lane, by heaps of rotting garbage and pools of noisome sewage, they came to a small hut. The low doorway was hung with sacking, and one end of the roof had an ominous droop. Stooping to go in they found the mud floor lower than the lane outside, and damp and dirty where the drainage leaked in. There was no window and no chimney, and the sacking over the doorway effectively prevented the entrance of much light or air.

In the weeks that followed Tulsi and Tilasari found one illusion after another shattered. Looking at their future from the village near Gorakhpur they had expected to find in the city conditions either similar to or better than those in the village, where they had struggled along on the wages of agricultural labourers. They found conditions in the city entirely different and much worse. They found a world of contrast between following a plough over familiar fields and tending a clanking machine in a noisy crowded factory. They found an even greater contrast between the village hut open to the sun and wind and the busti hut, dark and ill-ventilated; between the leisurely standing round the village well and the impatient waiting for a turn in the early morning at the municipal

<sup>1</sup> Gate-keeper.

<sup>2</sup> Collection of small huts, often a "slum."

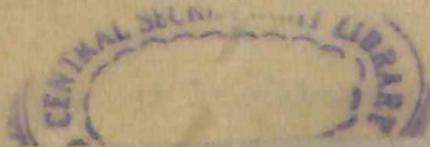


water tap; between the open discussion of affairs round the village gate and the furtive conversations at the mill gates, with a sideways glance for the long-eared sardar. All these contrasts the villagers might be ready to accept with true eastern philosophy if there were some advantages to be gained. Better wages, more varied and adequate food, good lighting and water, opportunities for welcome amusement—all these would have been compensations to assist in the difficult adjustment. Of these hoped for advantages all they reaped was better wages, but each week these wages vanished before the high prices demanded in the city for the bare necessities of life.

### HUMAN MACHINES

When Tulsi and Tilasari presented themselves at the gates of the X. Mill, Tulsi was taken into the spinning shed, and Tilasari and the children into the preparing shed. While waiting to be taught what to do, Tulsi stared at his surroundings. The manager of his mill, with imagination for the needs of his workers, had hung baskets of green growing plants from the roof girders. The sight of these among the machinery made at least one familiar feature for those who were country bred. Like all jute mills the spinning shed was part of a one-storied building, spreading over a large area and holding all the processes under one roof. The compound was laid out with care and forethought, and the mill buildings so placed as to avoid the direct rays of the sun through the windows at the hottest time of the day.

In contrast to the jute mills which are one-storied and mostly large and well laid out, the cotton mills are in blocks of buildings of two or more stories. The larger mills have a good lay-out of buildings, but the smaller mills often present an appearance of cramped quarters and untidy compounds, littered with rubbish. Within the factory, each worker is entitled, under the Factories Act, to a floor





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area of 36 square feet and a breathing space of 700 cubic feet. Except for this provision, and for a rule which requires white-washing of inside walls and ceilings, there is no statutory control over the construction of factories.<sup>1</sup> The Commission say on this subject :

“Factory work is too often started in buildings which are difficult to ventilate or are unhealthy in other respects. . . . So far as safety is concerned we consider that a scheme submitted to us by the Chief Inspector of Factories, Bombay, would operate smoothly and efficiently, and we recommend its adoption. This involves the submission of a proper certificate of stability before working is commenced in larger factories, and the grant to Local Governments of power to demand such certificates in smaller factories as need arises.”

For a whole day Tulsi stood beside another man and watched the doubling of the quickly moving thread and the neat way in which he set the threads in the process and joined them when broken. The machine with all its parts, some of them fenced for protection, seemed to him a monster, noisy, dangerous, and just alive enough to make the same movements over and over again with no pause and no change. Nothing in his previous experience with the cattle in the fields helped him to understand this machine creature and its ways.

Modern methods of manufacturing in India are requiring more complicated processes, and the Indian factory worker is yearly being introduced to machines of greater intricacy and greater speed. An interesting study in industrial psychology awaits investigation in India on the best methods of teaching a “machine sense” to country-bred workers. In the absence of such a machine sense complaints are frequent among factory owners of careless handling of delicate machinery, and of failure to keep the machines oiled and cleaned. Accidents to the workers

<sup>1</sup> There are regulations for Cotton ginneries and presses under the Cotton Ginning and Pressing Act.

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are also frequent from ignorance of the risks involved in wrong handling.

Once installed in the mill beside his machine the factory worker finds that the real difference begins between his new work and his old. He has lived hitherto under the open sky, exposed without shelter to sun and rain and wind, and he has accepted all that came because he had no choice. He looks up at the roof of the factory and realises that the sun's heat through corrugated iron can be even more fierce than the direct rays. If he is in a cotton mill the air has to be kept at a certain humidity in order that the threads may not break. The hot damp air soon makes him languid, and excessive perspiration makes him thirsty. In the steel mills he is working in the face of intense heat from furnaces. The Tin Plate works at Golmuri reported to the Commission that "Cooled air is blown on to the workmen exposed to the worst heat, and furnace fronts and floors are cooled by water. No expense has been spared to instal every facility possible to ameliorate conditions in a process which can be trying even in a temperate climate."

On this subject of the temperature in factories the Commission write as follows :

"In nearly every part of India there are long periods when the climatic conditions render physical toil particularly difficult and unpleasant. This is especially true of factory work. In many factories the temperature in the hot weather is higher than that of the air outside and the air movement is less ; in a number of factories the difference is marked. *A large number, probably the majority, of factory owners make no endeavour to mitigate the discomfort, to use a mild word, that the hot weather brings to their operatives.*"

The Government of India in 1923 made a special investigation into the humidification of the cotton mills, on the basis of which the local Governments have established standards to be observed in the mills. The use of



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live steam to moisten the air is prohibited when the temperature is above 85 degrees F. The Factory Department in Bombay Presidency have been most successful in persuading mill owners to introduce improved methods of ventilation and of cooling plant, especially in Ahmedabad where the summer temperatures are very high. The Chief Inspector reported in 1927: "At last Ahmedabad has generally recognised the need of efficient ventilating and cooling arrangements to neutralise the very trying climatic conditions. Agents now realise that improvements are necessary to secure a more contented labour force. In one weaving shed increased production of 4.6 per cent. was reported as solely due to the improved ventilation. Another mill reported an increase of 9 per cent. The usual practice of slacking for several hours of the day has been almost stopped. Operatives pay much closer attention to work, earn more and are certainly more contented." Certain weavers in Ahmedabad who were interviewed by the Commission bore testimony to the improvements: "In mills which have got fans we go out into the compound to smoke and we return soon; but in mills which have got no fans we have to go out for a longer time. Inside the mills where there are no fans the atmosphere is so very hot that people often faint and have to be carried to the hospital. The conditions are unspeakable during the summer months."

The Commission make the following suggestions on the control of temperature in factories:

"The aim should be to ensure that, when cooling power is deficient, reasonable measures of improvement shall not be neglected. We think that this can be secured by the following means. Where a Chief Inspector is of opinion that (1) the cooling power in a factory is so deficient as to cause serious discomfort to the health of operatives, and (2) it can be appreciably increased by methods which do not involve an amount of expense which is unreasonable in the circumstances, he should be able to serve on



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the owner an order requiring the adoption of specified measures within a given time."

The air in a factory may be hot and stagnant. It is also frequently full of dirt and dust. As a rule the hair and clothes and even eyebrows of workers in a jute factory are coated with a fine fluff, which is not only apparent to the eye, but is being inhaled by them all the time. The Commission say in this connection :

"The prevalence of dust may result in pulmonary disease. In certain manufacturing processes, particularly connected with jute, cotton and wool, *the reduction of dust to a minimum should be made obligatory*. More attention should also be paid to the general cleanliness of factories. It is difficult to associate efficiency with the *grime* to be found in some factories."

Mr. Arno S. Pearse, reviewing the Indian cotton industry for the International Cotton Federation, wrote of the human machine in Indian factories : "No wonder that he is incompetent. His constitution is frail ; he does not get suitable food ; he has no schooling, no ambition, is careless, wasting mill stores and raw material ; he is not disciplined, and is said to be by nature indolent as well as improvident. No industrial centre can flourish in the long run with such labour ; it therefore behoves the master to improve the quality of labour or to recognise the inevitable." He then turned round and criticised the millowners : "If mill-owners wish to improve their labour and to extend their industry without undermining the health of the workers, they will *all* have to attend to welfare work and to the improvement of atmospheric conditions in the mills."<sup>1</sup>

In reviewing the needs of the workers in the factories the Commission were impressed with the necessity for greater uniformity in the conditions under which they worked. They make the following comments and recommendations :

<sup>1</sup> The Cotton Industry in India—Arno S. Pearse, 1930.



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“In the course of our tours we endeavoured to visit as many factories as possible, and we were impressed by the great contrasts they presented. There are factories which would compare favourably in lay-out, cleanliness, atmosphere and general well-being with any factories in the world; there are others in which the welfare of the workers is almost entirely neglected. . . . What is now required is some method by which the more backward employer may be brought at least up to the general level, which has been surpassed by the more enlightened and progressive employers. . . . We have been impressed by the value of the Welfare Orders made by the Factory Inspection Department of the Home Office in Great Britain. . . . These Orders have increased the happiness and well being of the workers in the industries affected, while securing and retaining the co-operation and goodwill of the employers. We therefore recommend that local Governments be empowered under the Factories Act to issue Welfare Orders to classes or groups of factories where the circumstances warrant. . . . The type of welfare we have in mind covers such matters as washing facilities, ambulance and first aid requirements, arrangements for taking meals and allied matters.”

### FROM DAWN TO SUNSET

Sunrise saw Tulsi and his family already established in the mills as they had to be there by 5.30 a.m. Rising in the dark Tilasari had groped round the hut, getting the children ready and collecting some cold rice left from the evening meal. In the dark they left the busti, slipping in the slime of the lane and in the dark they entered the mill gates after their walk of nearly an hour. In the dark again—this time in the evening—the family met outside the spinning shed, and walked home to the lane still slippery with sewage and to the hut they never saw in the daylight except at week-ends.



In his former work in the fields Tulsi had known no laws regarding hours of work. At times necessity made him take advantage of all the daylight hours, even sometimes of the moonlight. His endurance was limited only by that of the bullocks he drove. At less pressing times he worked in short spells, passing the rest of the time in a happy idleness. In the factories the workers are subject to a rigid time-table. The Factories Act of 1922 limits the hours worked in factories to 10 a day and 60 a week for adults. Most of the cotton mills work a 60-hour week of 6 days of 10 hours each. A few work double shifts, the night shift having been introduced in the last two years. In the jute industry half the mills work a single shift of 10 hours, and half a multiple shift by which the mills run continuously from 5.30 a.m. to 7 p.m., the workers' shifts being so divided that they do not ostensibly total more than 10 hours a day. Mills working on the multiple shift work only four days a week and have therefore a longer week-end than the others.<sup>1</sup> In the engineering and metal trades the normal week is 48 hours, the men working six days on eight-hour shifts; and in those factories on a "continuous process" eight-hour shifts are common in the larger establishments, three shifts of workers being employed. These last include most iron and steel works, coke factories, electric generating stations and gas works.

The Commission write thus of the hours of work in general, looked at from the point of view of the needs of the workers:

"The advantages of a shorter week from the point of view of the *human needs* of the operatives do not need to be stressed. When to a ten-hour day one hour of statutory interval is added (and no reduction in this can be contemplated in so long a day), it means that the operative

<sup>1</sup> Since 1930 the number of mills on the multiple shift has greatly decreased and only a few are now working on this system.



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has ordinarily to remain in the factory precincts for not less than eleven hours. This takes no account of the time spent in going to and returning from work. Except when the weekly holiday brings its respite *hours of leisure away from the factory are virtually unknown. A reasonable amount of spare time away from the factory is indispensable for the building up of citizenship, for the development of life as opposed to mere existence, and for the maintenance of physical efficiency.* It is worth remembering that most of those who are compelled to remain in or near the factory for eleven hours a day were brought up in the freedom of the open fields."

In the mills working a single ten-hour shift, and especially in the cotton mills, there are to be seen at any time of the day a number of men standing round outside the mill, smoking, eating food, or just loitering. The Commission received evidence from the employers of the substantial difference between the nominal hours spent in the factory and the actual hours of work put in at the machines, and were given estimates of the actual hours varying from 7 to  $8\frac{1}{2}$  out of the 10. The application of the factory worker to his task, looked at in terms of output, is of greater importance, not only for his own earnings which are for the most part calculated on a piece work basis, but also for the prosperity of the factory and of the industry. The average number of looms tended by a male cotton weaver in India is less than two; in Japan the female weavers tend 5.5. The Indian worker not only tends fewer looms than the Japanese worker, but he does it in a less skilled and less concentrated way, involving less output and frequent damage to the material. No studies have been made in India of industrial fatigue, and there is therefore no precise data on which to determine the relation of hours and output. Most employers in the cotton industry took it for granted in their evidence before the Commission that the Indian worker was constitutionally inefficient and preferred to do a little work over a long period rather than to work hard for a shorter period.



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The conclusions of the Commission on this question of hours and intervals were as follows :

“ We have no doubt that it is *impossible* for the average operative to remain at work regularly through a ten-hour day either in a cotton factory or in any other factory. *The unauthorised intervals are a form of self-defence against over-work.* We are satisfied that generally speaking the short working week is associated with closer attention to work and stricter supervision than the long one. Further in no case did those workers who were working a short week with stricter discipline suggest that they would like a longer and less intense day or more intervals. . . . Nor did a single employer who had adopted a short day suggest that it would be better to lengthen the day and require a correspondingly lower standard of concentration. . . . A reduction in the hours of the individual operative need not mean a reduction in the hours worked by the industry. *A wider adoption of shifts would enable the industry to maintain production.* . . . We believe that if Indian industry is to expand profitably in competition with other countries it will be advisable to make more use of the machinery and plant.

“ With the exception of Sir Victor Sassoon *we are agreed that a reduction in the statutory week is practicable and desirable. The majority of us recommend a reduction to 54 hours a week.* So far as the daily limit is concerned we would fix this by statute at ten hours. This will permit of working either six days of nine hours each or five days of ten with a half-holiday on the sixth, and will give some elasticity. . . . We recommend that the statutory intervals should ordinarily amount to not less than an hour in the aggregate, and that subject to the sanction of the Chief Inspector employers should be at liberty to distribute this hour in such periods as they think best, only after consultation with the operatives. . . . We recommend that in future the local Governments should have the power to control overlapping shifts.”



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During the day spent in the factory the worker needs food and drink if he is to put any energy into his work. Those who leave their homes very early in the morning will only take a hasty snack before setting out, with the result that long before noon they are very much in need of food.

In England, in munition factories which were working at high pressure during the war, it was found that the provision of a hot meal in the middle of the day and of tea in the afternoon were of definite value in sustaining the workers' powers. The haphazard and unsatisfactory ways in which the Indian worker feeds during his working hours is one cause of his slackness and half-hearted working. It is unusual to find mills in India making provision for the workers to eat their midday meal in comfort, the reason given against providing dining-rooms being the dislike felt by different castes of eating together. The Superintendent of the Rifle Factory at Ishapore reported to the Commission the building of a large canteen to feed 1,000 workers at a time. Hot meals were to be served there which he considered "essentially necessary." In the Angus Jute Mills at Calcutta tea is served to the workers in the morning and in the afternoon. The Commission report states :

"In many mills we were struck by the lack of suitable places for taking food, and the number of operatives to be seen taking meals in all kinds of unsuitable places. We recommend that the possibilities in the direction of providing sheds and canteens be examined with a view to wider adoption of amenities of this kind."

During the day, while he is at the machine, the factory worker is all the time exposed to the risk of accidents. In agricultural work such risk is practically non-existent. On the subject of industrial safety the Government of India stated in their memorandum to the Commission :

"As in other countries, the industrial progress of India has been accompanied by an alarming increase in the number of accidents. The total accident rate per 100,000



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workers in factories rose from 520 in 1904 to 1,025 in 1927. . . . The growing industrialisation of the country has increased to a considerable extent the risk of injury to which workers are exposed. The ignorance and carelessness of the workers are responsible for a great many accidents. The fact is that the education of the worker has not kept pace with the increase in the complexity of the plant and processes consequent on the growing industrialisation of the country. . . . Employers have not always shown due regard for the safety of their workers. Cases are by no means rare in which accidents are due to lack of supervision or an indulgence in unsafe practices on the part of the management." It needs little imagination to see the risks run by an untrained man, accustomed only to the simplest agricultural implements, when he is set to clean machinery or to tend a machine. Plant and machinery account for the highest number of accidents, very often from loose clothing catching in moving parts and dragging the worker in.

The Commission bear tribute to the work of Factory Inspectors in their efforts to secure adequate fencing of machinery and the enforcement of safety regulations. "In this some employers have co-operated by the employment of safety posters and more rarely by the establishment of a Safety Committee, but there are other employers who themselves need education." The Chief Inspector of Factories, Bombay, in his annual report for 1929, pointed out that one manager had mounted Safety First posters on revolving frames lit by electricity, placed in positions where they could be seen from every part of the shed. The Commission conclude :

"We believe that in spite of illiteracy something can be done along the lines of the Safety First movement which has made great headway in the last decade in most industrialised countries. . . . We believe that the success of the movement in Japan is not without its significance in India. . . ."



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## HOMES IN THE SLUMS

Prominent among the needs of a family newly arrived in an industrial city is that of a home. Tulsi and Tilasari on arriving in Calcutta had expected to find a mud hut such as they had in their village, with a protecting mud wall for privacy. Instead they found themselves in a tumble-down shelter surrounded by filth and smells. In all the memoranda presented to the Commission the housing of workers took the first place. It was recognised by employers, by trade unions, by Governments, and by social service agencies as the single most important factor in the health, efficiency and happiness of the workers. In the Government of India memorandum to the Commission the recognition is thus expressed :

“The conditions of housing and sanitation are largely responsible for the instability of Indian labour and its low efficiency. The housing conditions in an ordinary Indian village are far from satisfactory, but there is generally no overcrowding and there are vast open spaces around. The strong sunshine in the daytime is nature’s disinfectant which saves the agricultural population to a large extent from the ravages of sickness and disease. In the larger towns there is neither space nor sunshine between the buildings, and in the absence of adequate arrangements for sanitation, *the home of the worker is apt to become a veritable death trap* from which it is only natural that he should endeavour to escape by returning whenever possible to his village. Overcrowding combined with complete ignorance on the part of the workers of all ideas of sanitation makes the housing problem in India far more complicated than it is in the west.”

The Commission point out in their report that in every industrialised country the problems associated with the housing of the working classes have increased with the growth of industry, and that India has been no exception to this rule. In all the industrial areas private landlords



have reaped large profits from rents squeezed out of inadequate and insanitary dwellings. The high rents exacted from the workers which often necessitate taking in boarders, as well as the actual shortage of available accommodation, have caused overcrowding, which in its turn brings grave problems of sanitation and danger to health. In 1922 the Bombay Labour Office in an investigation found that 97 per cent. of the working classes in Bombay lived in one-room tenements with as many as six to nine persons to one room. A recent survey, also in Bombay, showed the following typical examples of overcrowding :

1. One room 8 feet by 16 : three families, six adults and two children ; eight in all.
2. One room 8 feet by 16 : husband, wife and child, four relatives, and two boarders ; nine in all.
3. Two rooms 8 feet by 16, tin roof and small window : husband, wife and five children, twelve men boarders ; nineteen in all.

It calls for an effort of the imagination on the part of the comfortably housed to picture the daily lives of any one of the families in these "homes." The crowding on the floor space ; the smoke and smells from the cooking ; the food eaten amid a chaos of pots and pans, old clothes, bedding and crawling children ; the heavy, fetid air ; the utter absence of privacy for ordinary needs as well as for birth, death and sickness ; the publicity of the common staircase, the common washing place, the common latrine . . . such conditions should be cried aloud in the land, giving the comfortably housed ceaseless nightmares until they are stirred to action. Those who are able should see these conditions for themselves. They should "crawl down the filthy trenches" of the workers' quarters in Cawnpore ; they should splash through "the streams of sewage that filter over the pathways" of the cheries<sup>1</sup> in Madras ; they should grope their way down the "narrow tunnel of filth" and knock their heads against the low

<sup>1</sup> Slums.



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doorways of the bustis in Howrah. . . . and *then* they should picture the human beings who "are born, sleep and eat, live and die there."<sup>1</sup> Either a first hand knowledge of conditions or a keen imagination is an essential adjunct to reading the several excellent books on the housing problem in Indian cities. Those who can see that problem as a human one and not merely as a theoretical one in books should be stung to action by the horror of it. In public interest and in public action lies the salvation of the homes of the industrial workers.

The Commission bear witness to the efforts made by the more advanced employers to provide housing for their workers. "It is the one bright feature in a number of centres. Employers' housing schemes vary greatly; some are admirable and others less so; but the worst is usually better than the best of the alternative accommodation open to the workers." In most of the housing provided by employers there are two chief drawbacks: the houses are generally in the form of lines or tenements, which seem like gaunt prisons to the country-bred people accustomed to live in single huts, however poor; and there is little if any provision for the necessary privacy required by Indian women for their household tasks. It is this lack of privacy which prevents many men from bringing their wives to the cities.

Among the housing schemes of employers there are three outstanding examples where attempts have been made to meet the real needs of the workers. The Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras, the British India Corporation in Cawnpore and the Empress Mills in Nagpur have all built model villages with small single houses arranged in groups on tree-planted roads and courts, and each supplied with water and drainage. The Commission say of the Empress Mills scheme:

"Although the scheme is still in its infancy it was obvious to us that the workers had already developed a pride

<sup>1</sup> The quotations are from the Commission Report.



of possession and increased self-respect; the cultivation of flowers, the planting of trees and individually decorative schemes were all *evidence of a new outlook on home life among the residents.*"

Employers' housing schemes have so far provided for only 10 to 40 per cent. of their workers. As the Commission say in their report: "It is obvious that so far only the fringe of the problem has been touched." An Ahmedabad millowner said to the Commission: "The work which mills can do in housing is of a limited character. . . . Genuine attempts to relieve housing congestion and provide better housing facilities are almost without exception interpreted in labour circles as additional weapons to strengthen the employers' grip on the workers. . . . The best way out of the difficulty is for workers to build and own their houses by starting co-operative housing societies and for local bodies to build houses and to give grants in aid." This view was supported by the Labour Union in Madras: "There is a strong sentiment in India among the workers in favour of house property. The possibility of owning a house would act as a great moral and economic incentive to him to improve his standard of living. A serious objection to workpeople living in houses belonging to the employers is the feeling of constant subordination."

The Commission in their report, having surveyed the situation and the responsibility attaching to employers, to local bodies and to Governments, make the following suggestions:

"We consider that in the first place every Provincial Government should take the initiative by making a survey of its urban and industrial areas in order to be possessed of exact information as to their most urgent needs. Each Government should then arrange for conferences with all the interested parties in order that decisions could be taken in regard to practicable schemes and the methods by which their cost could be shared. In Bengal and Bombay Presidencies particularly, Town Planning Acts are urgently



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required. . . . These Acts should provide for the acquisition and lay out of suitable areas for working class populations and for the opening up and reconstruction of congested and insanitary areas.

“Generally speaking few attempts have been made to use co-operative building societies as a means to provide additional housing. An approach to the question along these lines would not only provide sanitary houses and relieve congestion, but would foster thrift and self-reliance among the workers. It has been suggested to us that the Indian worker is generally contented with his lot and views with suspicion any attempt to improve his circumstances; but the keen competition which takes place for any vacancy in the houses provided by employers indicates that his desire for a sanitary and decent house is greater than is generally realised.

“A little forethought now may prevent grave evils in years to come. *We recognise that in all these matters progress will not be easy until the social conscience is aroused. There can be no doubt that action is urgently necessary to counteract the serious effect on the health of the workers for which present conditions are responsible. Evidence is not lacking that part of the labour unrest which has characterised industrial development during the recent years is due to the realisation, however vague, on the part of the worker, that his standard of living is too low, and that he can never hope to raise that standard until his home provides him with a degree of comfort which is at present beyond his reach.*”

### HANDICAPPED FROM THE START

When Tulsi and Tilasari arrived in Calcutta they had been living on short rations for many months past, and all the family were feeling the weakening effects of under-nourishment. With great effort they steeled themselves to make the move to the jute mills, relying on the hope that the new conditions would be easier than the old, and that



there would be more money for food and clothes. This hope was destined to be unfulfilled. The long hours of arduous work, the dirty insanitary hovel which served them as a home, the high price asked for poor food in the bazaar, the change of climate and the damp evenings, the absence of friends: these were adjustments to be met by a stronger physique than either of them possessed.

Even worse is the plight of the man who leaves his family behind and comes alone to the city. The Government of the United Provinces in their memorandum to the Commission thus described the life of the male worker in the cities:

“The workman who has left his family behind often clubs together with other workers, generally preferring relations, caste men or friends from his village. Denied the comforts of a regular family life, the temptation to him to seek diversion after the day’s work by resorting to drink or drugs or to the bazaar is greater. His life becomes monotonous and unattractive. If he falls ill, he often lacks proper care. The desire to return home becomes a hindrance to sustained and efficient work. He has to remit home a portion, often a large portion, of his earnings and in consequence has to deny himself luxuries and even necessities.”

The extent of this disturbance of family life is partly shown in the sex ratio of the chief industrial cities. The Commission, commenting on the following figures taken from the Census of 1931 and quoted in their report, say: “If it were possible to analyse the figures for the industrial classes separately, the numbers would show an even greater disparity.”

Calcutta and suburbs ...	475	females to 1,000 males.
Bombay ...	553	” ” ” ”
Karachi ...	697	” ” ” ”
Cawnpore ...	698	” ” ” ”
Nagpur ...	852	” ” ” ”
Madras ...	896	” ” ” ”



Even more significant than the actual disproportion of the sexes is the fact that this disproportion is steadily increasing. The Government of Bengal pointed out in their memorandum : "In 1872 the proportion of the sexes in Calcutta was low, but it was relatively high in the industrial towns. Since then the decline in the ratio in the industrial towns has been very marked. In Calcutta City the 1921 census figures show only 374 married females per 1,000 married males, and only 47 per cent. of the total number of women were returned as married. Hence it is clear that the predominance of males involves a great increase in sexual immorality, and this in its turn tends to discourage men from bringing their wives with them." This was confirmed as true for all industrial areas by the Commission :

"This inequality in the sex ratio gives rise to a number of grave social problems. In the first place it leads to an increase of prostitution and a subsequent spread of venereal disease first in the city and later to the village with the return of the migratory worker to his home. In the second place the effect on home life is often disastrous since a premium is put upon the formation of irregular unions. The very knowledge of this too often completes the vicious circle, many men hesitating to bring their wives into the industrial cities where the atmosphere is so alien to that of the village with its code of moral restraints. . . . One of the most important factors affecting this problem is the housing conditions in industrial areas."

It is indeed a vicious circle for the so-called "single" male worker in the cities, surrounding him with economic and social perplexities, and he, even more than the immigrant family, is handicapped from the start. Poor and insufficient food at unaccustomed hours brings before him the fear and the spectre of illness. To him as well as to all men and women entirely dependent on their daily labour for their daily bread nothing is worse than losing work and wages through illness. Since the advent of national health insurance in Great Britain a great load of anxiety



has been lifted from the minds of the workers, and in consequence the general level of health has vastly improved. To the Indian peasant coming to work in the city this anxiety is always present. His chances of keeping well in the city were thus described in the Report of the Industrial Commission of 1918 :

“Living an outdoor life, engaged in agricultural pursuits, the ryot is able to put up with the considerable amount of parasitic infestation so commonly seen; malaria and hookworm infection, for example, is not incompatible with a fair output of agricultural work in such circumstances. Transference to large industrial centres, however, involves a change of environment which apart from other considerations connotes increased liability to disease. A more confined atmosphere, crowded insanitary dwellings, lack of outdoor recreation are certain to exercise a baneful influence and render the factory worker more prone to fresh infection. Had the larger employer of labour a plentiful supply of really healthy material to start with, he would still be under an obligation to secure for his operatives an environment above reproach; how much greater is the present need for hygienic environment when in most cases cure has to precede the conservation of health.”

A recent writer on the economic development of India<sup>1</sup> gave an entire chapter to the relation of public health and economic development, stressing the fact that “it was seldom that public health is mentioned in connection with economic policy”; and concluding: “Actually the conquest of India’s preventable diseases would bring far greater economic gain than any number of commercial, industrial or financial reforms.”

The recent Commission found a lamentable lack of information about the health of industrial workers. The vital statistics did not differentiate between industrial workers and others in the industrial areas, nor did the

<sup>1</sup> *The Economic Development of India*, by Vera Anstey.



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great majority of factories keep any separate record to differentiate between the absence through sickness and absence from other causes. The Government of Bengal reported: "The outstanding feature of available information under the heading of 'Health' is that no general survey of the health conditions in the industrial centres in Bengal has been made." Other Governments made similar statements most of them emphasizing that "health conditions are not very satisfactory." The Director of Public Health in the United Provinces stated in his memorandum that no employers except the British India Corporation kept health statistics of their workers. "The general feeling of the millowners is that labourers kept good health for about ten months after joining, after which they show signs of breakdown, and unless they take rest they are seldom found satisfactory after that period. . . . One undertaking frankly admitted that *they get rid of men as soon as they become unfit.*"

The Commission after reviewing the health conditions in the chief industrial centres conclude that "impaired physique and deficient diet are to be found everywhere," and that "sickness and disease exact a heavy toll and detract from workers' efficiency and earning capacity to a marked extent." In order to build up a better physique and to reduce disease among factory workers two reforms demand immediate attention: the provision of an adequate diet, and the provision of proper sanitation. A perpetual diet of rice, with no milk or pure ghi,<sup>1</sup> and very little fruit or vegetables is all that most industrial workers can afford. They cannot do sustained physical work on such a diet, nor are their bodies able to resist disease. The insanitary surroundings of most of the industrial areas have already been revealed. Where latrine accommodation is defective or absent, and there is no open ground near at hand, workers and their children use the lanes and gullies round the houses, and the resulting filth and smells are about them all the time.

<sup>1</sup> Clarified butter.



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To meet this situation the Commission make the following proposals :

“We have throughout been greatly impressed by the importance of the part played in health by defects of dietary. We visited the Deficiency Diseases Enquiry Laboratory at Coonoor where Colonel McCarrison, I.M.S., under the Indian Research Fund Association, has been engaged for some years past in nutritional researches. . . . While we were struck with the advances already made it was obvious that the work so well begun should be extended on a scale more commensurate with India's needs. Publicity work should be a legitimate sphere of the activity of such an Institute, because the Indian worker, both industrial and agricultural, requires guidance in regard to his diet. It should be impressed on all concerned that the health and, in a large measure, the happiness and contentment, of the workers are bound up with this question, and that, to quote Colonel McCarrison, ‘The output of work by the human machine is closely related to the quality of the food with which it is provided.’”

“The industries of India are now of such importance to her economic welfare, and world competition has become so keen, that it is necessary for industry to be conducted upon the most efficient basis possible. To achieve this end conditions detrimental to the health and well-being of the worker must be eliminated. . . . Indian industry should be able to secure research into the effect of output on hours, temperature and other factors, the suitability of the present meal and rest intervals for the Indian worker, the relations between fatigue and accidents, and other problems of a like nature, that the conversion of an agriculturist into an industrialist make of peculiar importance in this country.”

“As in the case of housing the best millowners have recognised their responsibility in caring for their workers' health and have provided medical facilities which are in all cases free for the workers. One of the outstanding instances



of this is the medical work of the Angus Jute Mills at Calcutta. They have a staff of seven doctors including a Chief Medical Officer and a woman doctor. The dispensary includes special units for eye, ear, nose and throat, venereal and skin diseases. The Chief Inspector of Factories, Bengal, said in his report for 1928: 'The medical relief and attention obtainable by the employees of this company has no equal in the province, and it would be safe to say no superior in any industrial concern in India. It is not possible to deal adequately with the splendid work which this fine staff is doing, not only among the employees of the company but also in the surrounding district.'

The Commission summarise the situation with regard to medical facilities as follows:

"Whilst the need for extension and expansion of the existing medical facilities cannot be over-emphasised, only limited success has followed the repeated efforts made to rouse public opinion and to induce municipal councils to face the problems associated with adequate medical relief of the people. The time has come when the whole position in urban and industrial areas should be surveyed and an estimate made of the requirements of each, due consideration being given to already existing facilities, whether Governmental, municipal or industrial. We recommend that these surveys should be made by the Government Medical Departments through their Civil Surgeons and that the information thus made available for each area should be considered at a joint conference of representatives of the three interested parties.

"The question of making provision for workers during sickness, even if it had not been previously raised by Government, would have been forced on us by what we found in every industrial centre. Of the great need of the workers for something of this kind there can be no doubt. A number of employers have sickness benefit schemes and their co-operation might be secured. . . . But assistance from these sources will almost certainly



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require to be supplemented by special statistical inquiries in selected centres and we recommend that these be instituted as soon as possible. . . . We recommend that thereafter the question of framing schemes be referred to a carefully selected formal committee who might be instructed to examine the material and to make recommendations for the institution, if and where possible, of definite schemes."

## THE LONG VIEW

The Commission preface the chapters in their report on health and housing with a section, from which the following extracts are taken. These are given in order that it may be evident how urgent the Commission consider these improvements to be, and to what extent they look to public support to initiate and carry them through.

"The need for great improvements in health and housing is undeniable, and it is fairly generally recognised. What is not so generally realised is the fact that these great improvements can be secured. The application of the knowledge of preventive medicine which has been acquired in recent years in respect of the existing evils would effect a great transformation. We cannot however overlook the fact that our proposals, if adopted, will involve a considerable expenditure and on this aspect we have two observations to make.

"In the first place, it is necessary, in respect both of health and housing, to take a long view. We should have been doing a poor service to India if, in this direction, we had limited our outlook to what is possible here and now. . . . The proper treatment of problems of public health demands a considered programme; the attempt to deal with them piecemeal too often involves the frittering away of financial resources. . . . We do not suggest therefore, that all our recommendations in the next two chapters can be dealt with either immediately or simultaneously, but we have attempted to lay down a policy



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and a programme ensuring gradual and progressive advance. *We believe our proposals to be practicable and they are necessary if the workers' standards of living are to be raised to a reasonable level.* It is from this point of view that they should be considered; with energy, goodwill and co-operation we are convinced that they can be successfully carried out.

“In the second place, expenditure on public health, besides yielding an immense return in human happiness, is bound to produce great economic advantages. . . . The economic loss involved in the birth and rearing of great numbers of children who do not live to make any return to the community, in the sickness and disease which debilitate a large proportion of the workers, and in early death with the consequent reduction of the earning years, is incalculable. Even a small step in the prevention of these ills would have an appreciable effect in increasing the wealth of India; a courageous attack on them might produce a revolution in the standards of life and prosperity. *We feel that the time for inaction and delay is past* and that particularly in regard to housing it is imperative that an immediate beginning should be made. To those who assert that India cannot afford to spend more on public health, *we would reply that she can no longer afford to do otherwise.*”

## IS PROGRESS POSSIBLE ?

When the Indian Jute Mills Association was under examination by the Commission the following question was put to them: “Is not attention to the personnel and securing of contentment of the personnel pretty nearly as important as the quality of your raw material, or the fitness of your machinery?” Looked at from this point of view, the lot of the industrial workers would not seem to lead to contentment. The long hours of work, the bad housing, the broken family life, the necessary bribes to the jobber,



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the high cost of living in the cities, the dangers to health,—none of these bring contentment. If Narayan in Bombay and Tulsi in Calcutta are to progress at all they must see before them improvements not only in housing and health but also in the amenities of life, in security of employment, and in the prospect of training for promotion.

For the great majority of factory workers there are no amenities of life in their surroundings. All that they can turn to in the cities for recreation and enlivenment is the drink shop, the gambling den and the brothel. A few factories provide sports grounds, but these are not usually appreciated by village bred people. Football has no indigenous place in village life. Something is needed which gives the sense of leisurely enjoyment and relaxation after fatigue, which is so characteristic of the end of the day in a village. In a modern Bengali painting called "After the Day's Work" the edge of the village is seen and a group of men sitting round, one with a tom-tom, the others singing and laughing. Some tree-planted space where groups could sit and sing, and be entertained by travelling musicians would be reminiscent of the village. Once in the crowded business quarter of Calcutta an up-country man leaned against the wall of a big bank and played his bamboo flute oblivious of the din of traffic around him. The coolies passing with their loads had a different look on their faces as though the strain of the city were lifted from them for a moment. The industrial workers have aspirations to fulfil as well as stomachs to be fed, and the absence of all mental and spiritual refreshment is for them one of the worst hardships of city life.

We have already seen that unemployment is now not only feared but known in some industrial centres. In the evidence before the Commission from all sides of India was found reference to a sense of insecurity, "even of fear, that not only were their jobs of indefinite duration but their lives also." Speaking from his long experience of industrial life, Sir S. B. Mehta of the Empress Mills,



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Nagpur, expressed the general uneasiness of the workers in this way to the Commission :

“The variegated largeness of a factory demands a co-ordination of departments, and economy of working demands a synchronising of departments and punctuality of supply by them. These entail on the workers strenuousness and regularity of hours, which impose a strain on mind, body and temper. And this strain is aggravated by the incidence of slum dwelling in large towns. Workpeople have a tendency to adapt themselves to this strain by taking French leave, and strikes look like lucky means of relaxation. But *what most stimulates present discontent is the precariousness of factory work*, which is upset by vicissitudes of trade, change of processes, and of uses of products and taste of consumers. Also, workers do not appear to participate in the gains of lucky booms, while in depression, they are asked to submit to lower earnings.” Another cause of the insecurity felt by the workers is the system of employment by jobbers and the accompanying bribery. There is no security so insecure as that based on favouritism. The proposals of the Commission to meet this situation, as also those to meet unemployment, should go far to meet the precariousness of factory work, and by meeting it to lessen the sense of insecurity of the worker.

Part of the aspirations of the worker arriving in a city is to get on, to “better himself.” It is for that end he left the field for the factory. Once in the factory he finds no opportunity of learning his job except what the jobber will teach him, often at a price, and no prospect of rising higher than a jobber. The absence of facilities for training in the textile industries was emphasised in the evidence before the Commission. It is noteworthy that in factories calling for a higher grade of skill, technical progress has been made. The experience of the iron and steel works at Jamshedpur has shown that in difficult and dangerous work, such as that in the steel rolling mills, a high standard



of proficiency can be reached by the Indian workers after careful training.

Why then are the textile industries to all intents and purposes blind alleys for the workers? The answer lies first in the kind of supervision exercised by the jobbers, who are not interested in the progress of the workers, and have not enough education, even if they were willing, to teach and train those under them. There is great need for a class of supervisors and foremen who besides being expert workmen will also be able to train others. The answer is to be found in the second place in the different way in which work is regarded in the village and in the factory. In the village a man's work, his "kām," is part of his caste. He tills the fields, or he makes brass lotas,<sup>1</sup> or he makes leather sandals because he is born to it. He has no sense of individual choice and very little, unless he is a craftsman, of individual achievement. He does what is necessary and what is ordained. The step from the community atmosphere of a village with its appointed tasks for everyone into the intensely individualistic atmosphere of a factory is a plunge for which the villager is totally unprepared. He is expected to work hard and continuously, to improve his output, and to master intricate processes. His former experience is of no use to him. He has stepped from one world into another and he is entirely baffled by the new demands made on him.

In a recent study of the Punjab the new conditions of life in the canal colonies are cited as producing a more individualistic attitude in the peasants and a more sturdy self-reliance. "Much less is attributed to fate than before. The people see . . . that human effort is a real factor in the struggle for existence. The desire for better conditions of life is also growing. The colonist is no longer content with the bare requirements of life, but wants a better house and better clothes, and education for his children and,

<sup>1</sup> Vessels for water and for cooking.



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moreover, he is prepared to work for them.”<sup>1</sup> Such a transition is described as “passing into the fruitful world of human will from the sterile world of fate.”

The way into this fruitful world of the human will for India's industrial workers is through the gateway of education. Little progress can be made in efficiency without some preliminary education. The Commission stress the lack of general education as the fundamental need of the workers :

“In India nearly the whole mass of industrial labour is illiterate, a state of affairs which is unknown in any other country of industrial importance. It is almost impossible to overestimate the consequences of this disability which are obvious in wages, in health, in productivity, in organisation and in several other directions. Modern machine industry depends in a peculiar degree on education, and the attempt to build it up with an illiterate body of workers must be difficult and perilous. We would emphasise the fact that, precisely because of this, the education of industrial labour should receive special attention.”

The Commission make the following suggestions for the training of the adult workers :

“The necessity of securing a more educated labour force has turned the thoughts of some to the possibilities of adult education. . . . But the labour of the industrial worker consumes his energies so fully as to make it impossible for any but an exceptional man or woman to do anything requiring much mental effort after working hours. . . . The provision of a simple form of education in working hours might however be worth while in the case of a few selected operatives in some industries. This would go far to solve the difficulty of obtaining suitable men for the lower supervisory grades. The first necessity is time off with pay for promising men selected for the purpose. At least three afternoons a week might be given to education. . . . The case of the jute industry

<sup>1</sup> *Rusticus Loquitur*, by M. L. Darling.



in Bengal offers a special opportunity in this direction by reason of its geographical concentration and of the excellent organisation of the employers. *We recommend that the Jute Mills Association should combine to maintain a part-time school for selected adult and adolescent operatives.* On satisfactory completion of the course, the workman, if properly selected in the first instance, would be able to take a post as jobber or assistant jobber, and the avenue of further promotion would be open to him. The possibilities of similar co-operative action deserve examination by employers wherever there is a concentration of industry. While we have stressed the importance of general education, we do not desire to imply that technical education would not be of great assistance in some cases, and we suggest that employers' associations might consider the question of granting scholarships for technical education to selected men."

These steps to progress, providing social amenities, some security in employment, and advance through education and training, are all necessary and urgent. In view of the numbers involved they also mean that those who promote and support them will have to take what the Commission calls the "long view." In taking such a view we must not lose sight of the present, and of what the present situation means for the peasant-factory worker who is tending spindles, looms and furnaces in the industrial cities. His reflections on his present lot on the eve of Diwali<sup>1</sup> can perhaps best be summed up in song rather than in prose:

I look for the goats coming home in the haze of the evening : I see the trams jerking down the streets crowded with tired workers.

I look for the blue threads of smoke rising from the huts at the cooking of the evening meal : I see the tall chimneys of the factories sending forth black clouds.

I look for the children running across brown fields to

<sup>1</sup> The Festival of Lights.



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meet me : I see them standing listless by the greasy staircase of the chawl.<sup>1</sup>

I look for the wife, lifting the lota from her head to place it on the clean swept earth by the white pattern on the door post : I see her, come drooping from the factory, waiting her turn at the water tap, pausing on the threshold of the dark noisome room.

I look for the peaceful smoking under the stars, where the peepul tree rustles its leaves overhead and the spirits pass : I see the drink shop's flaming lights, the noisy quarrels within, the blows, the sinking into the gutter in wretched forgetfulness.

I look for the twinkling lights of Diwali on the roof tops, I hear the songs rising and falling, the tom-tom's beat, the flute's clear voice : I see the torches flaming, I hear the brass band shrieking, the screams of women, the hoarse shouts of men.

I look for the harvest reaped, the money saved, the new plough paid for, I hear the new bangles tinkling on the baby's wrist : I see the wages handed to me, the sardar's hand outstretched, the moneylender at the gates, the empty rice jar, I hear the baby crying when its mother goes to the factory.

I look for the new light dawning, the village school, the evening class, the pottery plate on the shelf for beauty to make glad the heart : I see the black sameness of the daily work, the children driven to earn some annas, the power of the rich, the helplessness of the poor, the dirty sacking over the window.

I look for my country, I hear the songs of the land : I see the prison walls of the city, I hear the dumb cries of the exiles.

<sup>1</sup> Tenement.



## CHAPTER III

## GINS, HIDES AND BIDIS

“They have to sweat you when they start a new business if it is a small one. When they get on a bit and come under the law, then they can do for you some of the things they ought to do, because they have made a bit of money out of you and can afford it.”

*Girl in tin box factory, Canning Town, London.*

## FOLLOWING THE COTTON CARTS

“Roll, roller  
Spread, stick  
Rise, cotton  
Fall, seeds.  
Work over,  
Night comes,  
Gives Radha  
Rest soon.”

SUCH was the song of the gin, sung with many variations of tune, which Radha hummed to herself all day. Its rhythm was based on the regular movement of her spreading stick, the chug-chug of the engines, the phut-phut of the leather belts over the pulleys, and the ceaseless vibration of the floor on which she sat. At the end of each verse she put her hand behind her into the pile of raw cotton and took another handful to feed the gin. She could not sing the words out loud because she had a pad made of puggari<sup>1</sup> cloth tied over her face to keep the irritating fluff from her nose and mouth. As she worked she hummed

<sup>1</sup> Turban.



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a little nasal tune to the words, and both tune and words were to her a charm to the gin and a way of regulating her movements. Forward and back she bent to feed the gin, and slightly from side to side as she worked her stick. Sometimes as she sat through the long day she went over in her mind the story she had told to the party of sahibs who had visited the ginning factory recently. It ran something like this: "My husband's father works in the cotton fields. My husband's mother works also in the cotton fields for the picking season. When I was married and went to live in my father-in-law's house, I also worked in the fields picking cotton. Then my husband died. For picking cotton I earned very little money. My mother-in-law said it was too little to pay for my food and for my common white sari which a widow must wear. Therefore I was unhappy, for she was always scolding me. But one day my husband's brother who drives a bullock cart and carries the cotton from the fields, told me there was work in the factories and more money to be earned. So one day I followed the cotton carts to this factory and I asked for work. That was three years ago. Since then every season for four months I work at the gins and I earn enough to please my mother-in-law. It is not hard work, but it is always the same. It is too hot here after the fields, and the floor is always shaking."

\* \* \* \*

All over India in the cotton-growing areas, in the Bombay Presidency, in Central India, the Central Provinces, United Provinces, Punjab and Madras, are to be found cotton ginning and pressing factories. Most of them are situated on the outskirts of small market towns which serve as a centre for the cotton growing district. The labour for the factories comes chiefly from the villages round. In ginning factories the labour is very largely women, while the men work in the pressing and baling sheds. In the Punjab, for example, out of a total labour force



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in 1929 of 7,534 in ginning and pressing factories, 7,123 were women.

It is the pinch of hard necessity which sends the peasants to the seasonal factories just as the same hard necessity sends other peasants to the perennial factories in the big industrial cities. We have seen that migration to the cities is caused by the pressure of population on the land. Those who remain in the villages and work on the land, either as smallholders or as agricultural labourers, have to meet periods in the year when there is neither work nor food for a great many of them. Mr. Gandhi's movement for hand spinning and the movement to stimulate cottage industries of various kinds are attempts to assist the peasant during the off seasons.

In addition to the attempts to revive and stimulate cottage industries, another outlet exists for the peasants where there are seasonal factories in their neighbourhood. The following table made for the Commission in 1929 shows that of this group of seasonal factories, by far the most important are the cotton ginning and pressing factories :

			<i>Strictly Seasonal</i>		
			Factories		Workers
Cotton ginning and pressing	...	...	2,176		139,987
Tea	...	...	934		63,064
Jute pressing	...	...	115		37,300
Others	...	...	287		11,644
			<i>Partly Seasonal</i>		
			Factories		Workers
Rice	...	...	1,606		76,214
Oil	...	...	244		11,495
Gur and Sugar	...	...	45		15,076
Tobacco	...	...	16		9,922
Others	...	...	255		22,664
Totals			5,678		387,366



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The Commission describe the general characteristics of the seasonal factories thus :

“The main feature of nearly all these industries is that the workers are still essentially agriculturists, and the great majority live in their village homes. The degree of skill required is seldom great, and the proportion of women employed is fairly large. The factories are not concentrated but are naturally scattered over the areas producing the crops with which they deal. The small-scale factory is the rule, and the large one the exception. The workers are generally quite unorganized, and wages tend to be low.”

The worker in a seasonal factory is very much at the mercy of the employer. That employer may be the owner of the factory, or he may be a contractor taking on workers by the day, or contracting for the factory for the season. Whoever he may be, he works with a small capital and aims at making a profit quickly. The price of the raw material he cannot control and therefore he keeps the cost of his labour as low as possible. In the Madras Presidency where the seasonal factories are one-third of all the factories registered, and steadily increasing in number, it “is not uncommon to let the factories themselves out on contract.” In the Punjab, where there are also a large number of seasonal factories, the Director of Industries says : “In the selection of managing staff in seasonal factories, no attention whatever is paid to the qualifications, education or training of the individual employed.”

In seasonal factories the workers are at an initial disadvantage because they are seeking for work close at hand and they are ignorant about bargaining for better conditions. The ginning factory owners in different parts of India combine in what is known as a pool to protect their own interests in years of bad cotton harvests. This pooling system and its effects upon the workers were described to the Commission by the Factory Inspector of the Punjab thus :



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“The cotton crop in the Punjab during the last three or four years has been very much below the normal. A factory situated in an area like Lyallpur where there are fourteen to fifteen factories crowded together, has not sufficient work to keep it running for six days a week at full pace. As a result, the owners of all the factories meet together and decide that they will run only such a number of factories as they can keep going throughout the week and close the rest. The profits or losses of the various factories are pooled and distributed amongst the factory owners of the whole area. This pooling system leads to the closing of some factories and throwing their workers out of employment, and sweating the remaining workers who work in the factories which are kept open. The owners in this industry are in a very much stronger position than the workers.”

## GAMBLING WITH THE MONSOON

The reference in the Punjab Factory Inspector's evidence to the sweating of workers in ginning and pressing factories indicates one of the chief problems connected with seasonal factories. The short season for all seasonal factories tends to make the owners wish to run for longer than the prescribed hours in order to reap profits while they may. Under the Factories Act, the hours are limited to eleven per day and sixty per week. Most of the factories apply for exemptions from the weekly limit, the weekly rest day, and the daily interval, and varying advantage is taken of those exemptions which are granted by the Provincial Governments. A great many of the seasonal factories however are a law unto themselves, and observe the limits of the legal hours of working only when they know the Factory Inspector is in the neighbourhood. In his evidence to the Commission the Inspector of Factories in the Punjab said :

“The seasonal factories particularly work against



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regulations and have little regard for factory legislation. The nature of the staple industry (cotton ginning and pressing) makes it necessary to work hard whilst the season is on. As a result when the raw cotton comes into the factory, it is dealt with right away and regular working hours are to a great extent ignored. As 90 per cent. of the labour in the seasonal factories is unskilled and contracted for daily, the employer has little regard for its comfort, and long hours are indulged in. As this goes on for four to six months during the year, the workers suffer hardships, as although they work long hours, their daily wages remain the same. Prosecutions are launched against offending factory managers for this over-working. Thirty-eight cases were instituted in 1928, but the Inspector's difficulties were many in bringing the offenders to book. Cotton ginning factories are notorious offenders against the rule of hours of work."

The desire of the factory owners to gin cotton while the sun shines, the ignorance of the workers about their rights, and the difficulty of the factory inspectors in making surprise visits to scattered rural factories, all contribute to the sweating of the workers. This disregard of legal hours is also to be found but to a lesser extent in other seasonal factories. On this subject the Commission make the following comments and proposals :

"So far as the capacity of the workers is concerned, we believe that somewhat longer hours can be justified in seasonal factories than in perennial factories. . . . Having regard to the fact that the fixing of a working day in perennial factories at 10 hours and the working week at 54 hours has been advocated, we consider that it would not be unreasonable to maintain in seasonal factories the present maximum working day of 11 hours and the maximum working week of 60 hours. As a result of the tendency to grant exemption on too generous a scale, there have been few efforts so to organise the work as to deal with the crop in the time available with the least strain



upon those engaged in handling it. Workers have been called upon to work for excessive hours when others were available to take their places if necessary. So far as the needs of the industry are concerned, exemptions can only be strictly justified if it is not possible to secure extra labour, and we are not satisfied that this is true of any important class of the factories we are now considering. The extra latitude recommended for seasonal factories on the matter of hours should be regarded as meeting the special requirements of these factories, and the power of exemption should be severely limited in the case of factories which enjoy this latitude."

#### BREATHING DUST

Raising a dust which fills the air around the workers is an inevitable part of the processes of ginning cotton, preparing tea and milling rice. Up to the present it has also been inevitable that in all but a few of these factories the workers should breathe this dust for eleven hours a day, or however much longer than eleven hours they are kept in the factory. Many of the ginning sheds are also very hot, especially in the upper storeys where the women work, and the heat combined with the swallowing of dust causes great discomfort in the throat. Worse than discomfort is caused by the slow but inevitable injury to the lungs. The Government of the Central Provinces in their evidence to the Commission said: "Dust asthma, bronchitis, consumption and other diseases of the respiratory system prevail in the industrial centres of the cotton country." The Chief Inspector of Factories, Bengal, in his annual report for 1927 wrote thus of the dust in the tea factories:

"In many cases the atmosphere is impregnated with tea fluff, and the women and children work with a cloth tied round their mouths and nostrils. These conditions obtain more in hill factories where windows must be



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closed on account of mist and dampness which would spoil the tea. The consensus of medical opinion is that the dust acting as an irritant is likely to cause throat and lung disease."

Workers in the dusty processes endeavour to protect themselves by covering their mouth and nostrils with a pad of cotton, but this adds greatly to their discomfort especially in the hot weather. The toll of sickness from the bad effects of breathing dust continuously cannot even be guessed at. Seasonal workers come and go so casually that no one has any responsibility for their welfare. If they become ill, they drop out of work and no one inquires the reason. The sounds of coughing in a village hut, the germs carried on the dust, are the only tale that is told of a woman's attempt to eke out a living in a seasonal factory. To deal with the dust nuisance the Commission make the following comments and proposals :

"So far as health in seasonal factories is concerned, the main danger is from dust, the extraction of which presents special difficulties. The industries chiefly concerned are the three largest, cotton ginning, tea manufacture, and rice milling. . . . We recommend that, before the plans for new ginneries submitted under the Cotton Ginning Act are approved, the prescribed authority should be satisfied that adequate ventilation will be secured. . . . We recommend a more liberal use of the section of the Factories Act empowering an inspector to order the installation of dust extracting machinery, in respect of existing factories in bad cases where improvement cannot be effected by increased window or roof ventilation. . . . We recommend that owners of tea factories be required to instal efficient dust extracting machinery in all such factories within a specified period."

## FOUND IN THE BACK STREETS

To walk down the back streets of any modern town in India, or indeed of any town in India which has adopted



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modern methods of manufacturing its ancient wares, with an attentive ear and eye is to hear the sounds of power-driven machinery issuing from dark, crowded, and often dirty rooms where men and women work on a great variety of industries. A survey made in Calcutta in 1928 showed the following small factory industries in the city :

Hosiery	...	...	...	...	16
Ropes and cordage	...	...	...	...	13
Tanneries	...	...	...	...	95
Buckets and hardware workshops	...	...	...	...	49
Steel trunk factories	...	...	...	...	30
Brass hinge making	...	...	...	...	36
Brass and bell metal casting	...	...	...	...	110
Umbrella factories	...	...	...	...	20
Soap factories	...	...	...	...	35
Type foundries	...	...	...	...	12
Tobacco leaf pressing	...	...	...	...	20
Oil mills	...	...	...	...	88

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Of these small places the Director of Industries, Bengal, wrote in his evidence : " Most of these—though not all—use some form of machinery driven by electricity or other motive power. There are also many small shops and premises where electric-driven flour-grinding mills, soda water bottling, small chemical industries, etc., are carried on. The general impression is that the various industries are carried on usually in the most unsuitable, cramped premises, with little provision for light and air, ventilation and sanitation, and in such a state of congestion and disorder that danger to human life is an imminent and constant environment to those who labour therein."

Small works which employ less than twenty people are not subject to the Factories Act, unless they have



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been notified under the powers of the inspectors to extend the Act to places using power-driven machinery and employing more than ten persons. The result of the lack of regulation of these numerous small works is that the workers are without the protection of the Factories Act and of the Workmen's Compensation Act. They can therefore be worked long hours in dangerous premises, children under twelve can be employed and there is no compensation for injuries. There is also frequent delay in the payment of wages. Instances were given to the Commission of workers being several months in arrears for wages, the business sometimes going into liquidation before the wages were paid.

The Commission state the position with regard to these small industries as follows :

“Taking first the question of the smaller factories using power machinery, i.e., those employing under twenty persons, the most important points requiring attention are the unsuitable and even unsafe nature of the buildings in which the machinery is erected and the lack of adequate, and indeed often of any, protective guards to shafting, belting and machinery. It has moreover to be borne in mind that up to the present, workers employed in such places have been without the protection of the Workmen's Compensation Act, which has hitherto applied only to power-driven factories employing twenty or more persons. . . . The effective application of the Factories Act to these factories at this stage would involve serious practical difficulties. We therefore recommend the general extension to them of only a few sections of the Factories Act. . . . We recommend that the only operative sections of the Factories Act which should apply automatically, i.e., by law without the issue of a notification, to these factories, are section 5 (giving inspectors powers of entry), Chapter III (relating to health and safety) . . . and the appropriate parts of Chapter VIII relating to penalties and procedure.”



## TANNING : A FILTHY JOB

In addition to the small works using power-driven machinery and employing less than twenty people, there are a number of industries, employing large or small numbers of people in factory premises, excluded from the operation of the Factories Act because they use no power-driven machinery. Of these industries four have been chosen to illustrate the disadvantages to which the workers are subject. Two of these industries, tanning and bidi-making are found all over India, chiefly in towns of some size. Mica splitting and carpet making are local industries.

Down from the cart slip a pile of skins fresh from the slaughter house. The floor of the tanning shed is covered with debris from the previous day, much of it already rotting and black with flies. The workers take the skins and begin to scrape off the flesh. No one organises the removal of the refuse. It lies about in decaying heaps of flesh and hair, amid pools of stagnant water, and the men work all day in the nauseating stench. Only the "untouchables" undertake this work. No kind of protective clothing is supplied them while they are at work, and they are exposed all day to the filth of the tannery.

The Commission visited a number of tanneries and make the following comments on the industry as they saw it :

"In every case (in contrast to some of the larger tanneries which came under the Factories Act) we were struck by the lack of adequate sanitary arrangements, which make the bulk of such places even more offensive than is inevitable from the nature of the industry. Adequate drainage was absent. Often the whole earth floor space, spread over a wide area, was littered with heaps of evil smelling refuse and sodden with pools of filthy water. There were no washing arrangements and in the majority of cases there was no latrine accommodation. In a number of instances the workers had no alternative but to eat the food they



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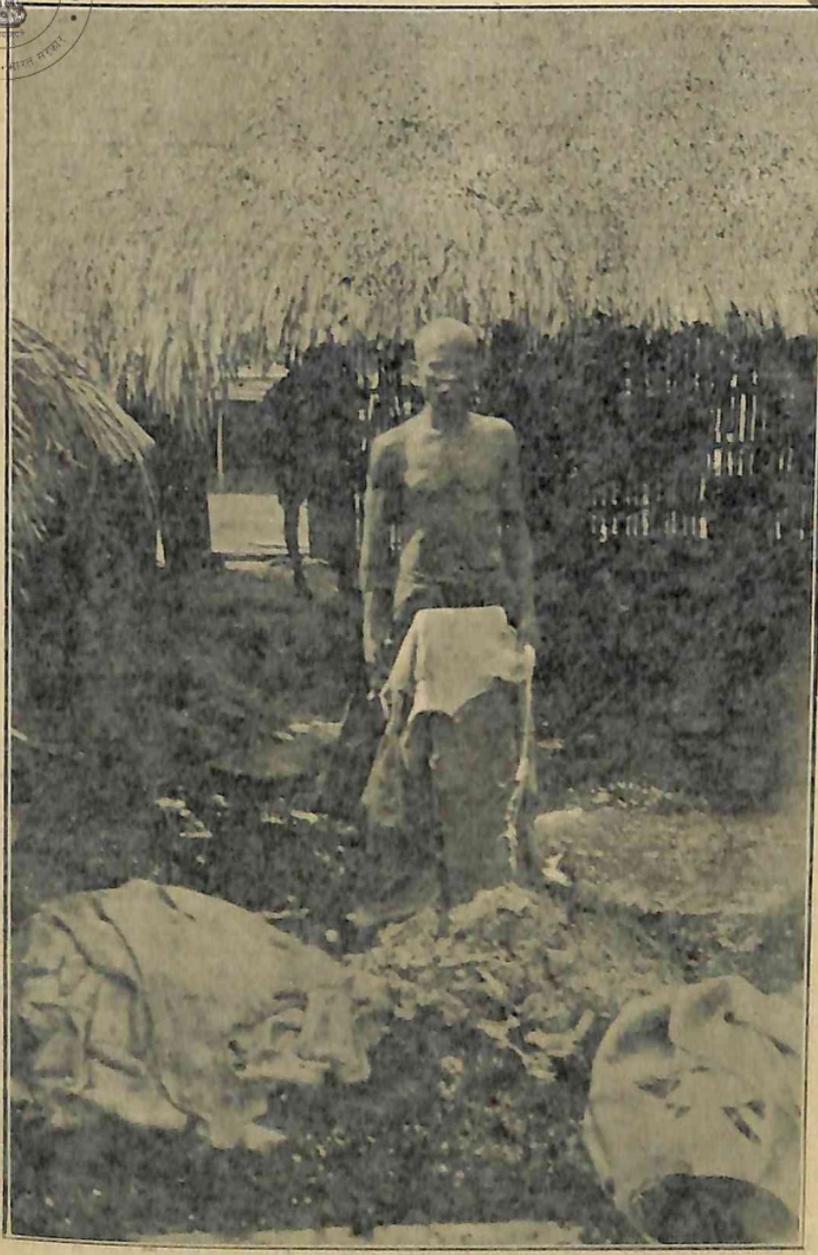
had brought with them in the midst of such surroundings. Hours were long, often twelve and sometimes in excess of twelve, and, whereas few women were employed, in the Madras Presidency children of from eight to twelve years, as well as older boys were found at work in the vats and elsewhere. Their hours sometimes exceeded those of the adults owing to the necessity of performing certain additional tasks such as water carrying, vat filling, etc., for which they receive no additional cash wages but merely two dhotis<sup>1</sup> a year. We feel that the statutory protection of the workers in this industry is essential because of the nature of the work and the class of workers employed, which from long social tradition is peculiarly powerless to help itself.”

### THE ART OF SPLITTING MICA

Mica splitting factories are to be found in Bihar and Orissa and the Madras Presidency, associated with the mica mines. The splitting of mica is partly done on the factory premises, which are merely sheds, using no machinery, and partly farmed out to contractors as a home industry. The Commission found that quite small children were employed, the only control over their work being their own ability to use the sharp knife necessary for the splitting. The evidence taken by the Commission in the mica mining area of Bihar and Orissa is given in some detail as it illustrates not only the existing situation but also the attitude of the employers to the children they employed, tolerating though not necessarily approving the conditions revealed by the questions of the Commission.

“We were rather struck with the number of young children whom we saw. Is there any lower limit of the age of a child which you take into employment?—There is no lower limit. . . . We say the children may come if they like and they will get so much per pound for the

<sup>1</sup> Length of cotton cloth worn draped round the legs by Hindu men.



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nica they split. If they do not make too much waste we let them go on.

“That is the only control there is?—Yes.

“We have just come from a factory where we saw a large number of small children employed.—Children go there to learn the art of splitting. If they do not learn it in their infancy they do not become very good splitters.

“A regulation prohibiting the employment of children under 12 would mean that they would have to learn it at a later age, from 12-15, instead of, say, from 7-12?—If one wants to learn the art of splitting well one should begin learning it in one’s youth.

“(Member of the Commission): That is an argument that has been used through the ages in respect of every increase in the age at which children may be employed.”

#### SLAVES TO THE BIDIS

Look out of the upper window in a house in any Indian city where there is a “slum area” to be seen. In the shade of the walls and on the verandahs, where they exist, are numbers of men, women and children engaged in the rolling of bidis (the indigenous cigarette). Their nimble fingers never seem to tire as they go on all through the day and often late into the night with the aid of a lantern. The tobacco is rolled in leaves and secured with a twist of thread. Go out into the streets behind the bustis and there will be a little stand propped up against a window sill, where the bidis are sold at 25 for one anna. The average rate of working for a good worker is under 1,000 bidis a day, usually about 600 to 800. For 1,000 bidis they are paid rates varying from 4 to 11 annas, depending on the finish of the bidis. From this wage, which averages about 8 annas a 1,000, sometimes the price of the thread and leaves is deducted and fines for any shortage in the bundles. The making of bidis has therefore a claim to be called a sweated industry on the basis of low wages



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and long hours. It is partly a home industry, but also in many towns the work is increasingly being carried on in factory premises, which may vary from large sheds to tiny dark rooms in a private house.

Bidi factories have increased very much in number in recent years. In 1921 there were in the Central Provinces 133 factories employing 6,440 persons, and in 1929 there were 775 factories and 29,000 workers. There are proportionate increases in other provinces, notably in Madras where in the last two years 3 or 4 big bidi manufacturers set up establishments employing about 20,000 workers. Of these bidi factories and the conditions which obtain in them the Commission write as follows :

“Every type of building is used, but small workshops preponderate and it is here that the graver problems mainly arise. Many of these places are small, airless boxes, often without any windows, where the workers are crowded so thickly on the ground that there is hardly room to squeeze between them. Others are dark, semi-basements with damp mud floors unsuitable for manufacturing processes, particularly in an industry where the workers sit or squat on the floor throughout the working day. Sanitary conveniences and adequate arrangements for removal of refuse are generally absent. Payment is almost universally made by piece rates, the hours are frequently unregulated by the employer, and many smaller workshops are open day and night. Regular intervals for meals and weekly holidays are generally non-existent.

“The paramount matter for concern in a number of areas, particularly in the Madras Presidency, is the question of child (i.e. boy) labour. In many cities large numbers of young boys are employed for long hours and discipline is strict. Indeed there is reason to believe that corporal punishments and other disciplinary measures of a reprehensible kind are sometimes resorted to in the case of the smaller children. Workers as young as five years of age may be found in some of these places working without



adequate meal intervals or weekly rest day, and often for ten or twelve hours daily for sums as low as two annas in the case of those of tenderest years. This recalls some of the worst features of child apprenticeship in England prior to the passing of the first Factory Act, particularly when it is realised that many of the parents of these child workers are in debt to the employers. As a result they are not in a position to inquire too closely into the treatment meted out to their children or to do other than return an absconding child. Although it is impossible to give even an approximate figure of the numbers of such child workers in the provinces where this type of labour is most prevalent, we are confident from the evidence submitted to us, as well as from our own personal observations, that it is sufficiently large in certain areas to constitute an evil which demands immediate remedy."

#### CHILD SLAVES IN CARPET FACTORIES

"I, Booter, son of Chakli, Chowkidar of Amritsar, owe Rs. 57 odd, of which half is Rs. 28.8.0 which I have borrowed from Booty weaver in advance. I agree that my grandsons N and F should be handed over for the purposes of carpet weaving. N is to get Rs. 9 per month and F is to get Rs. 7 per month. I will take the wages monthly. I will not break this agreement. If I break this agreement I will return all the money I have borrowed to the man who has lent it to me."

This document was found by a member of the Commission during a visit to a carpet factory in Amritsar. When confronted with the document the manager of the factory declared that "he had never seen it before and heard about it now for the first time." The excuse he gave to the Commission was that he "had nothing to do with the children" and only dealt with the master weavers. These master weavers contract with the manager of the factory for the making of each carpet, and are them-



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selves responsible for finding the labour and paying the wages. The same manager disclaimed any knowledge of the wages paid to the boys in his factory saying: "I do not know what the master weaver does with his boys." The Punjab Government in their evidence to the Commission emphasised the long hours worked in the carpet factories in Amritsar and still more the fact that the majority of the workers were children between the ages of 9 and 15. Their evidence continued: "The factory owners shelter themselves behind the opposition of the master weavers to any restriction in hours, and the children continue their blind alley occupation." On the normal sized loom there are four workers, the master weaver, a boy of 14 or over, and two boys under 12. It will be remembered that at one time an inquiry into the carpet industry in Persia showed that the children working on the looms became deformed as a result of long hours spent in a cramped position. A doctor practising in Amritsar gave evidence of inferior physique among the carpet factory children, among whom she had found abnormal curvatures in the legs and back from sitting for long hours in cramped positions.

The Commission, referring to the conditions already described, add certain very significant comments:

"Where the child is not the son or a near relative of the weaving master he is normally the child of a man who, in return for a loan of money from the weaving master, contracts out the labour of his child at so many rupees (7-9 etc., according to the age of the child) per month. The duration of the contract which is sometimes set out in a formal document, would appear to be determined by the repayment of the loan. . . . It was clear to us from the evidence that these children were in the position of being obliged to work any number of hours per day, required of them by their masters. They were without the protection of the law as regards their physical fitness to labour, the number of hours they might be



required to work without any intervals, or indeed any of the more elementary protections afforded by the Factories Act in respect of child workers, and they were subjected in some cases to corporal punishment. . . . We are convinced that here, as in the bidi factories, official regulation is required primarily in the interests of the child workers."

### THE LEAST PROTECTED AND THE MOST HELPLESS

In making their recommendations for the factories which are at present unregulated by law, the Commission refer to the workers in them as "the least protected and the most helpless" of the industrial workers of India. In the case of tanning the workers are outcaste people accustomed for generations to being abused as human workers. In all the industries the workers are very poor, entirely illiterate, and without any knowledge of how to protect themselves or any idea how to combine to demand protection. Moreover as we have seen, a great many of the workers are children under 12 years of age, who in the carpet factories and in some of the bidi factories are "sold" by their parents to meet their dire poverty. The Commission realise that any kind of regulation introduced in the interests of the workers will be new, unknown, and irksome to the employers and often to the workers.

"It may be taken for granted that in the first instance regulation will give rise to a variety of methods of evasion on the part of some employers and parents, but this will be no more than a repetition of the past history of such regulations in countries with an older industrial background. . . . Even where an increase in home work is not possible, some employers may seek to evade legal requirements by taking two neighbouring workshops instead of one, so that no one place may employ sufficient workers to come within the scope of the law. . . . While we recognise the inevitability of tendencies of this kind, we believe that in due course, when legislation has been



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enforced for some time, such activities will largely cease.

“As far as the parents of the child workers typical of these industries are concerned, we realise that we are here dealing with a class wholly illiterate, exceedingly poor, and only too heavily indebted. It is inevitable that to these the child's right to its childhood, and even to such education as may be available, should make no appeal comparable to that of its earning capacity, however small. There would appear in their case, as in that of the employers, no course open but that of compulsion by means of legislation so framed and so applied as to achieve the necessary end with the minimum of dislocation and hardship.”

The Commission continue by pointing out that while many reforms in these factories are obvious and desirable, they are concentrating for the present on two, the protection of children and the elimination of the worst dangers to the health of the workers. To meet this situation they make the following recommendations :

“We recommend the adoption of a separate Act of a different type which should be as brief and simple as possible, and which should apply in the first instance to all places without power machinery employing fifty or more persons during any part of the year.

“Realising the necessity of educating both employers and parents to a higher standard of consideration for child welfare, and for the passing only of such legislation as is capable of enforcement, we recommend that the starting age for children in such places shall in the first instance be 10 years.

“We recommend that for the present protection in the matter of hours be confined to children between 10 and 14 years of age. . . . The law should enact that the hours of children employed in these factories should fall within the limits to be specified by the Provincial Governments. These limits . . . should be such that in no case should the working hours of a child exceed 7 or fall outside



a period of 9 in the day with a rest interval of at least one hour. . . . A provincial Government could prescribe that in a particular district children should not be employed except between 9 a.m. and 12.30 p.m. and again between 1.30 and 5 p.m., and the manager of any factory in which children were discovered working outside those limits would be liable to prosecution.

“The system of mortgaging the labour of children is indefensible; it is worse than the system of indentured labour, for the indentured labourer is when he enters on the contract a free agent, which the child is not. We consider that the State would be justified in making the execution of such bonds a criminal offence. In any case we recommend that any bond pledging the labour of any person under the age of 15 years, executed for or on account of any consideration, should be void. . . . This recommendation is intended for application not merely to the factories mentioned in this chapter, but generally. Unfortunately there is evidence that similar abuses have occurred in connection with the employment of children in some of the Ahmedabad cotton mills.

“We also recommend that in every factory of this kind there should be a weekly holiday.

“The second urgent need is the enforcement of what may be termed the minimum standards necessary to ensure the health of the workers. This would include such matters as the necessary structural alterations or repairs to the building, the supply of adequate latrine accommodation, ventilation, lighting and drainage. The Act, in addition to requiring the observance of suitable standards in respect of these matters, might also give power to the Provincial Governments to apply welfare orders of a simple nature to particular classes or groups of industrial establishments.

“The proposals made above are designed for application in the first instance only to factories employing not less than 50 persons but Provincial Governments may be



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given power to extend any of the provisions to factories employing less than that number where conditions justify such action. We recommend that this be done forthwith in the case of offensive trades such as tanneries and shellac manufacture, irrespective of the number employed.

“We desire to emphasise that legislation of the sort recommended is to be looked upon as essentially a first step. A starting age of 10 years or a maximum working day of 7 hours in the case of child workers is by no means satisfactory, or anything other than the first and very transitory halting place along the road of progress. . . . We therefore urge that when the Act recommended shall have been in operation for five years, Government be prepared to make such further advances as experience will have shown to be possible.”



## CHAPTER IV

## TRAINS, SHIPS AND DOCKYARDS

## PART I

“In India cheap transit has always been and must continue to be recognised as a necessity. . . . With increased earning capacity we believe that workers on Indian Railways will realise and respond to the need for greater efficiency. There will be difficulties to overcome and occasions when patient consideration and negotiation will be necessary; but with goodwill and common effort we believe that all concerned in the development of Indian railways will benefit from a general acceptance of the principles indicated in this Report.”

*Report of the Commission.*

## SERVANTS OF THE PUBLIC

FROM cheap carpets to cheap transit, from the child slaves of the carpet looms to the servants of the public on the State railways is a sudden transition. There is a marked contrast between the types of workers and the nature of the industry. In the one case, in unregulated factories, the Commission's recommendations concern a very simple form of regulation; in the other, on the railways, the recommendations deal mainly with matters of administration. Nevertheless the workers on the railways are human beings with human needs, presenting a great diversity of persons and circumstances. The Commission say in their report:



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“Railways in India cover a wide expanse, the total route mileage of 41,000 miles being in excess of that in any other country save the United States of America. With a total staff of over 800,000, the railway administrations are the largest employers of organised labour in India, and their working policy as regards wages and other terms of employment reacts to some extent on industrial labour conditions throughout the country. . . . 72 per cent. of the total route mileage is owned and 45 per cent. is directly managed by the State.”

Among these 800,000 workers can be found every grade of skill and lack of skill. They range from the educated efficient Station Master of an important terminus to the Mikir tribesman carrying baskets of earth to repair a railway embankment in Assam. Between these two poles are the men on the stations, on the lines, in the sheds, and in the workshops—all the railway workers with whom the travelling public are familiar and many others besides. The Railway Department of the Government of India is run on a commercial basis and is expected to make ends meet, to assist industries by reducing freight charges, to serve the public by efficient and cheap travel service, and to be a model employer of 800,000 men. Small wonder that a member of the Commission said of the labour question on the railways :

“The problems are so vast that a great deal of patience and a number of years must elapse before one may reach anything like a solution of the problems confronting those who are administrators.”

From among these vast problems two stand out in the evidence before the Commission as of paramount importance. The first is that of the relation between efficiency and standards of living—the fundamental problem in all Indian industry. The North Western Railway memorandum stated it thus :

“It is argued not without force, that if a workman is continually obsessed with the idea that, although he



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is expected to put forth his best in the discharge of the duties allotted to him, he does not earn a living wage, and is constantly worried with the necessity of devising means to supplement his income, it is bound to impair his individual efficiency and thus react on the efficiency of the whole concern."

The second outstanding problem is that of personal relationships, involving the recognition of the place of the workers in the whole railway system. It was significant that of the evidence presented to the Commission that from railway trade unions filled one entire volume. In no other industry was it obvious that the workers were not only consciously disturbed and discontented but also so well prepared to state their case. The Government and the public are fully aware that good personal relations are essential to the smooth running of a public service, and that continued strikes and labour unrest are disastrous to industry and to the country. How to create those good relations on the railways and thereby to achieve what the Commission described as a "contented labour force" is the major problem revealed by the Commission.

### AN ADEQUATE LIVING WAGE

Sham Lal straightened himself, looked critically at his work and gave the shining brasses another rub over. An hour later the big engine with Sham Lal's shining brasses pulled out of the shed and was hitched to a special train and Sham Lal squatting on a loaded truck watched the Agent sahib and a special party board the train and steam away. He pricked up his ears as he heard a man below him on the platform say: "Those are the Commission sahibs. They have come to ask the burra<sup>1</sup> sahib how much wages he pays to us. He does not care. Every month he gets Rs. 3,500, and how should he care what the rest of us get? Yes, it is good to be rich, for then

<sup>1</sup> Chief.



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you do not care how other men live. Your stomach is never empty." Crouching in the semi-darkness, hugging his knees for warmth, Sham Lal pondered on what he had seen and heard, and his thoughts ran thus-wise: "So the burra sahib never had an empty stomach. . . . That must be great happiness. . . . He had so much money every month that no one could count it. . . . The other sahibs had come to ask him how much the workers got every month. . . . He would like to count his Rs.12. before them. . . . He would like to show them his wife in the busti with a new baby. . . . And the other three children, always hungry, running out to beg or steal to fill their stomachs. . . . Every month Rs.12. counted out. . . . Every day 6 annas for food for two grown-ups and three children. . . . Every week 6 annas left over for rent and fuel and clothes. . . . He would like to ask the Commission sahibs how to support a family on Rs.12. a month."

Sham Lal would have been amazed if he had heard the "Commision sahibs" questioning the Agent that afternoon. The interview ran thus :

"In your memorandum you say that the cost of a daily diet consisting of certain articles of a good quality in Calcutta would be about 6 annas. If you take the case of a man, his wife and two children, regarding that as equivalent to three adults, if you allow 6 annas per day for each adult, that would come to Rs.1.2. per day for food?—It is only a very rough estimate. Though you may say a man requires 6 annas, most people would not have more than 3 or 4 annas and yet they live.

"If I take the figure of 4 annas that would come to 12 annas for the family and that would not provide for such luxuries as ghi<sup>1</sup> or milk. Again, I find from your memorandum that there are wages of Rs.9 rising to Rs.11 per month, Rs.11 rising to Rs.16, Rs.12 to Rs.17, and Rs.13 to Rs.17. If you take the cost of food as 4 annas per

<sup>1</sup> Clarified butter.



adult, how is it possible for a man to live and support his wife and two children on wages of Rs.11, Rs.12, or Rs.13 per month?—But he does live.

“Yes, but have you ever considered how he lives? As an employer of labour, do you not think the duty devolves upon you to find out exactly what is a living wage? While the Agent and superior officers draw high salaries, I take it there are thousands of your workers who are living on a wage less than Rs.25. a month?—*There are 40,000 workers on less than Rs. 30. a month.*”

The Commission make the following comments and recommendations on wage levels :

“Although the position of railway workers generally appears to have improved considerably in recent years, as regards both earning capacity and buying power, the Railway Board recognise that accepted standards are being raised, and what would have been regarded as satisfactory even ten years ago is no longer sufficient. Early in 1929 therefore they set on foot a systematic examination of the service conditions of lower paid employees, with the result that revised scales of pay for these employees have been sanctioned and put into effect on three of the State owned and State managed railways at an estimated annual cost of Rs. 26 lakhs per annum. . . . It must be kept in view that of 759,000 employees on the twelve class I railways under review on March 31st, 1930, 408,000, or 54 per cent. were in receipt of less than Rs.20 per month. We recommend therefore that the claims of low paid workers to improved wage standards should continue to receive careful consideration from the Railway Board and the administrations concerned.”

#### INSECURITY OF TENURE

One of the motives which make workers join the railway service is that it offers continuous employment with certain privileges which do not fall to workers in industry.



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Men who join the railways with this in view, expect security in their work especially as they are in an undertaking which normally is always expanding. In spite of this expectation of the workers the Commission in going round India found that the biggest grievance of the railway men was insecurity of tenure and the possibility of discharge or dismissal under a month's notice. A member of the Commission stated it thus: "The great majority of workers are given what they call insecurity of tenure." By signing the service agreement which is required of all railway servants the workers accept the condition that they can be discharged at a month's notice or with a month's pay in lieu of notice, with no appeal against the discharge or no reasons given. If they are dismissed on a definite charge they have a right of appeal to the officer next above the rank of the one dismissing them. They can be "discharged under service agreement" with no ground of appeal.

The trade unions in their evidence recognised the need of the railways to discharge workers on grounds of retrenchment or other financial policy, but they demanded that that reason should be stated as the ground of discharge. The following extracts taken from the many references to this in the trade union memoranda illustrate the extent and depth of the grievance: "There is no security of service for the workers which depends only on the will of the managing staff. The recommendations of foremen for dismissal of workers is accepted and no appeal lies against the orders passed in such a case. . . . The danger and injustice of the service bond exist mainly in the fact that it empowers young and inexperienced officials to discharge a worker with many years service without the necessity for an inquiry into the case. . . . Summary justice may be necessary in the army, but it is altogether unnecessary on the railways."

The Agent of one of the biggest railways in India strongly endorsed the grievance of the workers



and expressed its seriousness to the Commission thus :

"I think this question of discharge and insecurity of service is a very burning question; it does affect the staff very largely; they have always the possibility of discharge hanging over them. If any means could be found of giving them greater security of service I should be very glad to do what I could."

The Commission say in their report :

"The feeling of insecurity of service is a source of anxiety, which in our opinion justifies further efforts being made to remove cause for complaint. Where large numbers of workers are employed, there must be cases in which disciplinary action has to be taken, but this makes it all the more necessary that the workers should understand that steady work, reasonable efficiency and good conduct will ensure security of tenure. They should also feel assured that, when their service or conduct falls short of the required standard, opportunities for explanation will be provided, and that their services will not be terminated without due enquiry, and, if desired, ample rights of appeal to higher authorities. . . . We therefore recommend that all classes of workers should enter into a simple service agreement, providing for :

- (a) Probationary period of 12 months.
- (b) Confirmation after 12 months approved continuous service.
- (c) Confirmed service to be terminable on one month's notice.
- (d) A declaration that service is liable to termination in any of six specified circumstances.

The power of terminating service should reside solely in the district or divisional officers or officers superior to them.

Appeal against discharge or dismissal should lie to the head of the department or Divisional Superintendent with final appeal to the Agent, with



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facilities for representation by a member of an accredited trade union or a fellow workman. Proper records of disciplinary action should be kept, and watched by personnel officers.”

## A LADDER OF ADVANCEMENTS

One of the privileges which workers on the railways expect is the possibility of rising from one grade to another through hard work and increased efficiency. The most difficult and most thorny question which the Commission had to investigate on the railways was that of racial discrimination in recruitment and promotion. A table of appointments supplied to the Commission showed that in the grade of subordinate officials drawing Rs. 250 and over, out of a total force of 8,757, 2,045 were Europeans, 3,777 Anglo-Indians,<sup>1</sup> and 2,935 Indians. The written evidence of the Indian trade unions was emphatic: “Racial discriminations should go forthwith. The Indian apprentice should be treated on the same level as the Anglo-Indian apprentice. . . . The recruitment of staff on the East Indian Railway is made on the basis of racial partiality. In the majority of cases the better posts carrying higher prospects are given to non-Indians without testing the real merits of the candidates.”

Admittedly in the past, railway service was looked on as the preserve of the Anglo-Indian and domiciled European communities. The Railway Board acknowledged this when interviewed by the Commission: “In the old days no doubt there was discrimination in favour of the European and Anglo-Indian, for the simple reason that at that time the European and Anglo-Indian came forward for railway service and were more fitted for the work. All that discrimination has entirely disappeared now on the State Railways. The Company Railways without

<sup>1</sup> Official designation of those formerly called Eurasians.



## TRAINS, SHIPS AND DOCKYARDS

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exception have agreed to put an end to this discrimination, with the result that there is no discrimination now." The apparent continuance of racial discrimination in recruiting which was insisted on by the Indian trade unions lays the railways open to the accusation that they do not consider any Indians fit for the higher posts. A member of the Commission expressed it thus: "The Railway Board have abolished racial discrimination in name, but what they are now trying to do is to discredit the whole Indian race by saying that Indians are not fit for higher posts such as A Grade Stations Masters."

What about the Anglo-Indians and Europeans accustomed for many years to look forward to privileged railway service? How do they regard the attacks on their privilege and the declarations of policy of the Railway Board? It is always hard for a privileged community to face change when it involves a withdrawal of that privilege. The Anglo-Indian Association told the Commission in an interview: "We state that as we have contributed to building up the railways in the past and bringing them to their present efficient conditions, our claims should not be overlooked. We realise that the logic of events must bring more Indians into competition for regular employment, and the pressure of these forces is already being felt. We realise that the number of Indians is so much larger than the number of Anglo-Indians, that they will in time displace the Anglo-Indians from the railway service. We seek some protection for a period which will enable us to equip ourselves to compete equally with the Indians." The chief population centres of the Anglo-Indians, located at every big railway centre, show the intimate connection of that community with the history of the railways. In these democratic days, however, privilege is expected to give way to even-handed justice, and the Indian demand for impartial treatment is in the cause of justice and cannot be overlooked. What the former privileged community can do to equip itself to



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compete in the open market is an immediate and a complicated question.

The Commission's report contains the following statement on this thorny issue :

"The Government of India have declared their policy to be the elimination of racial discrimination. . . . Our difficulty in dealing with this question is that, where this elimination is modified, the principles of the modification are based on considerations which lie entirely outside our scope. They have been evolved with reference not to labour but to political issues. In consequence we are not in a position to review the question as a whole. . . . We would urge however in the interests of labour, the importance of doing all that is possible to remove what is at present a constant source of discontent and bitterness. . . . We believe it to be in the interests of all concerned that definite steps be now taken which will lead in a specified number of years to the progressive elimination of any form of discrimination as regards both appointments and promotions to all grades and classes."

While the ladder of advancement appears to be barred to the Indian in the higher grades of labour by racial discrimination, the ladder is rotten in the lower rungs from bribery. The All India Railwaymen's Federation stated in their memorandum : "The method of recruitment of staff by a single official has led to frequent complaints of jobbery, bribery, etc., especially in regard to workshops and engineering labour, and not infrequently even to clerical staff."

The Commission make certain proposals to meet this charge of bribery in appointment, involving changes which follow the general lines of their recommendations in other industries. The keeping of registers is recommended for engineering and other departments, and in the case of mechanical workshops they commend the use of labour bureaux already in existence in certain shops. They say in this last connection :



“We believe that this system could be developed and, together with the system of selection boards, would enable almost all the employees in the larger workshops and many of the lower paid workers at large stations to be recruited, appointed and promoted in a manner that would go a long way towards removing grounds for complaints of favouritism and bribery. . . . It is naturally difficult to obtain direct evidence from either givers or takers of bribes, but there is a widespread belief that employment and promotion can be materially assisted by methods which ought not to be possible in highly-organised services. The elimination of bribery depends most upon the spread of knowledge and the development of character. Its complete elimination therefore will take time but the railway administrations can materially assist by making known to all employees and applicants for employment that under no circumstances should bribes be offered.”

### MAKING LIFE ATTRACTIVE

Shanti ran round the corner of the hut and stooped to enter the doorway. “Mother,” she said, “there is a party of people coming. I have seen them. Some are English and some Indian. They are looking in the houses. Do you think they might look in here?” The mother looked round at the interior of the hut. The chula<sup>1</sup> was by the door and the smoke escaped by the door or went up under the low roof. On a shelf was her tulsi plant and one or two brass pots. The floor was freshly watered and brushed. Inside all was clean and neat. But outside . . . the mud walls had many holes and one of them sagged dangerously. The thatch hung in an untidy fringe and in one place had broken right away. “Look, mother,” called the child again, “there they are; they are stopping near us. Do they like the so bad smell just there?” She disappeared and a few minutes later she came racing back.

<sup>1</sup> Cooking stove.



“They spoke to me. They asked me what my father did, and I told them he was a fitter in the workshops, and that in the evenings he read the newspaper and said much angry words and sometimes he went to meetings with his friends. I showed them our house and where the rain came in, and I said that you did not like the so bad smell outside but there was nowhere else to live.”

Two days later the Commission met the representatives of the East India Railway and spoke thus of their visit to Shanti's home: “We have received a good deal of complaint with regard to the housing of the labour employed at the Lilloah workshops. I understand that at Lilloah you make no attempt to house the workshop labour. We spent Saturday morning going round the Howrah slums. Do you suggest that it is reasonable to expect workmen of the type that are employed in your shop, 90 per cent of them being skilled, to reside in the bustis of Howrah? There has been a good deal of unrest at Lilloah. I suppose the bulk of the labour lives in the slums of Howrah. We have been through those slums and we are not surprised that people should be discontented if they have to live there.” To the representatives of another railway, as part of a comment on the lack of housing for workshop labour, the Commission put the question: “Have you embarked on a policy to make the life more attractive?”

### THE MIST OF IGNORANCE AND APATHY

Some days after the “Commission sahibs” had crossed his path Sham Lal overheard some workers in the loco shed talking about a meeting to be held that night. As they passed him they told him he had better come, and indicated the place. After work hours, instead of going home, Sham Lal went to the open space behind the running sheds, and there he found a crowd of men, squatting expectant in the darkness. A wooden box with a lantern



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on it was facing the assembly and presently a man got up by the lantern and began to speak. Sham Lal did not follow a great deal of the speech, but two of the speaker's points remained with him. "Why are we here in the darkness, struggling to find food for our families, all the time weak, all the time hungry; while over there, the railway sahibs are never hungry, and have great power over everyone? It is because they have education. They can read, they can talk with wisdom. We are ignorant and foolish, that is why we are weak and hungry . . ." and later on: "Shall this be always so? Shall we for ever squat on our heels and submit to them? How many are we, and how few are they? Yet who has now the power? Ah, but who *will* have it when, like the tide in the Hoogli, we rise and move together? Then no one can stop us. But we must have wisdom. We must have education."

Sham Lal came out of the darkness of the meeting into the full glare of the arc lamps of the station. After his evening meal he sat by his doorway, smoking and thinking. It was as if a mist had fallen from his eyes. "So—now I *see*. The burra sahib in his wisdom is like the big light in the station. The man who talked was like the little light, the lantern. I am like the darkness . . . but my fate is not fixed for ever . . . it will change . . . I shall send the boys to the free school, and there they will learn. . . . By some means I, too, will learn to read. . . . But before that I will join with others in the union . . . I will no longer be always poor, always hungry . . . I shall change and all will change with me . . . the great power of the burra sahib is not for ever."

That day in Delhi, mindful of the Sham Lals whom they had met, the Commission thus addressed the Railway Board, higher even than Sham Lal's "burra sahib": "In your memorandum you sum up the position by referring to the prevailing illiteracy, inefficiency, low wages and poor standard of living of the workers. I should like



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to refer for a moment to this question of illiteracy. You very truly say that the labourer is quick to avail himself of any facilities. . . . You very aptly bring out the point that the spread of education is the means by which you can dissipate the mist of ignorance and apathy, and you emphasise also the fact that at the root of the whole evil lies the ignorance of the worker. . . . As the largest employer of labour in India, possessing greater influence than any private individual, what have you done to bring home to the Government of India and to the local Governments the absolute necessity for doing something to build up a real live movement for providing elementary education so that your workers can be properly educated ?”

### BRIDGING THE GULF

Behind all the questions of wages and hours, health and housing, welfare and education, lies the fundamental issue of personal relationships. The methods of organisation on the railways and the large numbers of men employed make this issue of personal relations between masters and men a very momentous one in the interests of industrial peace. At the Railway Agents' Conference at Simla in 1928 one of the main speeches was entirely devoted to the "absence of the human touch" between employer and worker on the railways. The Railway Board memorandum to the Commission refers to the direct contact between employer and worker as being part of "the immemorial custom of the country." Theoretically each worker on the railway has a right of appeal to the Agent. Of what value is such a right to the illiterate gangman on a section of the line hundreds of miles away from railway headquarters? This need for opportunities of ventilating grievances was emphasised by the Commission in their report :

“There are problems arising out of service conditions affecting individuals, grades and classes of workers that require adequate facilities for ventilation and settlement.



It is important that grievances should be ventilated, and we believe that the local and district or divisional committees and railway councils referred to later provide appropriate channels for dealing with these problems. Establishment and employment officers are of great assistance to workers in this connection and we recommend their appointment on all railways. They have already proved their value, especially in the large workshops, and we consider that their activities can usefully be extended."

The gulf has to be bridged however not only between master and man but between organised masters and organised men. A member of the Commission, himself an employer, put the position in this way to one of the railway administrations: "I notice that you have been doing a good deal in connection with welfare work especially through your staff officer. But notwithstanding all that, unless you get into closer touch with the workers, unless you get some organisation of the workers, it is still possible that the workers will be discontented and you may have strikes. Can you suggest anything that may be done on the workers' side that may correspond with what you are doing on your side, so as to bridge over that gulf which I see just now?"

#### VISUALISING THE TRADE UNIONS

To the Agent of a railway a member of the Commission put this question: "My experience (as an employer) is that workers generally are suspicious of movements coming from the employer's side. I was wondering whether you could visualise trade unions coming from the workers' side, something that would be effective from their side, that would let the men have confidence in their leaders who can come and negotiate with you regarding their wages and other questions that may crop up between you?" Over and over again in their interviews did the Commission try to "gauge accurately the mind of the railway administration in regard to trade unions." The



strikes were accompanied by rioting. In the Bengal Nagpur Railway strike of 1927, the Auxiliary Force were called out, many of them being Anglo-Indian railway workers, officered by railway officials. To repudiate racial discrimination, and at the same time to tolerate a situation in which members of one community in a service are under arms to coerce their fellow-workers of another community, is to invite the charge of hypocrisy.

The strikes on the railways rebound with great force on the workers as many of them do not get reinstated afterwards. It is therefore in the interests of neither the union nor of the railway to force situations to a point in which a strike becomes inevitable. A member of the Commission asked one of the railway administrations :

“Do you envisage a far-off future when with trade unionism properly developed, all important orders should be given after investigation by a committee composed equally of officials of the railway and representatives of the workpeople, with a non-official public man as chairman?” Those who spoke for Sham Lal and his friends told the Commission : “We want joint standing committees in which union representatives will deal with everyday matters on the basis of Whitley Committees. We are not only prepared to meet the railway administrations, we are very anxious to meet them.”

On the recognition of trade unions the Commission say :

“Generally speaking there is ground for the complaint that at least some of the administrations expect a higher standard of efficiency, responsibility and organisation from the trade unions than can reasonably be expected at this stage in their development. We believe that a more generous policy in respect of recognition would be to the advantage of all concerned in railway work, and we commend this matter to the careful consideration of administrations and unions.”

On the final stage of relationships, that of joint consultation, their recommendations are as follows :



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## CHAPTER IV

## TRAINS, SHIPS AND DOCKYARDS

## PART II

“It may not be out of place to mention here that the preamble to the Treaty of Versailles raised great hopes in the minds of the workers of the world. . . . The seamen are a special class of workers . . . it is they who give life to the shipping industry, and advance the cause of national and international trade. . . . There is no housing accommodation provided in ports for seamen either by the employers or the Government. . . . There is no welfare work among seamen.”

*Memorandum of the Indian Seamen's Union, Calcutta.*

“The poverty among Indian seamen is largely the outcome of the usury which is practised by the boarding-house keepers who advance money at an extortionate rate of interest.”

*Memorandum of the British India Steam Navigation Company.*

## JOINING THE SHIP

LEANING his arms on the low wall, Satish Chandra watched the gang planks hauled up and the ship move slowly out into midstream. With her went his hopes, and he felt bereft and forlorn. Early that morning he and ten companions from his village near Sylhet had arrived at Sealdah station with the serang<sup>1</sup> Moti Lal who had been to collect in his village an engine room crew for a ship bound for China. At the shipping office the Chief Engineer was present and looked them over. He passed them one by one, but when he came to Satish Chandra he paused and said: “That man is not strong enough. He would never

<sup>1</sup> Overseer of crew.



## CHAPTER IV

## TRAINS, SHIPS AND DOCKYARDS

## PART II

“It may not be out of place to mention here that the preamble to the Treaty of Versailles raised great hopes in the minds of the workers of the world. . . . The seamen are a special class of workers . . . it is they who give life to the shipping industry, and advance the cause of national and international trade. . . . There is no housing accommodation provided in ports for seamen either by the employers or the Government. . . . There is no welfare work among seamen.”

*Memorandum of the Indian Seamen's Union, Calcutta.*

“The poverty among Indian seamen is largely the outcome of the usury which is practised by the boarding-house keepers who advance money at an extortionate rate of interest.”

*Memorandum of the British India Steam Navigation Company.*

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## FROM GENOA TO CALCUTTA

In 1920, the International Labour Conference, meeting at Genoa, discussed the methods by which Satish Chandra and his fellow seamen obtained their jobs on board ship. Joining a ship was recognised as being less straightforward than entering a mill gate. In many countries there were middlemen between the seaman and the ship's officers under whom he eventually served, and each of the middlemen exacted a price for assisting him to join the ship. As in the case of the factories in India the only way to get work was to buy the right to work, to pay to push between the legs of a straddling Apollyon. Following this Genoa conference the Government of India in 1921 appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Mr. A. G. Clow, to investigate the recruitment and conditions of work of seamen in Calcutta and Bombay. The *Gazette* of India on May 27th, 1922, published the resolutions of this committee, preceded by the following statement :

“The committee have presented a unanimous report in which they find that the present system of recruiting seamen through licensed brokers or private brokers has resulted in grave abuses. After taking legal opinion the Government of India have decided to treat as confidential the first three paragraphs of the report which describe the system and the abuses to which it is liable. The committee are unanimously of the opinion that this system has led to grave abuses which no mere amendment of detail would satisfactorily remove. They have come to the conclusion that it is imperatively necessary to introduce an entirely new system which does not involve the employment of intermediaries. The committee point out that this can only be effected by the organisation of employment bureaux.” The committee went on to recommend two alternative forms of employment bureaux, one managed jointly by shipping companies and seamen, the other by



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representatives were unanimous in the view that there had been no improvement since 1922; on the other hand the Shipping Masters and the shipping companies were of opinion that whilst bribery in recruitment had not altogether disappeared, it was by no means serious. . . . The present system does not seem to us to be designed to remove one of the basic causes of bribery, viz., the large volume of unemployment among seamen. So long as this remains, the temptation to offer a bribe is not likely to be diminished and, quite apart from its connection with bribery, the reduction of unemployment appears to be essential if labour in this industry is to be placed on a satisfactory footing."

#### BACK IN PORT

Satish Chandra came up from the stoke hole and leaned his arms on the railing of the lower deck, watching the banks of the Hoogli slipping past him. His thoughts went back over the voyage that was nearly over. He had already decided to go on with seafaring life. He had found a certain satisfaction in working as a member of a crew. It was true that at first, as he was a "last minute" man and did not come from the same "country,"<sup>1</sup> it was not easy to get on with his companions or his serang. But in time he had fitted in, and sailing to strange countries had widened his horizon so that he was no longer so dependent on his village point of view. The discipline of a ship's crew was new to him, but he accepted it as necessary and found no reason for making trouble. The certainty of food and wages and the sea air had made him much stronger, and he no longer looked back with regret to his work on the fields.

As he leaned on the rail he overheard two of the deck hands talking above him: "Every voyage after he is paid off, there is trouble for the poor lascar. It is not like

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and next day he returned, and every day for a week, but nothing happened. He found a lodging with another man from the Sylhet district in a "lathi" or boarding-house that was dark and damp and evil smelling. For sharing a room with three others he had to pay a year's rent in advance, and not having ready money he had to borrow from a Kabuli<sup>1</sup> money-lender who always seemed to be hanging round the neighbourhood of the lathi. The Kabuli, finding he was a first voyage man, charged him at the rate of 150 per cent. interest for the loan. The interest, no less than the charge for his rent and food, seemed to Satish Chandra exorbitant but there appeared to be no alternative. During the weeks of waiting he saw men driven desperate by hunger, paying large sums as bribes to the serangs, bribes for which they had to borrow from the Kabulis. He too felt desperate, hating the serangs for their power, hating the Kabulis for their strangling hold on him, and not liking to face going back home until he had earned some money. At last one day he ran into Moti Lal on his way to the shipping office. His uncle took him on at once, and this time he was passed by the Chief Engineer without any difficulty. After receiving his month's wages he was able to pay the interest to the Kabuli on his debt for six months in advance. But this time he sailed away with a heavy heart, for not only had he this debt hanging over him, but he could send nothing home to his family as he had promised.

On the vital question of unemployment among seamen the Commission make the following recommendations :

"The primary need is the elimination of surplus seamen until a stage is reached when the numbers are such that, on the one hand all the reasonable needs of the industry are satisfied, and on the other, capable seamen are assured of reasonable regularity of employment. . . . We recommend that beginning as soon as possible no fresh continuous

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at any one time, leaving 97,000 men unemployed.<sup>1</sup> The Shipping Master told the Commission that he had made an attempt to check the recruitment of seamen in view of the unemployment among them, with the result that he had reduced the numbers enrolled annually from 10,000 a year to 5,500. He also stated that unemployment was most serious among the senior ratings, who stayed in Calcutta in hopes of getting a job. To what extent the ordinary seaman went home to his village when unemployed, it was not known.

It was certain however that a large number of men like Satish Chandra were waiting for work in Calcutta, and getting into the clutches of the money-lender. No housing was provided for them, and they were equally at the mercy of boarding-house keepers who charged exorbitant prices, and of money-lenders who charged exorbitant interest on loans to meet those prices. In 1927 the Bombay Social Service League made a survey of the situation among seamen in that port, a report which gives a very vivid picture of their difficulties and helplessness. The problem in Calcutta is much more extensive and as yet very little known, and there is urgent need for a survey of the situation there, following up the disclosures made to the Commission on bribery, unemployment, indebtedness, and bad housing, all of which are inter-related.

In addition to such an inquiry, however, there is urgent need for a welfare institute for Indian seamen, on the lines of the Seamen's Institutes in other countries, which have been initiated by social service agencies. The majority of Indian seamen, having no one permanent employer, have therefore no one with any personal sense of responsibility for their welfare when they are not at sea. Without their families they are peculiarly exposed to all the risks and pitfalls of unemployment in a great

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### AROUND THE DOCKS

A day spent in and around the docks in a big port like Calcutta will reveal the fact that a great many workers are connected with the shipping industry beside those who navigate the ships, whether ocean-going or on inland waters. The group of workers known as "dock labour" include a variety of workers, doing every kind of job from carrying coal on to the ships, to loading and unloading cargo, running light railways and plying ferry boats. The dock areas in the ports are under the Port Commissioners who are themselves big employers of labour. In Calcutta, dock workers may be employed by the Port Commissioners directly, or by Messrs. Bird and Company, who are a big labour contracting firm, or by individual contractors. Dock labour therefore presents not only a variety of occupations but a variety of masters, under whom the conditions of work vary very much.

The Commission found certain conditions among the dock workers which called for action. There was a heavy toll of accidents on the docks, caused by the nature of the work. The docks are not under the Factories Act and therefore there is no inspection of the premises by the factory inspectors. No maternity benefit was being given to the women, about 1,000 in all, who were employed by Messrs. Bird and Co., on the coaling berths, neither was there any provision for leaving their infants in a safe place when they came to work.

In Karachi, the dock labour was entirely under contractors who employ women and children, observing no legal limitation as to the age of the children employed,



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## CHAPTER V

## TONS AND TUBS OF COAL

“Coal is a national asset.”—*Coalfields Committee.*

“One of the first essentials of a prosperous and successful mining industry is a prosperous, contented and plentiful labour force to work the mines.”

*The Chairman, Royal Commission on Labour in India.*

## A MOVIE AT THE MINES

DARKNESS fell on the mining settlement, hiding the ugly slag heaps, the gaunt hoists, the criss-cross rails, the barren blackened earth. In the open space behind the railway trucks a canvas sheet had been erected and thither the miners came by twos and threes from the “lines” to squat in a compact square, awaiting the pictures. A few miners, late up from the pit, arrived with their lanterns and stood on the outskirts of the crowd leaning on their picks. The chief picture of the evening was a film of Calcutta. In a silence betokening the unknown and the undesired, the men watched the temples of the city, the busy thoroughfare of Clive Street, the Victoria Memorial, Government House and all the grandeur of the city slip along before their eyes. The scene shifted to the docks where a liner was berthed. Up the sloping planks men and women carried baskets of coal from a coal barge to an opening in the ship’s hold. A close up of the barge and the coal carriers was flashed on. Instantly a great shout rose from the crowd. “Look, look, it is coal. Look, our coal.” The silence was broken by an incessant chatter-



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work in the mines. It is, as elsewhere in India, an unwilling exodus to the mines, an unwilling exchange of the plough for the pick. The men of the field and the forest are not only reluctant to take up work in the mines because of the nature of the work. They hate most of all bartering their birthright of independence for a mess of rice. Running through the written and oral evidence given to the Commission was a current of comment, sometimes of surprise, sometimes of grudging acceptance, about the independence of the miners. The following statement of the Government of Bengal was typical: "Miners are very independent and turn out to work just when and as often as they like. They certainly do not consider their collieries nor do they worry about any loss in wages."

Other factors enter into the reluctance of the Santals and others to settle permanently round the mines and divorce themselves from their accustomed way of living. The arduous physical toil, the long hours spent underground, the unattractive life in the mining settlement—all these make the miner cling to his village connections. But the point round which employers, inspectors of mines and all concerned with the industry revolve continually is this independence to which the miner clings, and which has its effect on his work, his health and his general efficiency. His birthright of independence: what place has it in a modern industrial system? The India Mining Association stated it thus in their memorandum:

"The Indian miner is primarily an agriculturist and only mines coal when it suits him to do so. In the Jharia coalfield he comes from distant villages, settles at the colliery for short periods at a time, leaves from time to time to attend to his agricultural concerns, and returns to the colliery when it suits him. In the Raniganj field many of the miners live within walking distance of the mines. They usually work at their mines for a few days at a time, and then return to their homes to give attention to their agricultural affairs."



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## TONS AND TUBS OF COAL

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of the output. The raising contractor receives a fixed payment per ton, in return for which he recruits the workers, mines the coal and loads it into wagons. . . . We believe that, whatever the merits of the system in more primitive times, it is now desirable, if the management is to discharge the complex responsibilities laid upon it by the law and by equity, that the manager should have full control over the selection, hours of work and payment of the workers. On all grounds, we recommend the gradual supersession of the raising contractor as such.

“If the raising contractor is eliminated, it will ordinarily be necessary to strengthen the management in order to carry out the functions he performed. . . . We recommend that in every mine there should be a salaried officer directly responsible to the management for the supervision of labour both in and outside the mine.”

This appointment of a Labour Officer, important as it is from the point of view of recruiting, will appear even more essential to the welfare of the workers after some insight into the conditions of work at the mines.

### AFRAID TO GO UNDERGROUND

Standing by a railway truck near the shaft of the mine were two men, Sobhi and Ledou. They told the Commission: “Both of us are loaders, working on the surface. We have never worked underground and we do not want to work underground. *We are afraid of accidents.*”

To an agricultural worker this fear of working underground because of accidents is as natural as the fear of a complicated machine in a factory. The earlier coal mines in India were what are known as open mines, or quarries, in which the coal seam was approached by an incline from the surface and the coal quarried in daylight. As the surface coal was cut away, shafts were sunk and deep mining became more common, necessitating a “cage” for descending



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work for some time before they are allowed to work at the coal face. When permitted to work at the coal face, they are made to work under a skilled miner for a number of years before they are considered competent to take charge of a working place. . . . In India a cultivator is allowed to start coal-cutting on his first day in a mine. Safety at a working place depends to a great extent on the skill and experience of the miner himself, and many accidents result from the employment of unskilled miners. . . . The miners recruited from the uneducated classes do not realise the risk of dangers to which they sometimes expose themselves. A comparatively large staff of trained men is maintained at most mines to look after the safety of miners, but conditions at a working place change rapidly and the danger cannot be entirely obviated in this manner."

On this most important question of safety and prevention of accidents the Commission bear testimony to the value of the inspectors' work and make the following suggestions :

"In the case of coal mines, we think that the presence in the mine at certain times of excessive numbers also increases the accident rate, and that a better level of individual output, with shorter hours, better disciplined working and better health among the workers, will all tend to lessen the incidence."

### TUBS, TUBS, TUBS

At the end of a narrow passage in the mine a lantern made a little circle of light. On either side of the lantern was a miner, with his pick beside him, one of them fast asleep with his head on his arm. The other man picked up the lantern and went to the end of the lead which opened into a wider passage. He bent low as if listening to something. Then he went back and shook the other



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which is divided between the miner and whoever carries the coal for him from the working face to the tubs. The contractor being paid by the truck load, tries to make the miner overload the tubs so that he may profit. If he has to pay for fewer tub loads, then he gains on the payment per truck. The miners do not believe they can be assured of fair play unless they see before them one or two tubs which they can fill at their own speed, and they will not as a rule begin to work unless they see those trucks before them on the loading line. All the miners who were interviewed by the Commission reiterated the demand for more tubs and for better arrangements for their clearance. The way in which they expressed their demands made it quite clear that they believed that those who were over them were in some way doing them out of their lawful earnings.

Two to three tubs a day represent the average amount which a miner can fill with his loader if he works a full shift. The average payment is approximately 7 annas per tub. There are a variety of circumstances however, which militate against the miner earning a regular wage, some of which are quite outside his control. Difficult working places, long leads, stone and shale in the coal, varying sizes of tubs (107 collieries use two or more sizes of tubs)—these in addition to the shortage of tubs are all circumstances adverse to the miners and their earnings.

The Commission make the following suggestions on the questions of the supply of tubs and the earnings of the miners :

“The shortage might be partially remedied by better organisation so as to enable each tub to be filled more often than at present. We suggest to mine-owners that, even at a cost of increased expenditure, an adequate supply of tubs, properly distributed, is essential to efficient working. At present, attention is apt to be concentrated on the question of the gross output, without



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which is divided between the miner and whoever carries the coal for him from the working face to the tubs. The contractor being paid by the truck load, tries to make the miner overload the tubs so that he may profit. If he has to pay for fewer tub loads, then he gains on the payment per truck. The miners do not believe they can be assured of fair play unless they see before them one or two tubs which they can fill at their own speed, and they will not as a rule begin to work unless they see those trucks before them on the loading line. All the miners who were interviewed by the Commission reiterated the demand for more tubs and for better arrangements for their clearance. The way in which they expressed their demands made it quite clear that they believed that those who were over them were in some way doing them out of their lawful earnings.

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mine, they do not work more than four or five days in the week. When they are actually down the mine they do not always, some managers would say never, do a full day's work, taking time off for rest or sleep or as the shortage of tubs dictates.

This independent, irregular habit of working has its origin in the former conditions on the coal mines, conditions which existed until so recently that it is not at all surprising that irregularity is still the rule rather than the exception. Prior to the Mines Act of 1923, there was no statutory regulation of hours. The miner, his wife, and family came to the mine, often from a distance; went underground, father, mother and children; worked, rested, slept, ate, and perhaps stayed for twenty-four hours on end. When they had cut enough coal they departed to their village for a few days before they repeated the operation. This spasmodic mining they carried on for about half the month, camping in the huts or houses provided by the mine when they were not underground. The Mines Act of 1923, prompted by the Washington International Labour Conference, came as a rude awakening to this system accepted alike by employers and workers. Inspired by international labour standards the Act forbade children under 13 to go underground, and limited the hours of work underground to 54 per week and above ground to 66, without specifying the number per day. By the amending Act of 1928 women were prohibited from working underground, to take effect gradually over a period of 10 years, and the maximum number of hours to be spent by any worker underground at one time was limited to 12. Thus within the last few years the primitive happy-go-lucky system of working the mines was destroyed, and the framework laid for a modern industrial system.

The employers under the new regime found themselves bound by legislation which they did not want and to which many of them had objected very strongly. The comments on the Mines Acts in the press during the



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The employers under the new regime found themselves bound by legislation which they did not want and to which many of them had objected very strongly. The comments on the Mines Acts in the press during the



last eight or nine years showed that employers in general had little sympathy with their object and resented the interference of the State. The other side of the story can be read in the annual reports of the Chief Inspector of Mines and in the debates on the Mines Acts in the Legislative Assembly. The Chief Inspector and his staff have been unwavering in their determination to safeguard the workers by protective legislation. It was a determination also to reduce order out of chaos, a chaos which, while appearing to humour the independence of the miner, in reality put more and more power into the hands of the employers, owing to the fact that the efficiency of the worker was not advanced one whit. The protagonists of protective legislation believed that under its shelter the workers would progress in every way, in efficiency, in health, in security, and even towards some level of bargaining with the employers.

It is nothing less than a transition of considerable magnitude and importance which is taking place in the coal mines at this moment. The employers had adapted themselves over a period of years to the irregular, inefficient ways of working practised by the "farmer-miners," as the Bengal Government called them. The present legislative restrictions on hours of work and the gradual exclusion of women from underground working call for a new attitude on the part both of employers and of workers. Employers have to consider in the first place how to hold their workers under the new restrictions, and in the second place how to get enough output from them when the hours of work are restricted and they can no longer work to their own time. There was much in the present conditions of mining that was found by the Commission to be adverse to the best interests of the miners. These conditions, such as the 12-hour shift, the low and irregular wages, the payment of wages on the rest day, the unattractive surroundings of the settlements, were excused by the managements in giving evidence to the Commission on



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the ground that the miners were agriculturists first and miners second, and that therefore mining conditions did not affect them too seriously. Under the new regime which has already caused some adjustments in the industry, employers will be forced to make further adjustments and to regard the workers as miners first and foremost. They will no longer be able to excuse the postponement of improvements by sheltering behind the workers' two faces.

It was clear in the evidence to the Commission that while the employers had already "sized up" the new regime, no attempts had been made to prepare the workers for it, or to explain the new legislation to them. For the introduction of shifts and the gradual exclusion of women, with the consequent direct effects on the incomes of the miners—for these fundamental changes no one had prepared them in any way. In order to ensure sufficient output for the mines, and in order to earn enough to feed their families, the miners will be obliged to work more regularly and earn more wages. Yet to meet this new situation they have no new equipment and no new knowledge. They are still the independence-loving village men of the aboriginal tribes, illiterate and ignorant of western ways, wholly unprepared for the new world of shifts, registers, regular output and discipline into which they have been plunged by the signing of laws in the Legislature at Delhi.

The definite regulation of hours by shifts is perhaps the most drastic of the changes in the new regime from the point of view of the miner and his ways. Evidence was given to the Commission that in certain mines this had already been tried with good success. At Lodna colliery in the Jharia coalfield a system of two shifts per day with an interval of two hours between has been in force since 1928. This mine is an old established one, 65 per cent. of whose labour force is settled on the mine, and machine drills are used. During the interval between



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shifts full tubs are raised and empty ones put ready for the incoming shift. "The miners quickly realised the benefit of the system, and now they prefer it to their old haphazard methods."

The gradual exclusion of women working underground affects both the home life and the working incomes of the miners. It was striking that at this point, when such a radical change for the whole community was involved, the evidence before the Commission showed that no attempt had been made by the employers to envisage the new situation, nor to prepare the miners and their wives for the changes about to come. Most of the workers interviewed by the Commission were not aware of the coming changes. Two miners told them :

"I was not aware that women in future were to be excluded from work in the mines. Will Government feed the women when they are excluded ?"

"We do not know that a law has been passed which will prevent women from working underground. If our women are excluded from working underground, how can we live ?"

These two extracts show the apprehension about his economic future which was felt by the miners, immediately the new situation was put before them. It takes little imagination to picture the consternation and discussion which went on among the families in the settlement as this news spread. The Commission pursued this subject further when interviewing the Chairman and Medical Officer of the Jharia Mines Board of Health.

"Do you think that by better organisation in the mine he could so increase his earnings without overworking as to make up for the wage of the woman?—I do not think he could, except by improvements in the technique of mining. Unless improvements come from outside, his own physical capacity for raising coal will not be so strengthened as to make up for the loss. It may be that the wage will go up on account of the limitation of labour ;



There being fewer men the employers may be compelled to offer higher wages. It is impossible for the miner working alone to raise sufficient coal under existing conditions and earn wages sufficient to maintain himself and his family. The woman must be absorbed in some other trade; she must work and contribute to the family earnings. That is the problem that we have to consider; it remains unsolved. By eliminating women from working underground we have not given the miner a home, which ultimately is intended. That means that there is a greater responsibility both upon the employer, the public and the Government to find such occupations for women who have been eliminated as would enable them to earn sufficient, simultaneously giving the miner a house where he can rest, otherwise he would take to gambling and drink, having no home at all."

The Commission have certain comments to make on the causes of irregularity of working in the mines. They also make some recommendations in view of the new situation with regard to the enforcement of shifts and the exclusion of women from underground:

"So far as working time is concerned, the principal aim should be greater regularity. . . . Greater regularity of work would be to the immediate advantage both of employers and employed. . . . We can put forward no panacea which will effect a revolution in the present irregular methods of work; but there are directions along which progress is possible. In the first place irregular attendance is associated with long working days. . . . The shortening of hours appears essential if greater regularity of attendance is to be secured.

"A second factor, which has some influence on the regularity of work, is the consumption of intoxicating liquor. The extent of the present evil may be gauged from the following figures, which relate solely to the colliery areas of the Dhanbad sub-division. In 1928 the average number of male persons employed in coal mines



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in that sub-division was about 55,000. When allowance is made for the consumption of intoxicating drugs in other forms, the total expenditure on drink and drugs in that year cannot have been less than Rs. 1,000,000. . . . We would emphasise here the harm done, particularly to the aboriginal population by the sale of spirits, and the loss in efficiency for which drink is responsible on the coal fields.

“The whole case for and against a shorter daily limit was examined with care by the Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly, which considered the Bill in 1928. The members of that Committee were agreed that the 8 hour shift is the system towards which advance should be directed. But for reasons given in their report, the Committee decided to adhere to the twelve-hour shift, recommending to Government that after the Act had been in force for three years (i.e., in three years after April, 1930), the situation should again be examined to see whether an 8 hour shift could then be introduced. . . . The smooth working of the statutory system of shifts combined with other changes recently introduced, will not be an easy task either for the industry or for the administration. . . . We endorse the recommendation of the Select Committee.

“We have two further recommendations to make. The weekly hours of work above ground should be reduced to 54, the limit suggested in the case of perennial factories. . . . We also recommend that employers should make experiments during the period available to them before the further reduction of the daily limit is made. In particular we would like to see the possibilities of 10 and 9 hour shifts explored as well as the more usual 8 hour shift.”

## PRESERVING HIS PHYSIQUE

To meet the new regime in the mining industry the miner has one asset, and one only, and that is his physical



strength. As we have seen, he has little previous skill, and no knowledge of mining, and a haphazard method of working. He has however a good heritage from a hardy stock, and with this one asset he comes to the mines to wield a pick. The Commission say in general terms of the health of mine workers :

“Both among men and women the physique is generally good, this being specially true of the Santals and Bilaspuris. . . . The satisfactory physique of the Santals is attributed to a better dietary and to the fact that they return regularly, often every week-end to their village homes. Other groups who lived more permanently in the mining areas presented a much less healthy appearance and a distinctly lower grade of physique.”

It is evident that the new regime is going to depend upon a larger output per head of the individual miners. The Commission conclude their chapter on mines by a reference to this question of a larger output, in terms of the health and standards of life of the miners. There is a very close connection between these two factors, and this opinion of the Commission should be carefully weighed and studied :

“In India, minerals and especially coals are so disposed that a large output per head should be possible. Such output is not obtained, nor can workers with a low standard of life be expected to produce it. Improvement in the standards and efficiency of the workers will solve many of the difficulties of the mining employer and must be secured by better health, shorter and more regular hours and more mechanical assistance.”

This increased output, therefore, for which everyone is looking, hinges on the physique of the miner, and on his being able to preserve that physique under the new regime of more regular hours, greater application to work, and stricter discipline. At present it is clear, as the Commission stated in the first of the two extracts quoted above, that it is the periodical departure to his village



which maintains the Santal's standard of health. The Chief Inspector of Mines confirmed this in his evidence :

“I think the present system by which the Indian coal miner goes away preserves his physique. He goes away for a period of rest and recuperation and that keeps him fit and well. To be dependent wholly on coal cutting for his living would probably adversely affect his physique until better conditions were given. I suggest that the conditions should be improved until they are such that all the year round work in the mines will not be harmful to him.”

What are those conditions which would adversely affect the health of the miner if he stayed in the mining settlement all the year round ?

The Santals owe that good physique, which is their primary asset, to good heredity, strict habits of living in the villages, and healthy outdoor life. Shut them up for twelve hours a day without sunlight and in vitiated air and their strength is greatly reduced. Deep mines are not easy to ventilate. The air may at times be cooler than the air outside, but it is sluggish in its circulation, the fumes of the gunpowder used for blasting hang about, and in most mines there is a very great humidity. The Chief Inspector in his annual report for 1927 pointed out that in many mines the air is practically saturated with moisture, to the extent that the mere effort of walking causes profuse perspiration. To hack at coal with a heavy pick, or to carry baskets of coal weighing 60 lbs. and over in such an atmosphere is to become exhausted after a very short period of work. In addition to the bad air and humidity underground, sanitation in most mines is entirely lacking. The Government of Bihar and Orissa say in their memorandum : “The sweepers' work underground is without exception inefficient owing to the lack of arrangements for the removal of night soil. There are no latrines underground.” Besides fouling the air, this lack of sanitation causes the soil to be impregnated



with hookworm, which infects the miners through their feet. This exposure to infection continues all the time they are in the mine, while the eating of food underground is an additional source of infection.

Working underground the miner's fine physique is being undermined just as steadily as the coal he works on. Above ground the food which keeps him going depends on what he can earn below. The Chief Inspector said in his evidence to the Commission: "If the miner were paid more money, you could get more work out of him; he would be able to work harder because he would feed himself better." Diet, therefore, in the sense of enough good and appetising food, is the pivot on which the physique of the miner under present conditions turns, and that pivot turns in *its* turn on the wages earned by the miners. It is a most vicious circle. Its consideration demands the "long view," and in order to break it there is need for forethought and study and welfare work of the right kind.

The return to the villages is considered the most important means of preserving the miner's physique. There is however an extensive scheme of preventive health work carried out by the Mines Boards of Health in Jharia and Asansol. The Commission say of their activities:

"These Boards are composed of officials, non-officials and representatives of the mineowners and royalty receivers. Both Boards have been remarkably successful in their main task. Not only have health organisations been built up to deal with the prevention of diseases, but medical arrangements have been improved, sanitation controlled and the question of housing of labour has also received considerable attention. In addition the Jharia Water Board, especially constituted for the purpose, has been able to provide a large and permanent protected water supply which is now distributed over more than two-thirds of the area under its control. These are admirable achievements for which the mineowners must be given credit,



the whole cost having been met from self-imposed cesses on owners and receivers of royalties."

On the question of the relation of housing to health, the Commission in their report write thus of the housing in the mining areas :

"Housing for all resident labour is generally provided rent free by the companies, but certain classes of workers prefer to live in their own villages and may walk considerable distances to and from their work. Provided the distance is not too great, this mode of life has many advantages; there can be no comparison between the Santal villages seen by us and some of the depressing lines of dhowrahs<sup>1</sup> built on mine properties. . . . Many of the lines leave much room for improvement. The arched dhowrahs, although possibly cool in the hot weather, are often dark and ill-ventilated and few are fitted with windows. The single room, 10 x 10, serves as kitchen, store room, living and sleeping room. As cooking must be done either in the room or in the arched verandah in front, and ventilation is usually defective, the inner walls quickly become coated with smoke and soot. When dhowrahs are erected back to back, as is sometimes the case, these defects are further aggravated. The classes from which the miners are drawn are accustomed to build their village homes neither in long lines nor in rows of rooms arranged back to back; on the contrary each has its individual hut with a small enclosed space which ensures some degree of privacy. . . . We consider that in all new houses both a window and roof ventilation should be provided.

"Sanitary arrangements in the mines housing areas are by no means satisfactory. Latrine accommodation is inadequate and there is room for an increase in bathing and washing places near the lines, most of the population using surface tanks for this purpose. Even if the provision of washing and bathing places in individual houses is not

<sup>1</sup> Houses in mining settlements, generally built of concrete.



practicable, it should be possible to extend the practice of certain employers who have built simple structures for such purposes in the vicinity of each block of houses. Fitted with taps and provided with drains to remove foul water, these would add greatly to the amenities of life for the miner."

## HIS CUSTOM FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL

A new regime in the mining industry, laws and regulations instead of haphazard working, what is this but the gradual crystallising of a modern industrial system? The employers see it coming, they weigh the advantages and disadvantages, they discuss its probable effects on the industry at their employers' association meetings. They understand it; they can prepare for it; they see in coal-mining as a "scientific industry" the chance of greater and more steady profits once the necessary adjustments have been made. These adjustments may mean that Ledou, who works on the surface because he is afraid to go underground, will be required to work regularly for five days of ten hours each, with a half-day on Saturday. That will mean that he cannot go every week-end to his village eighteen miles away, and get back in time on Monday. Will he come and live permanently in a dhowrah, or will he give up coal mining? The adjustment may mean also that Parbhu and Jiwan in their lead can no longer work as they please and wait all day for tubs. They must cut a regular amount of coal each shift, or they will be dismissed and other more regular workers found to replace them.

What equipment have Ledou and Parbhu and Jiwan for the new regime? Where are their plans to meet it? How can they estimate its result on their incomes?

To meet these new conditions Ledou and Parbhu and Jiwan have their physical strength (which is being undermined), their independence (which is being threatened)



and the result of a policy which the Indian Mining Association described as "leaving the miner to look after his own welfare in accordance with his custom from time immemorial."

Is it expected that the immemorial custom of village tribesmen will adapt itself naturally to an industrial regime? Will it break under the strain of adaptation, and all the valuable habits and the links with the village community be lost, while drink and gambling become a vain effort to forget the drab existence of a miner? Will the Santal's sturdy love of independence be driven underground to break out again in hatred of the employer and capitalist who controls his destiny? Like the invisible fire-damp in the mine which seeps unnoticed through the coal and bursts into explosion when ignited by a spark, so the desires and aspirations and grievances of the miners collect unseen in the new situation. With what result? The difficulty, and the danger, of the present psychological situation is that there is no ventilating process which is blowing out into the open the desires and aspirations and the grievances of the miners. If the miners were educated and could assess the value of their village life and tribal customs, and weigh them against possible economic gain from working at the mines, then they would be in a position to bargain with those who have work to offer. As it is, no one, not even a Santal himself, knows the value of what he stands to lose by becoming an industrialist; and no one, least of all the Santal himself, knows what he stands to gain.

Looking at the future of the industry, life at the mining settlement for those obliged to leave their villages cannot be regarded only in terms of health, housing and hours of work. The miners have desires and aspirations which must find expression in leisure and the opportunity to use that leisure in genuine recreation. The Santal song, the Santal dance, their love of wrestling, their art of building, their village government, their festivals—all these should



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have a recognised place in their new homes if they are to be anything more than places of exile.

With the exception of the Giridih area there are very few schools in the mining area, and most of them are poorly attended. The attendance and the interest shown appears to depend on the encouragement given by the manager. The Chief Inspector of Mines in his annual report for 1929 remarking on the fact that the number of schools in the Jharia coalfield had fallen from 99 in 1927 to 88 in 1929 said: "It is regrettable that although children were excluded from the mines as long ago as 1924 there has been yet no concerted movement for bringing into force the provisions of the Bihar and Orissa Primary Education Act of 1919 in the Jharia coalfield." The Commission found one or two places where there was evidence of a demand for education on the part of the miners, and one where they were actually clubbing together to obtain education for their children by paying for a teacher themselves. At the Jamadoba Colliery, significantly the one where machine cutting and higher wages were found, the manager told the Commission: "The miners have started a school on their own initiative. We have purposely not helped them with it. This effort shows a desire on the miners' part for the education of their children."

In studying the following recommendations made by the Commission for welfare and education, the emphasis already laid by them on the need for improving general conditions in the industry should be remembered:

"In order that no doubt may arise as to the functions which the Board (of Health) may legitimately assume, we recommend that the Mining Settlement Acts, which provide for the control and sanitation of these areas in Bihar and in Bengal, should be amended accordingly and that the Boards be renamed Boards of Health and Welfare. We also recommend that the Boards should be enlarged so as to give further representation to employers,



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and each should include representatives of the workers, chosen where possible in consultation with them, and at least one woman.

“We believe that another activity of the Boards of Health and Welfare should be co-operation with the Government in improving and extending educational facilities. . . . In view of the fact that children have been excluded from the mines since 1924 and as alternative employment for even the older children is scarce, we would press for the introduction of compulsory primary education in the coalfields.”

### A SENSE OF MUTUAL OBLIGATION

The recommendations of the Commission involve the appointment of “representatives of the workers” to two very important bodies, the Mining Boards (when determining the minimum wage), and the Boards of Health and Welfare. Such appointments are a foreshadowing of modern industrial organisation among the miners. At present that organisation is in a very elementary stage. The Indian Colliery Employees’ Association, the only trade union among the miners, numbered at the time of the Commission’s visit about 2,000 members, of whom 1,500 were miners and the rest from the clerical staff. In addition to the obvious practical difficulties of organisation among workers scattered over a wide area, a more fundamental problem is that of convincing the miners that combination will forward their interests. Their love of independence does not readily lend itself to uniting illiterate people, and his appeal for subscriptions falls on deaf ears when wages are already barely at subsistence level.

The mineowners on their side are organised in two groups, the Indian Mining Association which includes all the European firms and some Indian firms, and the



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Indian Mining Federation which is entirely Indian. To meet the changes of the new regime therefore they have their associations in which policies can be discussed and the interests of the industry safeguarded. What is going to happen to the miners and their interests? How are they going to safeguard their independence? What will be the future in the Indian mining industry in relations between employers and workers? The outcome will depend on the way in which the situation outlined in this chapter is met by the employers and the public. If "coal is a national asset," then the welfare of the coal miners is a public concern. To uphold and to carry out the recommendations of the Commission will make a demand on public interest and public support if a "prosperous, contented and plentiful labour force is to work the mines." The alternative is a grim conflict.



## CHAPTER VI

## TEA PLANTING AND PICKING

“Tea gardens like other industrial establishments must depend on offering sufficient attractions in order to maintain their labour force. The emigrant must be convinced that Assam holds out the opportunities of a better life than is open to him in his home land. If he is not convinced, nothing else will secure a flow of immigrants; if he is convinced it will be difficult to keep him away.”—*Report of the Commission.*

## MIGRATION OR DISAPPEARANCE ?

KIRODHAN, a lad of fifteen, had vanished from the village of Rampur. A harassed deputation from the village waited on the District Officer and told him their fears thus: “Sahib, my sister’s son, Kirodhan, has gone. Three days ago that accursed Sham Kamar was in our village speaking to the young men about the tea garden in Assam where he works. None would listen to him for they know the tales of the gardens, how everything is good before they go, and then when they are gone they are lost for ever. It is a fearful place; it eats the people. And now behold Kirodhan who was the joy of my sister has been snatched away, and we fear he too has been eaten up in that country and we shall never see him again. For if he tries to come home they will shut him up and watch him and prevent him. That is the custom there.”

According to the evidence which was supplied to the



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Commission on recruiting for the tea gardens in Assam, the lad Kirodhan was traced to a garden in Sylhet and returned to his native village. Such practices of kidnapping minors and obtaining recruits by other fraudulent means are, happily, no longer of frequent occurrence. They are now a very occasional survival from the bad days of the past. Nevertheless wherever they occur they give added force to the unpopularity of recruiting for Assam. The Government of India thus expressed the general opinion about this recruiting: "Recruitment for Assam has always been regarded with disfavour by Indian public opinion, and the attitude of the Legislature has been anything but friendly towards the tea industry. This is partly due to the *mystery* which generally surrounds the gardens in Assam which are difficult of access, and also partly to the low wages paid." The Government of Bihar and Orissa said in their evidence to the Commission: "The fact that a man has gone to Assam or 'Bhutan' is regarded as synonymous with his total disappearance. To aborigines Assam is still very far away."

The mystery and remoteness of Assam is felt not only by the aborigines. To the dweller on the plains of India, to the ordinary traveller, there is a sense of having left the civilised world behind when he crosses the great river and travels on the single track railway which pushes its iron path through the virgin forest and tracts of elephant grass. It is a "new country," with great possibilities ahead, but as yet geographically remote and industrially apart from the rest of India.

Ninety years ago, in 1840, the pioneer tea company, the Assam Company, bought the first tea plantation and began to cultivate the wild tea which had been discovered in great quantities on the lower hill slopes and in the valley of Upper Assam. Thirteen years later the importation of workers for the gardens began. The indigenous Assamese could not be persuaded to leave their farms and villages to work on the gardens, and there were few



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landless labourers to be found in the province. A pioneer planter thus describes the recruitment of the early days, about 1860: "Coolies were recruited from depots in Calcutta. . . . One could go to any of these depots and select the coolies. It was like buying animals, and smacked a good deal like slavery in the U.S.A. The coolies were put under five year indentures, the pay for the men being Rs.5 and for women Rs.4 per month for a full day's work." It should be added that these contracts contained penal provisions, and that workers who attempted to run away, or "abscond," before their term was finished, were punished with imprisonment. They were virtually imprisoned either on the gardens or in the gaols.

### A FREE FLOW OF LABOUR

The dominant factor in the labour situation on the tea gardens in Assam from 1870 to the present day has been the shortage of labour. The system of indentured labour for the plantations was controlled from 1870 onwards by a series of Government restrictions which increased by means of progressive legislation. These restrictions, which were intended to prevent fraud in recruitment and to protect the recruited workers, operated also in the direction of preventing a free flow of labour to the gardens. This free flow was further curtailed by the general dislike and fear of Assam prevalent in the recruiting areas as a legacy from the bad days when abuses were rife. These abuses are seen to-day in the light of the inquiries made by the League of Nations on forced labour in different parts of the world. The public inquiries have shown that forced labour invariably results in great unpopularity for the area and the work dependent on it. Indentured labour with penal provisions for breaking the contract has much the same result. In the history of recruitment for Assam, given in detail in the evidence to the Commission,



there is apparent throughout a dislike and fear of Assam which can be traced to the former conditions of indentured labour with penal provisions for "absconding," and the right of private arrest which was allowed to the managers of the gardens.

Over a period of years the tea industry through its recruiting agency, the Tea Districts Labour Association, has attempted to put its house in order and recruit by honest means. The owners of the gardens realise that the free flow of labour is hampered as much by the outlook of would-be immigrants as by the restrictions imposed by the law.

As the quotation at the head of this chapter indicates, the Commission look to the time when conditions of work on the tea gardens will be such that they in themselves will attract recruits by "offering a better life than is open in his homeland." Only then can a free flow of labour be obtained. The Commission bear the following testimony to the fact that, as far as recruiting is concerned, the tea industry has gone far to put down the former ills :

"The grave abuses of the past, which were largely responsible for the bad name of Assam in the recruiting districts, have been very successfully held in check. The "arkatti", or professional recruiter, who in the days gone by used to boast that in a few moments, by his peculiar methods, he could make anyone "willing" to emigrate to Assam, is now suppressed as soon as he begins his activities. For this the credit is very largely due to the tea industry itself, which has genuinely endeavoured to set its house in order."

### 69,800 EXILES

69,800 workers were admitted to Assam in 1928-9. Most of them had been on the road 15-20 days. They walked from their villages to the recruiting depot where they answered questions and submitted to vaccination.



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Then for the first time in their lives they travelled by train, shrinking back in the railway carriage from contact with strangers. The crossing of the great river, whether at Gauhati or Goalundo was to them the symbol of being cut off completely from their country. Then came the further train journey through the ever-deepening jungle, and the jolting in a motor-lorry up to the garden. What did they expect to find there? Who can say? Probably they themselves least of all. Their uppermost feeling is that of exile from their own country. They go over in their mind the days of walking, the days of train, the great river, the new jungle with its waving elephant grass. They feel caged and imprisoned in the garden. They want to go home and cannot. Their only means of escape is to walk, and that seems impossible to the man from Chattisgarh<sup>1</sup> or Vizagapatam.<sup>2</sup> Some of them find a friendly atmosphere in the garden and special care, shown by extra feeding, when they first arrive. Others find that the sardar's tales were grossly untrue, and on such gardens there is an atmosphere of fear and uneasiness that makes the desire to go home yet stronger.

A large majority of the 69,800 who entered Assam were in family groups. The gardens aim at recruiting families because the workers are more likely to settle permanently on the garden if the whole family comes.<sup>3</sup> The garden sardar, who alone is allowed to recruit workers, in talking to the villagers emphasises chiefly the higher wages to be earned on the gardens and the possibilities of improving their position. The tea garden workers, like the workers going to the mines and factories, are pushed from their villages by necessity. The sardar who recruits them offers them better prospects than they can expect at home. How is it then that the tea gardens are always short of labour?

<sup>1</sup> In the Central Provinces.

<sup>2</sup> In the Madras Presidency.

<sup>3</sup> The sex ratio on the gardens in 1927-8 was 311,887 men to 273,217 women.



Part of the answer will be found in the rest of this chapter which describes the conditions under which they live and work on the gardens. Part of the answer lies in the present restrictions on recruiting which the Commission propose to change, and in the heavy expense of recruiting. Each of the 69,800 immigrants costs on an average Rs. 150 to recruit and bring to the garden. The Commission say in their report: "The high cost of recruitment, which is now inevitable, must react unfavourably on the remuneration of labour." Part of the answer lies too in the fact that the tea gardens annually lose a certain number of their labour, some to work in the oil fields in Assam where the wages are higher, but by far the largest number to take up Government land and become permanent settlers in Assam. The Indian Tea Association in the Assam Valley told the Commission: "We are populating the valley. There are thousands of acres of very good rice land under jungle, virgin land. My experience is that the ambition of the garden coolie is to become a settler on Government land; they try to achieve that ambition as quickly as possible." In the Assam Valley, 316,207 acres have been thus settled, and in the Surma Valley, 48,927 acres.

The Commission propose to abolish the present Assam Labour and Emigration Act. They recommend the withdrawing of all special restrictions on the agencies for obtaining recruits. In the forwarding of recruits to Assam they would leave the control in the hands of the industry's recruiting agencies, giving powers of inspection and, if necessary, of control, to the provincial Governments. They then propose a new measure to safeguard the immigrants:

"We recommend the appointment by the Government of India of an officer in Assam (the Protector of Immigrants) who will look after the interests of emigrants who have not yet decided to make Assam their permanent home. He would be required to keep in touch with the recruiting



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provinces and would have the right to enter any garden to inspect the condition of the workers. . . . It would be the duty of the Protector to advise on all matters connected with the migration of labour to Assam. The Protector should also be entrusted with responsibility for the emigrant during the journey . . . and of ensuring that the emigrant is cognisant of his rights under the law before he reached the garden.”

### IN THE GARDEN OF INDIA

There can be no greater contrast to the outward eye than the factory slum, with its smoky chimneys and ugly buildings and dark alleys, and the open sunny slopes of a tea garden where the shade trees protect bushes and workers and the air is fresh with a wind from the hills. Instead of attending to a machine which is noisy and dirty, the tea garden worker has to hoe and manure the soil and prune the bushes, while his wife plucks the leaf and does the lighter forms of pruning. It sounds an ideal occupation for the man and his family who have had to leave their village and seek work elsewhere. Is it ideal? If not, what would make it so? Many times over it was emphasised to the Commission that managers and sardars on the gardens were judged by the way in which they kept their labour force happy and contented. On some gardens the managers achieve order and contentment. Significantly those gardens do not need to do much recruiting. On some other gardens there would appear to be neither order nor contentment, where chowkidars prevent workers from leaving the gardens and sardars drive them to work.

Ten years ago, in 1921, as a result of serious rioting, leading to a wholesale exodus on some gardens, the Government of India appointed the Assam Labour Inquiry Committee to “inquire into the conditions of coolie labour on the gardens ; to ascertain whether wages were



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adequate in view of the rise in prices; and to make recommendations for improving labour conditions." The study of the Report of this Committee is valuable from two points of view. First, the conditions as described in the Report were in some cases so bad that they throw much light on the present reluctance in the recruiting districts and *these conditions were in existence only 10 years ago*. Secondly, certain definite progressive steps have been taken by the tea industry to put their house in order, and the measure of this progress can be judged by comparing the evidence before the 1921-2 Committee with that before the Commission in 1929-30.

The Committee of 1921 drew attention to three chief aspects of the work on the gardens which were also those mainly emphasised by the Commission. They were the question of wages on the gardens; the freedom of movement of the workers; and the relations of the workers to their employers.

### FAMILY EARNINGS

When Ramswami left Waltair district he was earning 2 annas a day and in busy seasons his wife could earn the same. Their two boys minded the goats and occasionally picked up a few odd pice. The sardar who recruited them for Assam spoke of what seemed to them like fabulous wages and held out the further inducement of land to cultivate and the possibility of saving money to buy cattle. When Ramswami had arrived on the tea garden and settled down the chowkidar came round and told him that he and his wife and the two boys of 11 and 9 were all on the books of the garden and would all be expected to work. After a month or two of getting accustomed to the new life, Ramswami began to take stock of his surroundings. It seemed as though on his garden most things worked by favour. There was very little rice land available and it seemed to be given to workers



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who pleased the manager. It was good rice land and the men could make more money if they worked on the land than if they worked on the garden, but that did not please the manager. He saw, too, that some men were able to get advances from the manager to buy cattle for which they had free grazing. One day in the bazaar he met a man from his own "country" who told him he was going to buy some Government land and make a farm of his own. He had saved money from the earnings of the family, and fulfilled his great ambition to own land for himself so that he would no longer be a coolie but a farmer, and he threw out his chest with pride as he said it.

Ramswami's chief aim was to work in order to live, and therefore possessing rice land and raising his own rice crop appealed to him most of all. To this end all the energies of the family were to be devoted. This aim was strengthened when in the bazaar he heard some older workers telling of the time eight years ago when the wages were cut and the food prices were very high, and there was want and suffering among many families, a number of whom left to go back to their country to die there. Such things might happen again—who could tell? Meantime if he could buy land and get away from the garden and grow his own rice he and his family would be secure if the bad times were to come again.

Wages on the tea gardens are mostly on piece rates. Formerly there was a standard task, the "hazira," for which a fixed rate was paid, which could be finished in 4 to 5 hours, and additional tasks, "ticca," paid at a higher rate. This system has been replaced on many gardens by the "unit" system, in which there is no set daily task but a piece rate fixed for pruning so many bushes or hoeing so many "nals."<sup>1</sup> Under this latter system the worker is entirely free to do as much or as little work as he likes. In the evidence before the Commission and in the report certain aspects of wages on the gardens have

<sup>1</sup> Measurement of land.



come to light. In the first place the cash wages offered are low compared with those paid in other industries.<sup>1</sup> The Government of India stressed the importance of this in their memorandum on recruiting for the gardens :

“The wages paid in tea gardens are not attractive enough when compared with wages paid by other industries, and it is very difficult to convince intending emigrants of the value of the concessions which are allowed in the Assam gardens.”

In the second place, the wages are to a large extent standardised by the system of wage agreements within the tea industry. The Commission say of this system :

“The district committees fix the level of wages for each area or district. . . . There is none of the attraction of higher wages to tempt the worker to transfer his services from one garden to another. . . . We would point out that the workers suffer owing to the absence of any organisation on their side to counteract the powerful combination of their employers.”

Thirdly, the wages are calculated on a family basis. The earnings of the children, as well as those of the men and women, are entered in the wage books, and the standard of living of the families depends on all the members of the families working. This standard of living is admittedly low. It would be lower still without the regular wages earned by the children. There was evidence that in some gardens children began work at 4, 5 and 6 years of age, and that special baskets were made for them to carry the tea. The general starting age, however, was 8 or 9 years and in the best gardens children did not begin work till 10 or 11 years of age. There was no legal limit, however, and it depended entirely on the manager, or as one of them told the Commission, “on circumstances.”

The employers complained that from the point of view

<sup>1</sup> The monthly wages figures supplied to the Commission for 1929-30 were Rs. 13.8.7 for men, Rs. 11.1.7 for women, and Rs. 7.8.6 for children.



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of the gardens the workers did not do enough work, and that from their own point of view they could both earn more and live better if they worked more hours in the day and with less absenteeism. They earned, at the rate fixed by agreement in the district, just enough on the gardens to satisfy their needs, and spent the rest of the time on their own land or looking after their cattle. The Commission found in Assam, as elsewhere, the allegation that "a worker was content to do less work if he could earn enough for his bare subsistence. . . . But there is ample evidence that the worker is steadily increasing his day-to-day wants. . . . He has improved his standard of living in the last ten years and the plantation bazaars show the tendency of the luxuries of yesterday to become the necessities of to-day."

The Commission's conclusions are as follows :

"Our survey of the position in Assam has convinced us that the establishment of wage fixing machinery for the tea industry, if practicable, is desirable. . . . An important feature which emerges from the survey is the inequality of the bargaining power of the two parties to the wage agreement. . . . The fundamental weakness of the workers' position, namely the absence of any organisation, and therefore of any collective bargaining, is not likely to disappear in the near future."

The Commission then outlined the need for an inquiry into the possibility of setting up wage-fixing machinery, giving proposals which merit careful study in their report. They emphasise particularly the "main principle of the association of representatives of both employers and workers in the constitution of the machinery."

### FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Ten years ago the Committee of 1921-2 studied the working of the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act by which criminal penalties were brought against workers who broke their contract. The cases in the Criminal Court



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revealed that many workers were put under a 939 days' contract for a nominal advance of Rs. 4. Many of these cases were against women and minors. A woman under agreement for 313 days with an advance of Rs. 10 left the garden with 27 days balance. She was arrested and on her refusal to return to finish her contract was given six weeks hard labour in prison. In one district 5 per cent. of the cases were against minors, and *children of 8 years old and upward were placed under agreement and punished with imprisonment*, although Act VI of 1901 forbade placing minors under 16 on contract. These agreements were made on advances to the workers and thumb impressions were taken as signatures. The conclusions reached were summarised as follows: "The Committee record their strong disapproval . . . of the practice of placing coolies, particularly new immigrants, under illegal long term agreements; of the illegal arrest of absconders; and of the practice of taking contracts from minors. . . . *They are unable to say how far the practice of private arrest prevails, but that it is exercised they have no doubt. They believe that the freedom of the coolie is considerably restricted under the present system.*"

*This state of affairs which certainly would be described as virtual forced labour was revealed only 10 years ago.* It not only showed that unlimited power lay in the hands of the managers of gardens, but it showed that the law supported those powers, as the judgments in the criminal courts revealed. In 1926 the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act was repealed. It was small wonder therefore that after the repeal of the Act and with the previous Reports in their minds the Commission pressed home in their interviews with managers and representatives of the Indian Tea Association the question of the workers' freedom of movement. The Indian Tea Association representatives in the Assam Valley were asked:

"With regard to the changed conditions in the system of coolie labour since the penal clauses have been done



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away with, would you say that every coolie has been expressly told that he was free to go, and that the old methods of recruitment of labour were no longer in force? —I do not think we have done that.”

The following passages occurred in the evidence taken with the Government of Assam representatives :

“ We have been on many gardens and found a considerable proportion of good workers who are obviously under the impression that they are not free. There are certain facts which tend to make them think they are not free. In one case people are accepting bonuses and putting a thumb print to an agreement which is identical in terms with the old agreement, with one exception, and that is with the penal clauses. This Act has been abolished many years ago. Would it cause any trouble or difficulty to the tea industry if steps were taken to make it known clearly to every tea garden worker that he is not bound in any way by agreement and that he is perfectly free to move?—On behalf of the tea industry I should like to say that you will be running grave risks.

“ If there were an educated labour force who could read the papers and take cognisance of their rights and privileges themselves, there would be no complaint. But having regard to a labour force which the Government itself describes as credulous, ignorant and easily excited, and therefore needing special protection, surely special steps have got to be taken in a case of that character ? ”

The Commission found that the mentality of the workers on the gardens had not changed much since the days of the penal contract. For the first time in any Government inquiry into the tea gardens the workers were interviewed by members of the Commission and the managers were asked to withdraw in order that the workers might speak freely. One worker told the Commission : “ I think I cannot leave if I take the agreement money. If I go away the chowkidar will catch me and bring me back.” Another worker, asked if he was able to leave the garden



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if he wished, replied: "The manager and the chowkidar keep us back. We are kept here by the chowkidar and sometimes beaten, and the chowkidar goes round at night with a lamp and even opens the door to see if we are there." The cumulative evidence showed a general atmosphere in which the freedom of the workers was curtailed in the spirit if not in the letter. Most managers, knowing that they have to rely on their labour force staying with them voluntarily, do all they can to get them to stay. On the other hand, as the evidence to the Commission showed, they do not take any steps to acquaint workers with their freedom of movement lest there should be a wholesale exodus. "They believe they would have trouble if the labourers had some knowledge of their freedom."

The Commission say in their report:

"The first essential, in order to secure the freedom of the worker, is knowledge. It is to a large extent his ignorance which restrains him. It is a matter for regret that when in 1926 the vital change was made in the law by which penal contracts became illegal, little was done to acquaint the worker with the change. . . . The informing of the workers would have been a wise policy for planters to have adopted, and we recommend that they should now take steps in this direction. But the matter should not be left to their initiative. It is the duty of Government to secure that those on whom the legislature seeks to confer a benefit should be placed in a position to secure that benefit; and we recommend that all officers on whom any responsibility for conditions on plantations rests should be required to take active steps to acquaint the workers with their rights under the law."

### TIMES ARE CHANGING

The strikes in Assam in 1920-21 left a different legacy in the relations between employers and workers from that left by strikes in other industries in India. Instead of crystallising the employers and workers into two groups



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and bringing into relief the differences in their respective interests, the strikes have emphasised the "man-bap"<sup>1</sup> relationship between employers and workers both on its good and on its bad side. To the good employers the effect of the disturbances in 1920-21 was to increase their sense of responsibility and encourage them to do a great deal more for the welfare of their workers. The bad employer fell back on punitive methods and on maintaining the atmosphere of forced labour. An employer thus described the man-bap relationship, revealing at the same time the imperative necessity of keeping his labour force :

"The man-bap system is where the manager cares for his people, knows them well, attends to their wants and tries his best to keep them happy and contented. *He must do so.* The garden has to bring its workmen from hundreds of miles away. They will not come naturally unless the life is good. Moreover if the manager is not kind and sympathetic the coolies will quickly arrange to go elsewhere and disappear. Many absconders would bring to the manager the loss of his billet and perhaps of his livelihood. Thus it is to his own interest to study the wants and the content of his labour force."

The Inquiry Committee of 1921-2 in the final paragraph of their report put their finger on the weak spot, one might call it the danger spot, of a labour situation based on the man-bap relationship: "The tea garden labourer has no Trade Union to back his case. He has to look to the manager as his best advocate and adviser. . . . The tea industry has to compete with other rival industries to obtain its labour, and in selling its produce to face keen competition. There is a limit to the wage the industry can afford to pay. . . . The tea garden labourer is not likely to lag behind in his desire to obtain a higher standard of living and this factor will have to be reckoned with in the future." The Government of Assam in their

<sup>1</sup> Mother-father.



memorandum to the Commission expressed something of this viewpoint :

“The Indian Tea Association is undoubtedly a very strong organisation. What effect that organisation has on the industry or *on the conditions of workers* is difficult to say. . . . Union is strength and a common policy must generally be for the good. . . . From the point of view of the employer or the shareholder the policy has on the whole been remarkably successful. *It does not follow of course that success from that point of view means also the prosperity of the labour force. Conditions are changing in Assam as elsewhere, and the time may not be far off when it may be necessary to call into being the machinery created by the Trades Disputes Act.*

“Widespread strikes throughout the tea estates would be a public calamity, not only in the inevitable distress of the labour force and the great loss to the industry which any prolonged stoppage would cause . . . but also in the serious disorder which would probably ensue.”

### ROOTS IN AN ALIEN SOIL

Oti Goa after twelve days on the journey, “all the time in trains and getting out of trains,” stood on the road where the lorry had left him looking at the rows of brick houses with corrugated iron roofs, the garden lines where he was to live. He thought of the little mud hut he had left where the thatched roof came nearly to the ground, and he wondered if he could ever sleep under that glittering roof. He pulled the new blanket which had been given him round his shoulders, but even then his teeth chattered in the raw January afternoon. He thought of the tales he had heard of fever in Assam, and he began to desire hot food and a fire to sit by. Most of all he wanted his family and his country and the familiar sights and sounds and smells. Evening after evening for week after week he went out from the evening meal



to the same spot on the road and looked over the slopes of the tea garden to the great river, wishing that he could find his way home. No one else came to the garden from his village and he wondered whether they thought of him, and whether they had received the Rs. 10 that he sent, and whether the new baby was a boy. Eleven months after his arrival the Commission met Oti Goa as he was coming back from his work. To his surprise they asked him about his country and his wife and family. He told them he had sent Rs. 10 home but that he had not written any letter to his wife nor had he heard from her. Later that day the Commission told the manager of the garden of their conversation with Oti Goa :

“We know that they cannot read or write, but surely there could be means by which the management of a garden could keep these people here in contact with those they have left behind? Would it not be a good thing and make for the contentment of the people and also for the good of recruiting, if the management took a particular interest in maintaining touch between the people who come here and their villages, encouraging new recruits particularly to correspond with their relatives, and asking them if they have written to their wives telling them how nice it is here, and giving facilities for having letters written at your expense?”

Oti Goa in the eleven months he was on the garden before the Commission met him had had to make many readjustments to his new life. He never did anything but hate the rows of houses with the shining roofs. He could not sleep in the cold nights even with the two blankets which were given him. He stumbled out to work half dazed with cold when the chowkidar roused him in the winter mornings. He had fever in the rains, and for a long time was not strong enough to do the deep hoeing. Though he gradually became accustomed to the climate and the houses, the work and the food, he went on missing his village and the men he had known there, and he felt a



lost individual without a community. He knew as he told the Commission that he was better off on the garden than in his own country—he had more to eat, and kind treatment, and care if he was sick. Nevertheless he wondered sometimes if those things made up for the loss of his village connections and his feeling that he once had a place that was his own in a community but now had it no longer. No one cared what he did on the garden, provided he did not drink so much that he could not work. He had no guide for conduct and no one to consult, and always present was that uneasy feeling of being separated from everything and everybody he knew. A woman worker interviewed on a garden told the Commission: “Since I have been here I have not had my children with me. They have been in my own country for the whole three years. Because I cannot go home I am very unhappy at not seeing my children.”

The greatest hardship of the garden workers is that of being cut off from their homeland and separated from their friends and relations. The Commission say in their report:

“So far as recruiting is concerned, we believe that the difficulty of returning from Assam acts as an even more serious handicap than any disabilities on the gardens. We believe that if the worker went to Assam with a guarantee that he could return if he so wished after a reasonable period, many of the difficulties both of employers and workers would disappear. Our main proposal is that every future assisted emigrant to an Assam tea garden, should have the right after three years to be repatriated at his employer's expense. We contemplate that, when an emigrant has served for three years, he should, unless he desires to stay, be sent back by the employer, receiving his fare and the means of subsistence on the journey. . . .

“We are glad that the general idea of repatriation after three years was favourably received by the Indian Tea Association. . . . The scheme, if put into operation,



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should lead to a substantial increase in the numbers of candidates for emigration and for ever destroy the belief that Assam is a country from which return is difficult or impossible. It should lead to a healthy rivalry among garden managers in the matter of improving conditions, while it will give the labourers a greatly increased sense of security."

## PROMOTING A SPIRIT OF CONTENTMENT

If the repatriation scheme is going to succeed, so that the tea gardens are not denuded of labour, the conditions of life on the gardens will have to be such that the people desire to stay there, in spite of the pull towards their home land. In certain directions some gardens have already gone a long way towards making conditions attractive. A manager of a garden thus described the benefits bestowed and the resulting happy labourer: "The labourer and his wife are generally happy and contented persons. . . . On the estate the labourer is housed free. He has a convenient and excellent water supply, and firewood for the gathering and fetching. If sick, he is paid until he is well. . . . There is a hospital for serious cases. . . . The wife receives pay for three months when the periodical baby arrives. . . . The labourer has a plot of land at a nominal rent and the rice helps the family on its way."

The 1921 Committee reported on the high death rate in the gardens due to the importation of poverty stricken workers from famine districts. They added: "The disillusionment following upon the immigrant's arrival on the garden . . . has a prejudicial effect on his health." Physically weak from semi-starvation, and depressed in spirit from the uprooting from his home, the new immigrant needs help to withstand the dreaded scourge of Assam—malaria. Some gardens have taken active steps to control malaria, and practically all make some provision for the health of their workers, though with varying standards



of efficiency. The evidence given before the Commission showed the progress that had been made in remedial and preventive health measures. A medical officer who has carried out some very successful anti-malarial work told the Commission: "The tea planters from my experience here are the medium by which malaria in Assam will be controlled. The tea planter at present controls the insect pests which damage and destroy his tea bushes, so why should he not control the dangerous insects which breed in his drains and streams round his lines and which damage and destroy his labour force? *There are gardens in this district which have never recruited for over thirty years owing to being malaria free* and where there has been a natural increase in the population. We have at last after much patient research got down to bedrock facts, and the planters on the unhealthy gardens in this district have rapidly appreciated the importance of controlling malaria as they are well aware that a healthy labour force becomes a happy labour force. Our figures show 39,130 less days of sickness on the gardens in this district employing 18,000 persons for 1929 as compared with 1927 when malaria was not being controlled."

Not only humanitarian considerations but also the urgent economic need for labour has moved tea garden managers to care for the coming generation and for the young children. A manager in the Assam Valley who had an unusually large number of children on his garden told the Commission: "In view of the recruiting difficulties in the past we wondered whether we could not raise our labour from the children. As far back as 1912 I started feeding the children and looking after them. Then I found that when there was a family of two children and a third child was born, that child was sometimes neglected and died. Therefore in 1925 I started paying a man 30 per cent. higher wages if he had three non-working children. That increased the number very much; in 1926 there were 52 families with 3 non-working children, while



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at the present day (1930) there are 91. . . . If by the death of one of his children a man is going to lose 30 per cent. of his earnable wage he will bring a sick child to hospital immediately." On many gardens the non-working children are fed at the hospital every day free of charge, some of them being specially recommended for feeding after medical examination.

In spite of the excellence of some medical work and the care given to housing and sanitation the Commission found in their inspections great variations in the standard of health work on different gardens, and they found on some gardens doctors who had practically no qualifications or training. In view of the need for enforcing a minimum standard of health and welfare on all gardens, the Commission propose that Boards of Health and Welfare should be set up throughout the tea garden areas. They say of these Boards :

"The important principle underlying our scheme for such Boards is that, in the first instance, the industry itself should be entrusted with responsibility. We believe that, in respect of plantations, the sense of responsibility, combined with the powerful force of enlightened self-interest, reinforced by the knowledge of local conditions, should produce a much more rapid advance in measures for the health of the workers than would be achieved by State compulsion. . . . The Act constituting the Boards should detail, as far as possible, their duties . . . and the matters in respect of which they were empowered to issue regulations. Within this category we would place :—

- (a) the provision of drinking water ;
- (b) the provision of conservancy, sanitation and drainage ;
- (c) the provision of medical facilities ; and
- (d) the prescribing of minimum standards of new housing accommodation."

Care for the worker's health and for his children, together



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with increased wages and the possibility of repatriation if desired, should help to create a spirit of contentment among the workers. Among the material benefits which are given by the gardens however, none are more valued than the grant of land for cultivation. It was clear from the oral evidence taken by the Commission that the statement of the Indian Tea Association in their memorandum was substantiated: "Indian labour of the class from which the tea industry draws its supplies *is more concerned with the improvement of status than in the improvement of the standard of living.*" This means that the chief concern of the workers is to save money in order to own land and be their own master. Many of the gardens meet this "land-hunger" of the workers by providing on the gardens land for cultivating rice for which either no rent or a very small rent is charged. Unfortunately when the tea gardens were being laid out the importance of providing rice land was not recognised as a factor in keeping a contented labour force. Hence some gardens have no rice land, others have a very limited amount and others again possess extensive tracts of jungle which can be cleared and planted. The Inquiry Committee of 1921-2 found that a garden possessing extensive rice land usually had a more stable labour force. They found also that the allotment and distribution of the land was on no fixed system and that the irregularity was a grievance among the workers.

The Commission found that on the gardens there was no security of tenure in the land for cultivation—it was given and taken away at the will of the manager. Workers preferred to spend time working on their land to working on the garden, and in some cases it was evident that it was financially more profitable for them to do it. In such cases the amount of land held by any one worker might be reduced, in order that he might be forced to give more time to the garden. This constituted a real grievance in some districts, and the grant of land which should have bred contentment, bred instead a smouldering



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resentment. The Commission saw this giving of land also in the light of a possible improvement in the health of the worker :

“ We believe that much larger supplies of fresh milk, ghee and vegetables are a vital need for the labour forces resident on the plantations, if their general health is to be improved. . . . Where possible a more generous allocation to them of land for grazing and for cultivation would not only effect improvements in their health by providing the necessary animal fats and vitamins, but would also promote a spirit of contentment in a people actuated by a deep inborn love of land.”

## PREPARING THE GROUND

*“ What is needed is the education of the labour force to the appreciation of a higher standard of living, when they will want more, and be prepared to work for it and make good use of their earnings. The very nature of the labour force makes progress in that direction slow, but it is only by such progress that any lasting improvement can be effected. It is impossible to introduce measures suited to the educated labour of other parts of the world. The ground must be prepared before the seed is sown, and it is the preparation of the ground that at present demands the most attention.”*

This passage in the evidence of the Government of Assam stood out among the evidence presented to the Commission as *recognising that steps must be taken to change the outlook of the tea garden worker.* The tea industry piously hoped that some change might take place but actually appeared to desire the status quo to continue. No evidence was given by any welfare workers or outside agency to suggest what steps might be taken.

To take aboriginal people from their villages hundreds of miles away, to plant them in organised industry albeit of an agricultural character, and to expect them to take root and prosper, is a great venture. Progress is put



before them in terms of earning more money, working more regularly, and depriving themselves of some of their income by sending their children to school. Such inducements sound like a fool's paradise to aboriginal agriculturists, and so far their failure to appeal to them has been evident. Between the workers and the outside world with its influences stands the garden manager, in his kindness or in his tyranny. All the benefits bestowed and all the new ideas for their welfare have come hitherto through his mediation.

The first essential in the "preparing of the ground" is the opening of the gardens and the workers to the outside world. The Commission say in their report :

"We do not regard as satisfactory the existing position where the workers are largely isolated from outside influence and any member of the public may be effectively prevented from approaching the workers' lines except with the manager's permission. On principle it is objectionable that considerable areas included within the garden grants, in which large numbers of workers are settled, can be entirely closed to anyone who may be interested in their welfare. We have considered the point submitted to us, namely, the danger of interested people attempting to make use of the illiterate and ignorant labour force on the tea gardens for purposes unconnected with labour, but this is a risk to which every industry in India is exposed, and we think it better to face it than to continue a policy which inevitably gives rise to suspicion and is liable to be abused. . . . We recommend that steps should be taken to secure public contact with workers' dwellings on all plantations."

This control over the right of access to the workers' dwellings has hitherto been alleged by trade union leaders as the chief difficulty in the organisation of the workers. The proposals of the Commission with regard to wage-fixing machinery and boards of health and welfare envisage a day when workers' representatives will take their share



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in collective bargaining with the employers on conditions of life and work. Provision indeed is already made for these representatives. There are also constant references in the report to the strong position of the employers contrasted with the weak position of the worker looked at in terms of organisation. The organisation of the workers therefore cannot be relegated to an indefinite future. It is bound to come. But in order to prepare for it, the path must be cleared for outside influences to reach the garden workers, and of these by far the most important is education.

The Commission recommend that no child under the age of 10 years shall be employed on the gardens. They also call attention to the experience in Ceylon where the provision of educational facilities is required on the plantations and where the response of the parents is gradually improving. As with every other group of industrial workers in India the responsibility for educational work has been thrown like a ball from the employer to the Government and back again. Neither had any educational progress to record. Instead the Government reported a *decrease* in the number of schools in the whole province. In 1914 there were 153 schools and 3,159 pupils; in 1926 the figures were 65 and 1,798. The following extract from the memorandum of the Government of Assam gives the causes of the decrease :

“The reasons for the failure of the special schools are not far to seek. . . . The labour force do not appreciate the ultimate advantages which their children would derive, but they do appreciate the more immediate result, viz., the reduction of the wage earning capacity of their children. . . . The managers, with a few exceptions, do not actively interest themselves in the question, more from the fear of upsetting their labour force than from any antagonism to the principle of the scheme.”

Without going in detail into the failure up to date to establish and to popularise education on the tea gardens,



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it is possible to learn something from past experience and also from other parts of India. It is becoming recognised more and more widely that much of the primary education in the villages in India has been on wrong lines. There has been nothing given in the village education which was in any way allied to the children's daily life, therefore reading and writing were meaningless to them and soon forgotten again. The last ten years in India however have seen experiments in rural education which hold out great hope for the future. The village teachers' training school at Moga in the Punjab has more than justified its principles of relating education to the needs of village life, and so making the school the centre of a community life and the impetus to improve the outlook and raise the standard of living of the whole community. The Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab wrote of this experiment: "The most interesting and valuable contribution to educational progress in India during the last few years has been the work at Moga. The objects of this work are to provide a form of training to boys of the depressed classes, which would enable them to return to their villages as teachers and to become a rallying point to the whole community."<sup>1</sup>

A member of the Commission during an interview with garden managers in the Assam Valley brought out the relation, which has already been mentioned, of educational propaganda to the need of the family for the children's earnings: "There is a very great deal of patient educational work being done with these people in order to make them, against their natural instincts, avail themselves of western medicine. It seems to outsiders like myself that that work has met and is meeting with remarkable success, and that it has paid you to bring about that success. Why has it not been equally possible for you to do the same patient educational work in regard to getting these people to send their children to school. Is it a fair deduction

<sup>1</sup> *New Schools for Young India*, by William J. McKee.



therefore that the absence of that patient educational work in regard to school attendance is due to the fact that it would not pay you, whereas the patient educational work in regard to medical attendance does pay you?" In reply to a previous question the same managers had said that "coolies are very reluctant to send their children to school," and "you would never keep children off the garden." The essentials indeed of any educational scheme which is to be successful would include not only new methods of education and teachers specially trained to follow those methods, but also some readjustment of tea garden work which would pave the way for making education compulsory. It might also be necessary to increase the parent's wages to compensate for the loss of the child's work, making such an increase dependent on the child attending school.

It was evident that garden managers found themselves between the devil and the deep sea on this matter of education. On the one hand they were reluctant to do anything which would disturb their labour force. On the other hand they found themselves in an impasse when they were faced with the need of improving the outlook of the workers and increasing their desire to work harder. *They acknowledged that they could see no solution.* The situation was such that a member of the Commission asked the India Tea Association if "*they had ever visualised the labour problem and taken a proper survey of it.*"

The Commission say in their report :

"We are aware that the supply of teachers and the decisions as to the vernacular to be taught present problems which give rise to practical difficulties. . . We recommend that the local Government should convene a representative conference of both Government and the tea industry at an early date with a view to surveying the ground and deciding the particular contribution of each to the desired end. . . . Co-operation between the industry and Government could be further extended from the outset by agree-



## TEA PLANTING AND PICKING

ment on a curriculum suited to the type of work to be found on the plantations.”

The worker on the plantations has desires and aspirations which are at present hidden under the need for more food and more material comforts, but which are not necessarily met by the provision of those material comforts. He needs also recreation, and a calling forth of the best in his old tradition to help him in his new and difficult adjustment. The problem of plantation labour which involves uprooting families from their homes and assisting them to take root in an alien soil is one which is not peculiar to India. It is indeed the major problem in many areas where modern methods of cultivating and organising have been applied to indigenous crops; it is really the problem of industrialised agriculture. The tea industry in Assam with its highly-efficient organisation can give a lead not only to India but to other less developed areas where the conditions of plantation labour are coming under the searchlight of publicity. The Commission see ground for encouragement in the future: “The evidence showed us that the spirit of goodwill on both sides and the readiness to co-operate are there, if only the impetus to make the start can be given, and thus obviate the difficulty created by the present tendency of both Government and the industry each to look to the other to make the first move.”



## CHAPTER VII

### MOTHERS AND BABIES

“As it is the common lot of women to do the dirty work, and as in England at any rate it was the State regulations of the hours of labour with reference to women and children that brought about a limitation of the hours worked by men, the tightening of control over the labour of women and children seems the first desideratum—for they are amenable and not discontented material, but to a liberal view ‘factory fodder’ all the same.”—*Punjab Government Evidence.*

“Why have the women workers been so long grudged the help which only a woman can give?”

*Women in the Factory*, by DAME ADELAIDE ANDERSON.

### SLAVERY OR FREEDOM?

WHERE is woman's right place? Primitive society demanded that woman should take her share in cultivating the food supply for the family, in addition to household work which included spinning and weaving and the care of children. To this day in all agricultural countries, in all peasant communities, the woman shares with the man in the work of the fields. The same is true in home industries which may be part of woman's traditional work of spinning and weaving for family needs, or may be another trade learned to occupy spare hours. Modern industrialism with its great upheaval introduced in western countries two new and contrary ideas of woman's place and work.



The textile factories offered employment to women and girls where they could be either independent wage earners or contributors to the family income. At the same time the tradition was gradually established that a man working in a factory or workshop should earn enough to support a wife and family without the necessity of the wife having to work also. Thus the industrial system in the west with one hand gave women the possibility of economic independence, while with the other it took it away from them in offering an incentive to a man to earn a family wage by making it a matter of personal pride and personal status.

For at least these last thirty years the Woman's Movement in the west has been evolving and revolving ideas about woman's right place. Should she be a domestic drudge or an industrial slave? Does economic independence mean freedom or merely an exchange of one kind of slavery for another? In Soviet Russia the Communist doctrine with one fell blow knocked away all the props from under the old arguments, by producing not only a new theory but a new system to fit that theory. "The Communist with his worship of economic determinism lays the disabilities from which women have suffered throughout the ages to one cause—economic dependence on men. In all Communist writings the point is always emphasised that the spiritual liberation of woman is conditional on her economic emancipation. Women must be workers. They must do something to contribute to the economic gain of the nation and to win their own economic independence."<sup>1</sup> Therefore all the big factories employing women have elaborate arrangements for the care of children and the provision of food, making the possession of a home and family not only no bar to women who want to work, but also, as far as possible, not an additional burden.

No one has any clear answer to-day to the question:

<sup>1</sup> *Humanity Uprooted*, by Maurice Hindus, p. 295.



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“What is woman’s right place?” Like many other social-economic ideas of to-day it is in the melting pot. Among the industrial workers, women are breadwinners as well as home-makers. Is this the ideal at which to aim? Or is it only a necessity of the present situation? India has her own very definite traditional ideas about the place of women. Like many other ideas they are being shaken to-day by the winds that blow from all corners of the earth. The re-forming of these ideas is one of the tasks before the Woman’s Movement in India. In this Woman’s Movement in the new India what part will be played by the women who are swept into the vortex of modern industry? In the uprooting from field to factory the woman is even more intimately concerned than the man. She may be left behind in the village while her husband “goes travelling”<sup>1</sup>; she may accompany him to the chawl and be plunged into the struggle to make a home in one half of a dark, dirty room; she may be obliged to add to this attempt at home-making the necessity for factory work. She appears to the public as one unit in the total number of women textile workers; as one unit in the 97 per cent. of Bombay’s workers who live in one room tenements; as one unit in the 319 women out of every 1,000 whose babies die under a year old. What about her as a human being? Who has the eyes to see not only her burden of suffering but her possibilities of development if that burden were lifted?

## FACTORY FODDER

In ancient India, Savitri the ideal wife and the daughter of a king, to save her husband’s life, went to meet Yama the terrible god of death, defying his terrors and outstaying his threats, triumphantly winning her husband’s life as a reward. In modern India, the factory worker’s wife and

<sup>1</sup> A phrase used in South India by the women whose husbands have gone to work in the cities.



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the daughter of a peasant, to save their home, goes to meet the terrible god of the machine, defying its terrors and outstaying its threats, winning the rice to save her family's life as a reward. But for her there is no triumph. She is fodder to feed this horrible monster of the machine, and all she achieves is endurance to go on being fodder. For the part which women workers in factories in India are playing to-day is that of cheap labour. Cheap labour for cheap goods is one of the manufacturer's guarantees of profit, and for many processes in the factories women's labour is adequate and can be had very cheaply. The jute mills employ 23 per cent. of the total number of women workers and we have already seen that women form a large proportion of the workers in seasonal factories. The increasing restrictions on child labour with the hoped for advance of primary education make it likely that where children were employed formerly women will now be employed at the lowest possible rates.

In every industrial country legislation to protect factory workers has begun with the women and children because it was generally recognised that they were at the same time the most helpless and therefore the most exploited of the workers. The situation revealed by the Commission in the unregulated factories makes this very clear. It is also clear that in India as in other countries, public interest and public support are necessary to carry out this protection of women and children.

### NO TIME TO REST

“We get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to do our household work so that we may be ready to go to the mill at 7 o'clock. We work in the mill from 7 in the morning till 5.30 in the evening. We then go home and work till 10 o'clock in our houses. We barely have any time for rest.”

So spoke some women workers at one of the best mills



in India, when giving evidence before the Commission. Does it need imagination to see behind that bare statement? Can those who live comfortably and at ease picture the days of these women? Outside the eleven hours spent in the factory, what determines their choice of what they will do? The needs of their husbands for well-cooked food; the needs of the children for washing, clothing, feeding; the natural pride in the home which must be kept clean and well swept: these demands of her home and family are as much law to the women as the regulations in the factory. The Commission said of factory workers in general: "Hours of leisure are virtually unknown." For the women workers, not only are the hours of leisure unknown, but their hours of rest are curtailed by the demands made on them by their homes. Day after day, and week after week this exhausting circle of toil goes on.

There was evidence given before the Commission both in the cotton and jute industries of the strain upon women workers. The Lady Investigator of the Bombay Labour Office said: "The health of the women workers is more affected than that of the male workers by the present conditions of living. She is a wage earner as well as a domestic drudge and has to sustain the strain doubly. Her bodily strength is stunted on account of overwork."

In Bengal the battle has raged round the employment of women under the multiple shift system in the jute mills. The International Labour Convention concerning the employment of women at night which has been ratified by India, requires that a night period of at least 11 consecutive hours shall be given to women. In jute mills on the multiple shift where women can begin work at 5.30 a.m. and finish work at 7 p.m., the night rest is reduced to a period of 10½ hours. The Chief Inspector said in his evidence: "The regulations for women are unsuitable in so far that they permit women to be employed between 5.30 a.m. and 7 p.m., hours which unduly encroach



upon their leisure. In many cases women have to leave their homes with children before 5 a.m. in darkness, and get back to their homes in darkness about 7.30 or 8 p.m." A manager of one of the jute mills on the multiple shift system asked by the Commission about the hours in the jute industry replied: "I am of opinion that it is wrong to bring women and children to work at 5.30 and send them home after 7 p.m. I think more attention should be paid to their home life, and that they should have some time in their own homes. In the old days when we were working without electric lights there was not so much discontent as there is to-day."<sup>1</sup>

The system of early marriage in India means that practically all the women workers are married, and many of them also young. The counterpart of the average young irresponsible mill girls of England and Japan, are the married women in India, bearing the treble burden of factory work, child-bearing and home-making. Older married women and widows are to be found in the Indian mills, just as they are in Lancashire, but the majority are young married women. Dr. Balfour in an investigation in Bombay found in 1928-9 that out of 185 maternity cases among mill women, 20 per cent. were below 20 years of age, and 59 per cent. between 20 and 30 years; that is that 79 per cent. were under 30. It is small wonder that the infant mortality figures in industrial centres are appalling. The burden which economic necessity and custom lays on these young married workers is an impossibly heavy one, and it is borne at the cost of the children's lives and their own health.

#### MILLWORKERS BY DAY AND PROSTITUTES BY NIGHT

If the lot of the young married woman worker in the factories is a hard one, what of the fate of the women

<sup>1</sup> Since the visit of the Commission the multiple shift system has practically disappeared, owing partly to the evidence given and partly to trade depression and curtailed working hours.



who are not married, or are widows, or deserted by their husbands? A certain number of these women are to be found in all the mill areas. The Government of Bengal evidence on the immigration to the industrial areas near Calcutta, showed that among the immigrants from Midnapore out of approximately 300 women millworkers one in three admitted to being a prostitute, and of persons born in Hooghly one third of the females earned their living in the mills and of these one in every four owned to being a prostitute. The Assistant Director of Public Health in Bengal in his evidence said: "No privacy is possible in the present condition of housing. There is practically open prostitution near the workers' houses."

In 1923, Dr. Dagmar Curjel made an investigation for the Government of Bengal into women's labour in Bengal industries. Her investigation revealed the existence in Bengal of a class of women who should technically be called "single women workers" in that they were neither married nor the relatives of men working in the mills. "The workers from Bihar, the Central Provinces and the United Provinces have women with them, and these women work in the mills, but they are not always the wives of the men with whom they live. . . . The Telegu workers bring women with them often in addition to their wives, all of whom work in the mills. . . . The ordinary respectable Bengali women around Calcutta are reluctant to undertake factory work. Some Bengali workers are women of good caste and family, who for some reason have offended family tradition and been outcasted. . . . A number of the Bengali women workers, however, were women of doubtful reputation. Such women were usually of low caste and of poor development and looked unhealthy; one manager in whose mill the female labour was chiefly of this class remarked that 'he had noticed that they did not last long.' . . . As it is scarcely possible for a woman to live for any length of time alone in a mill compound, women workers if deserted by one man,



usually seek other male protection. . . . If the men eventually return to settle in their own homes, these women are left behind at the mills. Thus deserted women and children are to be found in the mill area.”<sup>1</sup>

The woman who lives in and around the mill lines may be a widow, or a deserted wife, or a professional prostitute. She has to work all day in the mill and either has a temporary liaison with some man, or pursues the trade of a prostitute by night. In either case she probably has children to rear and support. This is one of the many social-economic situations which has grown up in Indian industry and hitherto has been largely ignored. Dr. Curjel showed its existence in 1923 and seven years later it was still there—unexamined and untouched. Better housing will certainly make it possible to have more families settled in the industrial area, and therefore more normal social life. But that development will not affect the plight of the women who have no husbands and are dependent for their livelihood on work in the mill, eked out by a prostitute's fees. There is need for an inquiry as to the extent of the problem and for serious consideration as to the best way of helping these women, recognising the need, which has been recognised in Japan, for an adequate measure of protection through special housing accommodation.

#### TROUBLE FROM THE JOBBER

During the day while women are at work in the factory, their well-being or their ill-being depends to a large extent on the people who supervise them. If they have to go out to feed their babies; if they need a short rest; for any need of theirs they must apply to the supervisor. The supervisor therefore has the power to make their lives bearable or miserable. The kind of men supervisors who have grown fat through jobbery and bribe taking are not likely to be considerate to the women who work under

<sup>1</sup> *Bulletin of Indian Industries and Labour*, No. 31.



them. They can make their lives a hell. The extent of this misery endured by women workers is hidden under their silent endurance of many things which are intolerable. Nevertheless this suffering from male overseers came to light during the visit of the Commission, and was voiced in a petition from a group of women workers in the textile mills in Nagpur, handed in to the Commission on their arrival. This petition contained thirteen requests, of which five related to the question of supervision in the factory :

- “ 1. The supervising staff over women employees should be women.
2. Men supervisors over women should be stopped by law.
3. Women Factory Inspectors should be appointed.
4. Women workers should be trained in first aid.
5. There is considerable trouble felt by women from the jobbers.”

The general theory behind which the employers shelter is that most women are working with their husbands and therefore all is well. That this is not so, any visit to a factory will prove. It is also easy to see that the men jobbers and sardars have every opportunity of bullying and taking advantage of the women who work under them. This is unsatisfactory both from the point of view of the protection of the women and of their efficiency. In England experience has shown that women supervisors get much better work from the women under them, and also keep much better discipline. In Japan special attention has been paid to the training of forewomen in the factories during the last ten years with admirable results both in discipline and output of work.

The Commission make the following recommendation :

“ The supervision of women presents special difficulties. When undertaken, as is generally the case, by men jobbers it leads to serious abuses and has resulted in representations



to the Commission. We recommend that where women are engaged in substantial numbers, there should invariably be employed at least one educated woman in charge of their welfare and supervision throughout the factory. She should be responsible to the labour officer, where there is one, and to the manager where there is not, for the engagement and dismissal of all female staff, whether permanent or temporary. We found this system already in force in one or two large Indian factories with excellent results."

### HER INSTINCT WOULD ENLIGHTEN HER

Throughout their silent endurance of intolerable conditions Indian women have been waiting for someone who would have the eye to see their wrongs and the power to right them. The industrial experience of the west has proved without a doubt the value of women in the factory inspection staff. The building up of their work and of their share in the administration of protective legislation should be studied in the record written by Dame Adelaide Anderson, who was for twenty-four years the Chief Woman Factory Inspector in Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> She quotes in her book a woman worker in a textile factory in Yorkshire who wrote in 1896: "Mill girls need a sensible and educated woman to further their cause. . . . How many of our women are there who have to spend most of their lives in unhealthy, badly ventilated and insanitary mills, and must go on and tolerate the condition of things silently, not daring to complain, and even if they have the courage they shrink from telling a man? A woman inspector would often see irregularities without being told. Her instinct would enlighten her."<sup>2</sup>

Since that was written thirty-four years ago the work

<sup>1</sup> *Women in the Factory—An Administrative Adventure*, by Adelaide M. Anderson, D.B.E., M.A. (John Murray, 1922.)

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 24.



of the women factory inspectors in Britain has abundantly justified the women's hopes. Beginning with the special needs of women and children in industry, they have also played an important part in the general improvement of conditions in the factories. In Great Britain, it was *after* their appointment rather than *before* that the need for their work was appreciated most. The experience in Bombay, which has been the only province in India so far to appoint a woman factory inspector, repeats the experience of the west. Not only has the appointment of this woman been justified, but the Chief Inspector in his evidence asked that another be appointed. The following paragraph in the Commission's report recommends the appointment of women factory inspectors :

“ On more than one occasion in the past, attention has been directed to the need of women factory inspectors. So far only one such appointment has been made, namely in the Bombay Presidency. The Indian factory worker is just beginning to realise the significance for himself of the factory inspector, and even now, owing to his lack of organisation and illiteracy, complaints made by workers direct to the inspectorate are few. Women workers are in this respect even less advanced than men, and are generally reluctant to address male officers. Moreover many of the special, yet remediable, disabilities from which they suffer will only come to light with the appointment of women factory inspectors. This was found to be the case in older industrial countries and must inevitably be so to an even greater extent in India, where almost every employed woman is married and of child-bearing age, and where social and other customs make the position of the woman worker less secure than in the west. We are confident that in India, as in Great Britain, their appointment has only to be made to prove its justification.

We recommend that women inspectors should be of Indian domicile and not younger than twenty-five years of age, and their remuneration should be on a scale calcu-



lated to attract and to hold the type of woman required for work which will necessitate initiative, resource and self-reliance, and in the first decade at least no small measure of pioneering enterprise. We should like to see the appointment of one such woman in every province, but in the event of this not being immediately practicable, we recommend their appointment forthwith in Bengal and Madras, and the appointment of part-time women officials in these provinces where the number of women and children employed in regulated industries is smaller. It is to be hoped however that such part-time service will be for a limited period only."

#### A PATIENT AND PERSISTENT EFFORT

We come now to a realm of women's work in India which has been a battleground between modern humanitarian ideas and the accepted custom of the country. Women in the factories have for some time been protected by the factory law. Women in the mines had no such protection until, after a long fight, the Mines Act was amended in 1928 to provide for the gradual exclusion of women from underground working.

Why should women be excluded from working underground in the mines? A reference to Chapter V where the conditions underground are described will make it clear that they are inimical to the health of women, no less than to that of the men, and that women subjected to such conditions for twelve hour periods cannot continue to bear and rear healthy children. The long drawn battle over their exclusion merits careful study. Its ultimate success should convince sceptics that patient and persistent effort can overcome the inertia of accepted custom and the barriers of specious arguments. Public opinion has been apathetic, and with the exception of the support of a small group of social reformers the Chief Inspector of Mines has carried the day alone.

The situation of women workers in mines as it existed



in 1925 was set out in Bulletin of Indian Industries and Labour No. 35. Prior to that however during the last decade the annual reports of the Chief Inspector of Mines, the debates in the Legislative Assembly on the Mines Act and its amendments, and the current press comments indicate the battlefield and the array of the forces on both sides. The following quotation from the leader in the *Calcutta Statesman* in 1923 illustrates one way in which the proposed reforms were greeted :

“The one argument in favour of the exclusion of women from mines is to be found in the fact that since 1842 they have been excluded in England. But England is not Bengal. . . . Santali women are employed in the hardest field labour and in menial and degrading scavenging tasks. . . . There is a serious danger that the permanent industrial and social welfare of the country may be jeopardised by the doctrinaire reformers who know nothing whatever of the delicate economic machinery with which they seek to interfere. . . . The need of the moment is tranquillity, especially in the industrial sphere.”

The Chief Inspector of Mines in his report for 1927 summed up the situation thus : “The main opposition, however, to the prohibition of female labour is based on economic grounds. *Female labour is cheaper than male labour, and women are docile and work with greater regularity than men. It is feared that without female labour the cost of production will increase.*”

In the evidence before the Commission in 1930 these arguments were repeated by some of the employers. The Indian Mining Federation (representing most of the smaller mines) said of the regulations : “The recent action taken by Government has been unfortunate. The prohibition of women in the majority of Indian mines is wholly unwarranted. . . . Economically it will tend to lower the standard of living of the labourers.” A member of the Mining Board in Bengal stated in his evidence : “The recent regulations of the Government providing



for a gradual exclusion of women labourers underground cannot but be characterised as highly ill-advised. . . . Family has always been the centre of Indian lives and a miner prefers to work in pairs keeping his wife working always under his eyes. . . . In the present depressed state of the industry there will be insurmountable difficulties for the small mines mostly owned by Indians."

The Commission in their report reviewed the changes and their results thus :

"The second important change in the law relating to mines is the introduction of the regulations for the prohibition of employment of women underground. After July 1st 1929 it has been limited to a percentage of the total underground labour force, 29 per cent. in coal mines and 40 per cent. in salt, to be reduced by 3 per cent. and 4 per cent. respectively each year, so that after July 1st 1939 women will be entirely excluded from underground workings.

"The effects of this change must be increasingly felt as time goes on, but in some directions are not difficult to foresee. First and most obvious is the loss of wages to the women, for whom alternative employment is not available and where these are the wives or connections of the male workers, a corresponding reduction in the family income. We recommend that in order to mitigate hardship amongst women excluded or about to be excluded from underground workings, employers should reserve for them vacancies occurring among surface workers wherever practicable. The release of so many women of the miners' families from the industry should make possible the raising of the miners' standard of home life, with a consequent increase in their efficiency to the benefit of employer and employed. But this advantage will not be gained without effort on the part of the employer, for unless conditions of life on the collieries are improved, miners will not bring their women to the mining areas when their power to earn is gone, and these areas will not escape the evils resulting from a marked disparity in the sex ratio.



“The other work done by women in the mines, namely that on the surface, covers a variety of tasks, but involves the carrying and lifting of heavy weights, and sometimes the pushing of heavy trucks, as the photographs taken by the Chief Inspector show.<sup>1</sup> In open mines and quarries, a number of women are also employed, carrying the coal or stone up the inclines on the sides of the open workings. Some of this carrying involves a strain and a twisting of the body to adjust to the weight which might be injurious to the women. The Commission were told in interviews that the average weights carried were 50 to 60 lbs. Girls of 13 beginning work also carried these weights as no difference is made between the younger and the older women. The Commission propose that measures for regulating the loads carried should be undertaken by the Mining Boards.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE RACE

The women who work in the factories and mines and whose spare time and strength is spent in cooking meals and caring for the home are also the mothers of the race. During these arduous years they are bearing children—the future industrial workers of the country. Women of agricultural communities, who work in the fields with their husbands, in most countries continue their work up to the time of childbirth and take it up again as soon as possible afterwards with little apparent detriment to their health or the health of the child. But the conditions of modern industry, the hot, dusty atmosphere, the hours of standing and tending machines, the horrible housing, the lack of fresh air and sunshine, make it inadvisable for women to work right up to the time of childbirth, and still more inadvisable for them to resume work immediately after. Economic pressure however forces many women to work to the last minute, and to begin work again as soon as they can move about.

<sup>1</sup> See Annual Report of Chief Inspector of Mines for 1927.



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WOMEN WORKERS COMING TO THE SURFACE OF THE COAL MINE  
CARRYING BASKETS OF COAL WEIGHING ABOUT 60LBS.

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To meet such a situation enlightened employers in many countries introduced maternity benefits for their women workers. It was acknowledged by the Washington Conference in 1919 to be the right of women workers to have leave six weeks before and after childbirth on full wages. This provision was intended to make it possible for women to take the necessary rest without suffering from lack of money.

The Government of India when ratifying the Washington Conventions gave a tentative promise to examine the possibilities of legislation on maternity benefits. A Bill introduced in the Legislative Assembly in 1924 was thrown out, and it was the Bombay Government who were the first to pass a Maternity Benefits Act in 1929. The Government of the Central Provinces passed a similar Act in the following year, 1930. Certain of the best mills put the idea into practice without waiting for legislative action, as for instance the Empress Mills at Nagpur, which since 1921 have given 2 months leave at childbirth on full wages to every woman who has worked 11 months in the firm. On an average, 238 women take advantage of the benefit every year, and the amount paid to them is about Rs. 4,800.

A great deal of information about the need for maternity benefits and the extent to which they are already given was collected for the Commission and published in the evidence. The single most valuable piece of information was that given by Dr. Balfour and her colleague Dr. Shakuntala Talpode in the course of their investigation into the maternity conditions of women mill workers in Bombay. This was a scientific investigation "to collect evidence as to the actual effect of work on pregnancy as it occurs in women living under the conditions of the Bombay mill workers." The detailed account of the inquiry is given in a paper by Dr. Balfour entitled "The Maternity Conditions of Women Millworkers," published in July, 1929. Dr. Balfour in her statement asked the question:



“Is the effect of the work done in the mills injurious to the expectant mother and her unborn child?” She took two groups of women, both living in mill areas, one group working in the mills and the other not working but the wives of mill workers. The still-birth rate of the working group was more than double that of the non-working group. The weights of the infants at birth of the working group were lower. “The facts ascertained seem to indicate that the effects of the work are injurious, not so much to the mother, but to the unborn child. The women have to stand all the time they are at work and have to keep their minds fixed in one direction for hours. It was one of the marked features of this inquiry that so many women stated they had ceased work before full-time because they felt so exhausted. . . . It appears, however, that the women who do housework as well as mill-work suffer most. Among those who did the housework the evidence of still and premature birth was 312 per 1,000 and among those who did not, it was only 125 per 1,000.”

The future of the race in India demands not only financial assistance to women during childbirth but also expert care during the pre-natal period, at the confinement, and during the first years of the child's life. The case for such medical aid and the terrible results of bad handling by ignorant dais<sup>1</sup> are too well known to need emphasis here. The Commission make the following suggestions about medical aid for women workers :

“Indian women are generally unwilling to avail themselves of the services of male doctors, and wherever a hospital organisation exists, whether it be provided by an employer or by a local body, the addition to the medical staff of a woman doctor is to be commended. . . . The development of women's clinics, the management of maternity wards, and the supervision of child welfare centres and creches are all legitimate and desirable expan-

<sup>1</sup> Midwives.



sions of medical and welfare work which only become possible when a woman doctor is available.

“The figures we have been able to obtain for infantile mortality indicate only too clearly the necessity for a wide expansion of child welfare and maternity relief organisations. The need for trained health visitors is no less great. . . . We suggest that as in the case of medical facilities it should be possible at least in the larger industrial areas, for Government, local authorities and industrial managements to co-operate in the development of child welfare centres and women’s clinics.

“We believe the time is ripe for the introduction of legislation throughout India, making a maternity benefit scheme compulsory in respect of women permanently employed in industrial establishments on full time processes. We would exempt from such provisions seasonal and part-time workers and would extend legislation to those women employed full time in the perennial factories covered by the Factories Act. . . . Under present circumstances we do not recommend that the woman worker should be asked to pay any periodical contribution. . . . At this stage we recommend a more general extension of the schemes already in operation in Bombay and the Central Provinces. In those the entire cost of the benefit is borne by the employer and we recommend that, in the first instance, the proposed legislation should follow these lines. . . . We recommend that the maximum period for which any woman shall be entitled to the payment of maternity benefit be four weeks up to and including the day of her delivery and four weeks following that day. . . . The qualifying period of employment might be fixed at 12 months, but it should in no case be less than 9 months. . . . The closer the benefit can be linked with medical treatment the better. . . . Probably the best method is to give the woman a maternity benefit in any event and an additional confinement bonus only if a trained midwife is employed or hospital treatment is adopted. . . .



The administration of the Act should be entrusted to the factory inspection staff, and wherever possible to the women factory inspectors."

REARED ON OPIUM

The woman worker, when she returns to work after her confinement, has to make up her mind what to do with her baby. If there is a relative or an older child at home she may leave the baby there. Or, fearful for what may happen to it, she may take it with her to the factory. Some mills prohibit the bringing of infants into the mills, but many tolerate it for the sake of keeping the women contented. The baby lies on the floor by the mother, breathing in the jute or cotton fluff all day, and is fed at intervals. An unnatural stillness is noticed by even casual observers in many of these babies in the mills, and even more when they are found in the homes. Opium drugging of infants is very common among working mothers partly to keep the child quiet and partly to prevent it from being too hungry when the mother's milk supply is not sufficient. This opium drugging is a terrible tale of race suicide, and it is widely prevalent. It is partly responsible for the high infant mortality rates in the cities, for opium drugged babies seldom grow up to be healthy children.

The worst indictment of the modern factory system in India lies in the infant mortality statistics of the cities. The Bombay Government evidence to the Commission gave the following table of infant mortality rates :

		<i>Bombay Presidency</i>	<i>Bombay City</i>	<i>Abmedabad</i>	<i>Karachi</i>
1920	...	183·21	555·60	360·08	251·29
1921	...	178·11	672·12	348·10	270·25
1922	...	169·10	405·16	299·04	252·01
1923	...	159·76	413·91	297·61	218·46
1924	...	191·17	423·17	343·69	255·80
1925	...	162·01	359·05	322·74	222·29
1926	...	194·63	393·79	437·76	252·70
1927	...	161·42	319·12	287·27	211·02



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The causes of infant mortality are partly opium drugging, but also largely the housing conditions in the cities.

The Bombay City figures were worked out in connection with housing, and the infant mortality figures for 1927 according to rooms occupied were :

1 room	...	490	deaths per 1,000 births		
2 rooms	...	203	" "	" "	" "
3 "	...	222	" "	" "	" "
4 "	...	195	" "	" "	" "

It is an established fact that well run creches in mills are the best way of assuring that the babies are well looked after during the hours that their mothers are working in the factory. Bombay Presidency, since the appointment of a woman factory inspector, has made notable progress in the provision of creches in mills. The Chief Inspector of Factories for the Presidency in his report for 1929 stated that 15 creches were in operation in Bombay City with an average daily attendance of 371 children. *Only 7 infants of all those admitted to the creches had never been given opium, but after their admission the opium drugging of 243 babies was stopped.* "The children cared for in the creches will be the ultimate workers in the mills. There is a great contrast between the healthily reared children in the creches and the opium-doped infants left in the chawls."

No concerted effort has been made by the jute mill employers to keep the babies and children out of the factories. The babies lie beside their mothers on a pile of jute fluff, in a box, anywhere where they will be out of the way. The toddlers run about and push their fingers into the machinery, which is fenced for grown-ups but not for children. The Chief Inspector of Factories in Bengal reported 23 accidents in 1929 to children under 12 in the factories. One child of 4 years was suffocated while asleep under a pile of jute tow. Many minor accidents, some serious accidents and even deaths are reported every year among babies and children who are



brought in by their mothers. The best employers in Bengal have no desire to have children in the mills, but are unable to see any way to get the idea of creches made popular either among the workers or their fellow employers. The success of the infant welfare clinics at Titaghur and Kankinnarah show that trained women in charge can overcome prejudice and caste scruples among the women workers, but, as a member of the Commission said, it is a matter of *patient education*.

The Commission after reviewing the need for creches made the following recommendation :

“The Government of India, women doctors and representatives of women’s associations all stressed the importance of the provision of creches where an appreciable number of women are employed, and the bulk of employers, although preferring voluntary to compulsory schemes, also favoured their inauguration. We recommend therefore that creches should be provided in all places where women are employed in considerable numbers, and we would make the obligation a statutory one on all factories employing not less than 250 women. This statutory requirement could be embodied in the Factories Act, power also being given to Governments to require the establishment of creches in places employing fewer women than 250 where in their opinion the circumstances warranted it. The organisation and inspection of the factory creches should be one of the duties of the women factory inspectors.”

The provision of child welfare clinics has already made a great appeal to Indian women and the progress in this respect during the last ten years has been outstanding. Thought and care for the children of women workers in factories and mines, both in clinics and in creches, should make its own appeal to all who are alive to the needs of the industrial population. Here the burden of the women workers can be shared to some extent by those who are more fortunately placed. At least the children of these women workers can be given a fair start in life.



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Born in a chawl, reared on opium, bereft of fresh air and sunlight, what chance has a child of growing up a healthy citizen? The Commission have flung down a challenge to stop this fearful wastage of human life. Is it going to be taken up?



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## CHAPTER VIII

## EARNING AND SPENDING

“In our study of the People’s Livelihood we wish to think not simply in monetary scales of income and expenditure, but as far as possible *in concrete terms of satisfactions enjoyed*. It is to be borne in mind that the richness of a people’s life does not depend wholly on individual income and activity.”

*Conference on the People’s Livelihood in China, Feb., 1931.*

“They have no grievances except that they would like to have more of this or more of that.”

*Mineowners’ Evidence to the Commission in Bihar.*

## A LITTLE MORE

It was pay day at the A.B. Mill. Pay day was on the 20th of the month, and this was May and very hot even for Bombay. Sonoo shambled forward to the pay desk with heavy dragging footsteps. His feet were weighed down to earth not by the heat but by his cares and trials. As he had feared, the cashier handed him Rs. 16 instead of his usual monthly wage of Rs. 26. “Rs. 10 is deducted for damaged cloth,” chanted the cashier, “this cloth you will receive from the mukadam.” It was a chant which all the weavers dreaded. Rs. 5, Rs. 10, Rs. 15, sometimes their whole month’s wage was cut for damaged cloth. With his Rs. 16 knotted in the folds of his dhoti, Sonoo made his way to the mill gate. There he spied the Pathan moneylender standing just outside with two of



his ruffianly "assistants" beside him, pounding their lathis<sup>1</sup> on the ground in anticipation of a deal with their victims. Sonoo waited until several other men had collected at the gate and went out with them, hoping to hide among them and so escape notice. Just as he was dodging down a side street a shout from behind made him turn his head, and at the same moment a strong hand fell upon his neck. The Pathan shook him by the collar of his shirt till the cotton ripped and Sonoo's teeth rattled. "So—you would escape? You thought I should not see you? Pay me, pay me, or the lathis shall make you pay." With trembling hands Sonoo undid the knot in his dhoti and handed the Pathan Rs. 6. "That is not all. The interest is Rs. 8. There is more in your hand. Give it me." Sonoo murmured an explanation about the cut in his wages and the damaged cloth and finished up: "Indeed I cannot pay this month. It is not possible." The money-lender folded his arms and looked down from his height at the trembling Sonoo. "It shall be added to the capital. It shall be written in the book. I shall remember. Go."

Breaking into a shuffling run, Sonoo hurried through the narrow streets, his eyes on the ground, his heart full of heaviness. He had meant to stop at the drink shop on the way home and celebrate his earnings, but he had no heart for that to-day, and only wanted to get home. At the entrance to the chawl he had another rude awakening. The chowkidar shouted at him, "Your rent. Pay your rent," and blocked the entrance to the staircase while Sonoo again undid the knot in his dhoti. He handed out Rs. 6/2/-, and as the chowkidar went away, Sonoo looked at what was left in his hand. Rs. 3/14/- out of a wage of Rs. 26. . . . Rs. 3/14/- for a month's work, paid 20 days after it was due. . . . He leaned against the greasy wall of the chawl, and his legs nearly gave way beneath him. How could a man live?

Two hours later, Sonoo sat in the doorway of his single

<sup>1</sup> Poles with leaded ends.



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room smoking a bidi, and hoping a little breeze might come. In the semi-darkness of the room his wife Ratna moved about, putting away the remnants of the evening meal. Presently she squatted behind him and waited in silence until he grunted. Then she gave expression to the thoughts which were in both their minds. "Ai, Sonoo, how shall we live? Your damaged cloth you cannot sell for Rs. 10. You will not sell it for more than Rs. 6 in the bazaar. Behold this month I have earned Rs. 16. We shall have a little money for rice. But your shirt is torn and we cannot buy another. Krishna our son can earn 3 annas a day blacking shoes. But if he is out working the children here get no food all day, To the baby I gave opium this morning, and he sleeps still. He will cry for food when he wakes and I have so little milk for him. He will die too, as six of our children have died. Ten have I borne and here are only four. I must work that we may eat and while I work there is none to care for them." She looked round the small room 10 ft x 10, and with eyes accustomed to the darkness she measured and considered. "Sonoo, there are only six of us here. We must take in two boarders. There is room, and they will help to pay the rent. You shall find two men who will live here with us. That will help us. The children must have rice to fill their stomachs. They cry all day for hunger. At night they must be fed." Sonoo had punctuated the conversation hitherto with grunts, but when Ratna mentioned boarders he broke out into a torrent of curses. He cursed the mill and the mukadam, he cursed the chawl and the chowkidar, he cursed his poverty and the Pathan moneylender. Exhausted by his curses, he relapsed into silence, thinking gloomily of his debt of Rs. 600 for his marriage which had grown during the fourteen years of married life in a way that he failed to understand. Formerly he had only paid Rs. 2 a month interest. Defaults in payment had inevitably happened when his wife was laid up at the birth of a



child, and the monthly interest had now grown to Rs. 8. The Pathan had it all written in his book. Sonoo had not even got it written in his head.

His thoughts went to his children. When he was Krishna's age his mother had moved to Bombay and while she worked in the mill he had run freely about the streets, going to school when he liked. He wanted Krishna to go to school, but Krishna had discovered he could earn 3-4 annas a day as a shoe-black and Krishna thought it gave him more standing in the family if he worked than if he went to school. The six-year-old girl played in the gutter by the chawl all day. The two babies slept fitfully, left alone in the tenement room, doped with opium.

If only he had more money. He was always wanting more rice to fill his stomach, and just a little more dal<sup>1</sup> to flavour it. He was always wanting that drink which gave him a feeling of light-heartedness for a while. He was always wanting a new shirt and dhoti. He was always wanting to buy a new sari for his wife. He was always wanting to go to his village every year for the Shimga festival and to spend more than two weeks there. He was always wanting more of this or more of that. There was never enough.

He would sleep. Ratna was already asleep. They did not have to pay for sleeping. Sleep was free and a forgetting of misery.

### THE POWER ELEMENT IN THE HUMAN MACHINE

Sonoo in the cotton mill, Tulsi in the jute mill, Parbhu in the coal mine, Sham Lal on the railway, Satish Chandra on the ship—all of them left their villages and their fathers' fields to earn more money in new work. The lure of better living, the hope of earning more money are the incentives which bring them to the factory, the mine, the railway. The preceding chapters, describing conditions in the

<sup>1</sup> Pulse, usually cooked with curry powder.



various industries, must have shown that the hopes of the immigrant workers have not been justified. The wages which they could earn in the cities, in terms of the higher cost of living, did not deliver them from want, while other causes operated to undermine their health and working capacity. Hence there appears to settle down on the industrial workers a kind of fog of apathy. To those who have read the previous chapters this apathy will not be surprising. It comes from the low standard of living of the workers, as fogs spread over low lying land. On the higher levels the fog is dispersed. With a higher standard of living among the workers, apathy vanishes, and vigour and ambition take its place.

Throughout the greater part of the evidence to the Commission there was an underlying assumption on the part of many employers and of some Government officials, that the worker had a fixed standard of living and that no inducement would make him work any harder or earn any more than was necessary for that fixed standard. This was perhaps most apparent in the evidence from the mining centres. The Commission in an important chapter on the income of the industrial worker say :

“This view is frequently coupled with the belief that the worker has already attained the standard he desires. . . . But it is not difficult to show that the doctrine is not true of the great bulk of Indian industrial labour, for it is contradicted by the facts. . . . The evidence of unprejudiced observers regarding improvement in the general standard of living and the increase in the level of real wages show that the workers' earnings have risen, i.e., that the idea of any general fixed standard is fallacious. . . . In our terms of reference we are directed to report on the 'standard of living of the workers.' No part of our task has given us greater difficulty . . . . In Bengal, the leading industrial province of India, not even the construction of a cost of living index has been attempted, and a statistical analysis of earnings and expenditure is entirely lacking.



We find ourselves crippled by past neglect in this direction. . . . The material available is inadequate as a basis of any complete treatment of the workers' ills. . . . Even to such an elementary question as the extent to which the workers' earnings suffice to provide for their necessities no precise answer can be given."

The wages paid to the worker supply his power as a human machine. Generally speaking, high wages mean high power in the human machine, low wages low power. The rates of wages therefore are crucial in industry, for if men and women are not paid enough to live decently they cannot be efficient. It is not possible to enter here into the wages paid in the different industries. The Commission quote in their report wage tables which were prepared for them, and statistics about wages can be found in the annual reports of the Chief Inspectors of Factories and the Chief Inspector of Mines. An important point to note about the wage rates is that they vary not only from province to province and from centre to centre, but in the same city and even in the same mill. Inquiries into wages made by the Bombay Labour Office showed that in the cotton industry the same work in different mills was paid on different scales and even the same work in the same mill. Thus in one mill seven oilers were doing exactly the same work for the same time, for wages varying from 9 as. to Rs. 1/6/- a day. In the jute industry the Government of Bengal reported that "in two mills separated from each other by little more than a boundary wall, under the same managing agents, there is practically not a single entry of wages which is the same." The railway evidence emphasised the great need for standardisation especially in the large centres. The lack of standardisation in wages is an element in the insecurity felt by the worker and also a potent cause of the constant migration from mill to mill.

Wages considered either in terms of cost of living to the workers or of efficiency in the industry are low. It



has already been emphasised many times that the human machine in India is a low power machine, and the cause of that low power is mainly low wages. In a discussion on the capacity of the miners to produce more coal, the Chief Inspector of Mines told the Commission: "Wages are *the* question." The Commission endorse this: "It is impossible to expect any high standard of efficiency on the wages now paid in many branches of industry."

In their report they go very thoroughly into the practicality of minimum wage machinery. Many of the trade unions in their evidence urged the necessity for a minimum wage, not only on the ground of providing the poorest paid workers with the minimum necessary for a livelihood but also with a view to introducing a third element, namely an impartial chairman, into negotiations about wages. As many trade unions pointed out, it is not usual to have any wage negotiations. In the majority of works wages are fixed arbitrarily by the employer. The Commission conclude their survey of the possibilities of minimum wage machinery with a renewed emphasis on the need for further investigations into wages and standards of living. They also say: "We recommend that of the industries which come within our terms of reference, those referred to in the chapter dealing with unregulated factories be examined in the first instance with a view to the need and possibility of instituting minimum wage-fixing machinery."

When the worker comes to the pay desk to receive his wages he may be paid for a month's work, or two weeks, or one week. The periods of wage payments vary in different parts of India. It is weekly in jute mills, fortnightly in the Ahmedabad cotton mills, and monthly in the rest of the cotton industry and in the more skilled trades such as engineering and iron and steel. In the mines, payment is usually weekly and in unskilled work daily. The best firms pay within the shortest times possible for the calculation of the wages. Thus the Angus Jute Company in



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Calcutta never hold more than two days unpaid wages in their hands, whereas some industries which pay monthly wages may hold 15-25 days unpaid wages in their hands.

It is not difficult to see that the period of wage payment, and also the delay in making that payment, matter a great deal to the worker. The man newly arrived at a cotton mill may not receive his wages for six or seven weeks after he begins work. During that time he has to live and to live on credit. The Commission says: "Long intervals between wage payments invariably add to the embarrassments of the poor, and have an appreciable influence in binding the worker to the moneylender. . . . We believe that a reduction in the period of payment would have a definite effect on efficiency. It would also assist the worker to more judicious expenditure."

We come now to a distinction between wages and earnings, a difference which is of great importance if we are to understand the position of the worker. In the case of Sonoo his monthly wage was Rs. 26; his earnings on May 20th were Rs. 16. The distinction represents the difference between the money value of a man's wage rate and the actual sum he receives after any deductions have been made. The Commission had extensive evidence on the deductions made from the workers' wages. These deductions represent fines for lack of discipline, deductions for damaged goods or tools, or for some benefit provided by the employer. In all cases it means that the worker coming up to the pay desk receives less than his regular wage. This adds to the general insecurity he feels about his work and prospects. Fining in large scale industry is universal except in Tata's Iron and Steel Works and the Tin Plate Company at Jamshedpur. It was emphasised by trade unions and social service agencies that fining was often excessive, generally in the hands of subordinates, and always a grievance. "Even where fines are not excessive the workers do not get an opportunity to prove the injustice done to them through the imposition of fines



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by their immediate superiors." There is no legislation governing the imposition of fines such as exists in England under the Trade Acts. The Bombay Labour Office made an inquiry into the system of fining in 1928 and found that no information about fines was ever given to the workers beyond posting a notice.

The Commission say about deductions in general :

"In all cases of deduction we consider that there is strong ground for legislative regulation. In the first place the worker is utterly helpless in the matter. . . . Further, the fact that in many cases the worker's wages suffice for little more than the purchase of the primary necessities of life makes even a small deduction a definite hardship. . . . Even when actual hardship is not caused, fines have an irritating effect on the worker and create a sense of injustice."

### IN THE BAZAAR

Food, fuel, clothes and rent : these are the "primary necessities of life" which Sonoo and Ratna and all the other industrial families have to meet from the earnings they receive at the pay desk. As with all families living near the poverty line, rent is the first charge on income. Whatever the earnings, the rent must be paid or the family will be evicted from their room. With the other primary necessities, clothes and food and fuel to cook the food, it is often a case of a choice between clothes or food. As a trade union said in their evidence : "To buy food they economise on clothes ; if they must buy clothes they starve."

We have already seen how little data there is for estimating the cost of living in India. The bulk of the money for food is spent on cereals which fill the stomach but do not supply an adequate diet. In many cities the families of industrial workers cannot afford more than a very small sum for milk or ghi, and vegetables and fruit are too expensive for most



to buy. Two valuable inquiries made by the Bombay Labour Office in Sholapur and Ahmedabad among cotton mill workers show the very high percentage of the earnings spent on the primary necessities, food, fuel, clothing and rent. In Sholapur it was 83 per cent. of the total expenditure and in Ahmedabad 85 per cent. The budgets show under additional necessary expenditure items such as washing, barber, household necessities. Interest charges on debt are a large item, and there are small sums for tobacco, liquor and travelling to the village of origin. The Commission conclude: "The remainder, if any, can be devoted to the few pleasures that are open to the illiterate. These facts are best left to speak for themselves, and it is unnecessary to emphasise the general poverty they disclose."

The inquiries in Sholapur and Ahmedabad among the cotton mill workers are from the province where wages are higher than in any other province in India. From Bombay and the Punjab the wage levels drop to Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and then drop again to Madras, the Central Provinces and the United Provinces. With the drop in wages comes a drop in the standard of living. More money is spent on rice, less on ghi and vegetables. the rooms are more crowded, the clothes are more ragged. Poverty and want come near the starvation line, and when an unexpected expenditure on illness or death has to be met, the margin between poverty and starvation shrinks again. Over all hangs the black cloud of debt. This perpetual menace of debt means that any increase in wages does not lead to the possibility of "satisfactions to be enjoyed" but to an attempt to meet the claims of the moneylender.

### A FAMILY INCOME

One result of the general poverty disclosed is that in the words of the Committee's report :



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“In respect both of income and expenditure it is the family and not the individual that is important in relation to the standard of living. . . .” It is impossible under the present standards of earnings for the man to be considered the “rice-winner” of the family. The women must go out to work also, and we have seen in the previous chapter the strain imposed on them by the double responsibility of home making and factory work. From all parts of India evidence was forthcoming that it was necessity which drove the women to work in the mills and mines. An inquiry made in Sholapur by the National Christian Council in 1928, into the economic status of women workers in the mills, brought out some very pertinent facts. 482 cases were investigated out of a total of 4,335 women employed in five cotton mills. 446 of these women were married. “Some attempt was made to find out if the women worked willingly or if they were only driven to it by economic necessity. Of the total 482 questioned, 388 worked only from necessity and would remain at home if not driven to the mills by economic pressure.”

The most serious indictment of the present industrial situation, however, is the extent to which families depend on the children's earnings to meet the necessary expenditure. The Senior Certifying Surgeon in Bengal giving evidence before the Commission and commenting on the fact that some jute mills had discharged all their children said: “If children are not employed by mills till they attain adult age it means an extra burden on their parents to feed and clothe them, which they cannot afford to do, and the natural result will probably be that very soon parents will demand extra wages, and labour in general is likely to become discontented and cause trouble.”

Are children to be exploited because their parents do not earn enough to support them? Is this dependence on the children's earnings entirely an economic question, or can it be met by some social readjustment?



## EARNING AND SPENDING

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### THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO ITS CHILDHOOD

It still remains for India to adopt as a principle that every child has a right to its childhood, that is to an endowment of health, play and education with which to begin life. Where extreme poverty prevails the child's right is unknown and unrecognised. A social revolution of no small magnitude has been effected by the proposals of the Commission to limit the age of *working children*. They recommend that in the factories which are at present unregulated, subject to statutory limitation of numbers employed in those factories, children shall not begin to work until they are ten years old. The same age limit is proposed for children working on plantations. With regard to the mines, where it is only since 1923 that children were excluded, they say :

“Under the present law, children under the age of thirteen years may not be employed in mines either above or below ground and there are no half-timers. . . . We recommend that no child under the age of fourteen should in future be permitted to work in or about the mines.”

The employment of children in the docks, on the coaling of ships, was found by the Commission to be the practice in one port. On this they make the following recommendation :

“As in our view work of this kind is unsuitable for children and a system of half-time working is not practicable, we recommend that the minimum age should be raised to fourteen years.”

On public works, such as irrigation works and road making, which is almost invariably under the contract system, the Commission recommend that “contracts should stipulate the age below which persons should not be employed and this should in no case be less than twelve years.” Four members of the Commission, being of opinion that this work is comparable to that on the mines and docks, recommend fourteen years as the minimum age.



These proposals of the Commission cover all the organised industries except those coming under the Factories Act. If the full rights of childhood, i.e., up to 14 or 15 years of age, cannot be granted yet under present social and economic conditions in India, at least up to the age of 10 the child's right to its childhood will be guarded by the State, *in so far as legislation follows the Commission's recommendations.* In the factories and workshops under the Factories Act children may not be employed under the age of 12. Between the ages of 12 and 15, subject to their being certified physically fit, they may be employed for not more than 6 hours a day.

The Commission recommend that the hours of children in factories should be limited to 5 per day, with the probability that in factories working a 9-hour day for adults, half-timers will work 4½ hours. They also recommend that "persons between the ages of 15 and 16 should not be employed as adults in factories unless they are in possession of medical certificates certifying them as physically fit for adult employment." With regard to the age of the half-timers the Commission is divided. Four members consider that the minimum age should be raised immediately to 13. The rest of the Commission recommend no change. The arguments on both sides should be carefully studied in the report, as they throw light on the economic pressure among industrial families, on the difficulties in the administration of the law, and on the position of India in the international labour world. The International Convention of 1921 laid down 14 as the minimum age for admission of children into industrial employment. Special exemption was made for India fixing the minimum age as 12. Is India justified in continuing to claim that exemption?

The Commission has laid down as a standard to be achieved that children should not work in any organised industry before the age of 10. It remains for the public and the Government of India first to give effect to that proposal in legislation, and secondly to set the seal on the progress



made by giving the child his right to free primary education. There is no doubt that the enforcement of compulsory education would go a long way towards solving the problem of the child, both of whose parents are at work all day, and whose only occupation, if he is not a wage-earner, is to run the streets. In the proposals of the Commission can be found a "Charter of the Rights of Childhood," in the recommendations dealing with health measures for the industrial population, with the limitation of the age of employment, and with the promotion of education. Health, freedom and education: those are the paramount rights of childhood. The Commission lay stress on the fact that the responsibility for education is primarily one for the community. The "Charter of the Rights of Childhood" will be incomplete unless the community does its part. The Commission make a strong case for the preferential treatment of industrial areas, pointing out the benefits to be reaped in industry by a future educated industrial class. The ills of the workers are indeed mostly economic. But in order to lift themselves above the present level of miserable endurance, they need the stimulus of education, the dynamite of an awakened mind. Taking the long view, education of the children is indispensable. Taking any view, it is part of the right of their childhood.

#### DISOWNING THEIR CHILDREN

To meet the need of the family, children are put in work. Where the law restricts their working to 6 hours a day, it is a not uncommon practice for a child to work half the day in one mill and half the day in another, to the second mill under an assumed name. In the jute mills in Bengal the following evidence was given by the Certifying Surgeon:

"The system of shifts in multiple shift mills offers every opportunity for employment beyond legal limits, and in some mills children are actually working as many



as 11 or 12 hours per day. Generally speaking, it may be stated that in my opinion approximately 25 per cent. of the children employed in jute mills work longer hours than the law permits, thereby affecting and jeopardising their general health and physique.

Detection of double employment is exceedingly difficult as children give false names and particulars to obtain more than one medical certificate. My experience is that a large number obtain three or more general medical certificates. Even if cases are detected prosecution would be futile as it is practically impossible to prove the consent or connivance of anyone concerned, as it is a common practice for parents to disown their children, and children their parents if they have the slightest suspicion that trouble may arise from the admission. Children, for fear of being beaten, cannot and will not be forced to make complaints to mill managers of the ways in which they are victimised."

The multiple shift system has now practically disappeared. Nevertheless the recent existence of such a situation speaks for itself. The poverty of the people outwits the law, and the rapacity of the sardar assists them in so doing. The evil of the double employment of children and the difficulties of putting it down should be a cogent argument against reverting to multiple shifts.

### THE CURSE OF CREDIT

The industrial families who, to meet their simplest needs, are forced to crowd their rooms with boarders, to put an intolerable strain on their women, to withhold from their children the right to their childhood—these families are born, live and die under a curse. That curse is the curse of credit. Poverty, borrowing, debt, interest, poverty, borrowing, debt, interest—so the circle begins and continues; and with each repetition the outlook of the worker

becomes more hopeless. There are small debts to meet the cost of daily living; there are large debts to meet big expenses such as marriages and funerals, where expenditure out of all proportion to the income of the worker is largely dictated by custom and followed regardless of consequences. The Commission say of this devastating facility for credit:

“It is the large debts which are incurred not from economic necessity but on account of social pressure and custom that most enslave the worker. The fatal weakness in the present system is the comparative ease with which the worker can borrow sums which he has little prospect of being able to repay. . . . The offer of cash to the extent of Rs. 100-200 in exchange for a thumb-print is almost irresistible. The lack of forethought in mortgaging the future is illustrated by the fact that the thumb-print is frequently given on a blank document or the page of a book. It is by no means uncommon for the moneylender to fill in both the capital sum and the interest subsequently, and in any case the borrower has no copy of the transaction. The worker's debts are due to a large extent to the fact that the lender finds in him a profitable investment and is ready and indeed eager to give the worker money which it is contrary to the latter's interest to accept.”

The Commission devote an entire chapter to the question of indebtedness, in so doing stressing their belief in the fundamental importance of this side of the worker's life. At the outset of the chapter they say:

“Among the causes responsible for the low standard of living of the worker, indebtedness must be given a high place. . . . We are satisfied that the majority of Indian workers are in debt for the greater part of their working lives. Many indeed are born in debt, and it evokes both admiration and regret to find how commonly a son assumes responsibility for his father's debt, an obligation which rests on religious and social but seldom



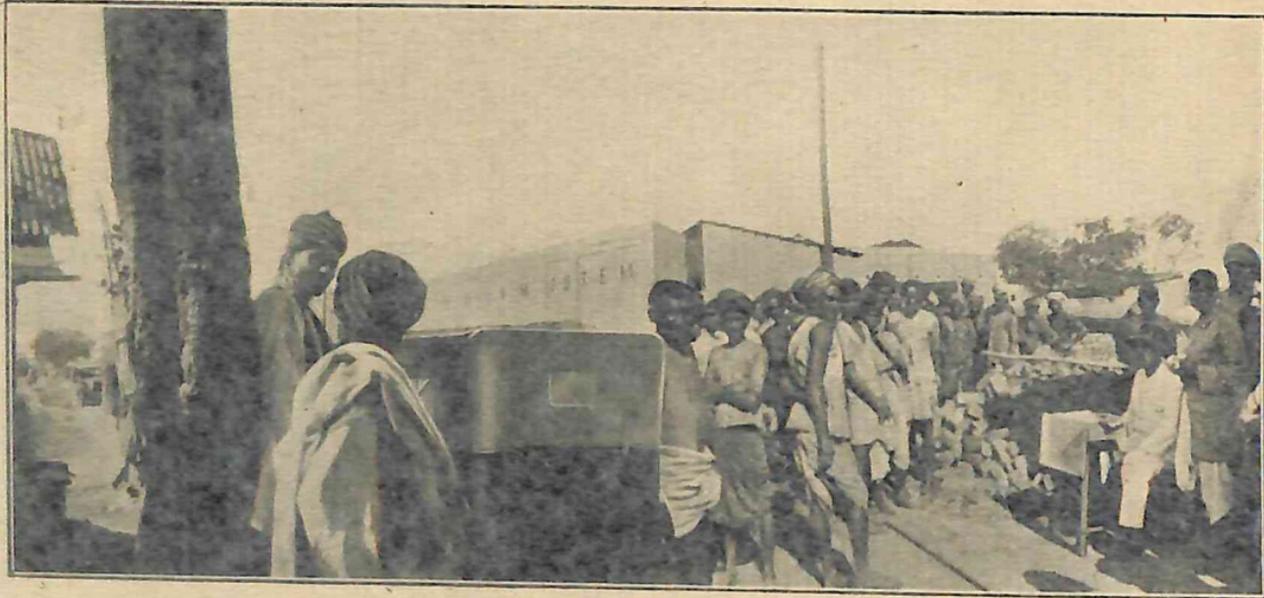
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on legal sanctions. . . . It is estimated that in most industrial centres the proportion of families or individuals who are in debt is not less than two-thirds of the whole."

They continue by saying that "the burden of debt is aggravated out of all proportion by the rate of interest which has to be paid." A common rate is 75 per cent. per annum. "Much higher rates are also charged, 150 per cent. or more per annum being by no means uncommon." They trace the deepening of the curse of credit to the self-interest of the moneylender.

"The prompt repayment of the capital is not usually desired by the moneylender; he prefers to remain a creditor and receive interest. . . . But defaults are recorded so that the borrowing of a trifling sum can, and not uncommonly does, lead in a few years to a permanent and heavy load of debt. . . . In a number of cases a stage is reached when the moneylender takes from the worker the whole of his wages, paying him only sufficient for subsistence, and even puts the members of the worker's family to work on a similar basis. . . . Whatever the figure of actual payment, the result is almost invariable; the indebted worker has to give all of what might otherwise be his savings to the moneylender, and these payments are not merely the surplus that would be spent on petty luxuries; they have often to be provided by trenching on the primary needs of a healthy life."

The Pathan who waited to pounce on Sonoo outside the mill gate is a figure all too well known in the industrial areas. He and his swaggering ruffians brandishing their lathis beset the mill gates on pay day, or follow their victims to the chawls or bustis and there deal summarily with them. A threat of violence may be enough to extort some payment of the interest due. If threats do not avail the lathi with its leaded end is laid about the shoulders of the wretched man till he hands over some of his earnings. In some mills the moneylender even stands by the pay-desk and receives his interest on the spot. Again, he may receive



PATHAN MONEYLENDER WATCHING JUTE MILL WORKERS BEING PAID



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an attachment of wages in a law court and so pocket the whole of the worker's wages.

The Chief Inspector of Factories of Bombay in his annual reports for 1928 and 1929 lays stress on the relation between indebtedness and industrial unrest. He speaks of one mill where larger numbers of workers had been engaged, and where the influx of moneylenders had increased almost pro rata with the increase in the number of workers. "Sustained efforts to enable mill hands to get out of debt, to borrow where inevitable at reasonable rates of interest, and to wean them from their habits of piling up debts through not paying their interest charges regularly, will have considerable bearing on the wages problem and on unrest among the workers."

#### BREAKING THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

The poverty and indebtedness of the Indian industrial worker affect not only his own standard of living and his needs as a human being, but also his efficiency as a worker. Debt undermines the foundations of his home, and debt and poverty together sap his efficiency. The Commission state the situation thus in their report :

"It must be admitted that the Indian industrial worker produces less per unit than the worker in any other country claiming to rank as a leading industrial nation. The causes of this low efficiency are complex. Some are to be found in the climate of India and other factors ; but a powerful influence is exercised everywhere by the low standard of living. Inefficiency is attributable to lack both of physical energy and mental vigour. These are to a large extent different aspects of the same defect, for physical weakness cuts at the root of ambition, initiative and desire. This weakness arises from the hardships to which the worker is subjected. . . . These hardships are mainly the result of inability to afford anything better, and this in its turn arises from low efficiency. Thus poverty leads to bad

conditions, bad conditions to inefficiency, and inefficiency to poverty. We believe in attempting to break the vicious circle at as many points as possible."

The Commission's recommendations which are aimed at breaking this vicious circle are here given. On the subject of standardisation of wages they say:

"We urge that every effort be made in Bombay to put the policy of standardisation into operation at the earliest possible moment. . . . We recommend that the jute industry, which has all the advantages of a high degree of internal organisation on the employers' side, take early steps to investigate the possibility of standardisation of wage rates, both for time and piece workers, associating with it representatives of bona fide trade unions."

On the subject of wage periods and delayed payment of wages the Commission makes the following proposals:

"We recommend the general adoption of a system of weekly payments in the belief that it will have important effects on both welfare and efficiency. . . . At the same time we are alive to the advisability of proceeding gradually in matters of this kind. . . . While we would urge on employers everywhere the adoption of the system of weekly payments, we are not prepared to advocate their general enforcement by Government at the present time."

To deal with the indebtedness of the industrial worker the Commission make most drastic proposals. These ought to be studied in the report, for no extracts can do justice to the thoroughness of the Commission's investigations and recommendations. They are here proposing another social revolution, and as in the case of the limitation of the age of working children, the support and interest of the public will be necessary to make this revolution succeed. It is important to follow their distinction between the position of agricultural workers, who can generally offer some security for borrowing, and the industrial worker who cannot pledge anything but his future earning capacity.



After examining the difficulties and possibilities of co-operative credit movement among industrial workers, and commending a scheme in operation on the B.B. and C. I. Railway, they conclude : " Even if the co-operative credit movement were to spread among industrial workers it would not strike at the heart of the worker's difficulties. Credit, in the sense of borrowing capacity, is not the worker's need ; it would be nearer the truth to describe it as his curse. . . . "

They then proceed to their important and far-reaching recommendations.

" Our proposals are mainly directed towards making it unprofitable for the moneylender to advance to workers amounts which are beyond their power to repay.

" Under the Civil Procedure Code it is possible for a moneylender to secure the attachment of the wages of anyone who is not a labourer or a domestic servant. We recommend that the salary and wages of every workman receiving less than Rs. 300 a month be exempted entirely from the possibility of attachment.

" As the law stands at present male debtors are liable to be arrested and imprisoned for 6 months in execution of a decree for the payment of more than Rs. 50, and for 6 weeks in the case of a smaller sum. . . . We recommend that at least so far as industrial workers in receipt of wages or salary amounting to less than Rs. 100 a month are concerned, arrest and imprisonment for debt be abolished, except where the debtor has been proved to be both able and unwilling to pay.

" We recommend a new procedure for the liquidation of unsecured debts due from workmen. We contemplate that on the presentation of an application by a workman giving a statement of his debts and creditors and assets, the court should issue a notice to the creditors and should thereafter in a summary inquiry estimate the workman's assets, his probable earnings and reasonable expenditure for the maintenance of himself and his family during the



ensuing two years. The court, having assessed these, would issue a decree based on the difference between the sums. Execution of this decree would then be obtained in the usual way, but it should not be possible to keep the decree alive for more than 3 years in all. . . . The debts should rank preferentially in order of their age, the oldest debts having priority.

“The great majority of debts never come within the cognisance of a court, and the workman’s knowledge of his legal rights and capacity to evoke them are both limited. But if the law is substantially altered in the direction of the protection of the debtor, all the other forces working to protect him will be greatly strengthened. We have noted with appreciation the efforts made by social workers, co-operators, labour leaders, employers and others to save workmen from heavy debts, but the scales are at present so heavily weighted in favour of the moneylender as to make these efforts unduly difficult and largely ineffective. Our recommendations are designed partly to place powerful weapons in the hands of all who are prepared to assist the workman, and we hope that they will lead to much greater activity in the matter of debt prevention and debt redemption on the part of trade unions, employers and individuals as well as associations working for social betterment.”

Where there is no court except the “court of the lathi,” the moneylender has to be dealt with in a different way. “We recommend that besetting an industrial establishment for the recovery of debts be made a criminal and cognisable offence. Besetting might be defined as loitering within the precincts or near or within the sight of any gate or outlet of the establishment.”

It will by now have become only too apparent that the workers have no opportunities for saving for old age. Where return to the village for old age is not possible, some provision must be made. On this subject the Commission say :



“Workers in the main are unable to save out of their low earnings against old age. Those in intimate touch with the life of the workers know something of the misery in which many pass their old age. The necessity for making some provision against old age needs no emphasis. . . . We recommend that, until such time as it is found practicable to institute either a general scheme of old age pensions or provident funds for industrial workers, Government should, wherever possible, encourage employers by financial grants or other means to inaugurate schemes of this nature for their employees.”

Through these proposals a determined attempt is made to release the workers from the heaviest shackles of poverty and debt. If these recommendations are put into effect and followed by public interest and support they should remove a great deal of the present exploitation of the workers' ignorance and need. But the workers themselves need to be made conscious of these changes and to cooperate in them willingly. For that important step they will need the help of the community—Will it be forthcoming?

The Commission finish this most trenchant chapter with the following comment, which is a challenge to the public to throw off the paralysis which a difficult situation so often produces: “In dealing with matters of this kind there seems to us to be a tendency to reject the imperfect weapon and to wait in the hope that at some future date the perfect one will be available. Indebtedness is a formidable question, but its magnitude enhances the importance of attacking it and increases the results to be secured by successful effort. . . . There is no need to dwell on the great advantages to Indian industry that would immediately accrue from even a small increase in the purchasing power of the masses.”



## CHAPTER IX

## MASTERS AND MEN

“Everything that we have seen in India has forced upon us the conviction that the need of organisation among Indian workmen is great. . . . Nothing but a strong Trade Union movement will give the Indian workman adequate protection. . . . It is in the power to combine that labour has the only effective safeguard against exploitation, and the only lasting security against inhumane conditions.”

*Report of the Commission, Chapter XXI.*

## AN UNEVEN BALANCE

The loud honk of a car behind them made Tulsi jump one way and Tilasari the other. The Bentley slid through the gates of the jute mill, and Tulsi caught a glimpse of two men leaning back in the shade of the interior. While he and Tilasari waited in the lane for the dust raised by the big car to subside, he thought: “That is a good way to go—no standing in the sun, no choking in the dust, no walking when you are tired.” The next morning Tulsi heard the sardar telling some of the workers that the mill was going on short time. The sardar said there would be no work next week; no wages would be paid, only khoraki<sup>1</sup>; it would be so every fourth week; the sahibs had given an order. Tulsi thought of the big car at the mill gate and wondered if the sahibs in it were the

<sup>1</sup> Allowance.



ones who had given the order about short time. Such was life : for the sahibs a big car, shade, giving orders ; for him trudging through the dust and sun, and wondering how to make ends meet with only khoraki and no wages to be earned.

Tulsi would have wondered still more if he had seen the meeting in the board room in Clive Street, Calcutta, where the decision had been taken to put the mill on short time. It was the board room of a firm which had several trade interests. Decisions went out from that room to affect the lives of jute mill workers, coal miners, tea garden workers. Such decisions, based on the needs and interests of the trades, called for a high degree of skill and judgment, involving as they did the fortunes of hundreds of shareholders whose money was entrusted to the company. Equally too were the fortunes of thousands of workers involved, who in another way were dependent on the prosperity of the trade. Their day-to-day living was vitally affected by the decisions made in the Clive Street board room. Above Tulsi and his immediate boss, the sardar, rose an elaborate structure up to the heights of the board room. At the bottom of the structure were the workers, dependent for their livelihood on the wages they earned. At the top of the structure were the directors, declaring the policy and the dividends of the company. Wages at the bottom ; profits and losses at the top—they were the visible part of the structure. But the vast enterprise was really held together and supported on the fragile framework of human relationships. Those human relationships were to Tulsi a glimpse of the sahibs in a big car and the tyranny of his sardar. They were to the directors a glimpse of Tulsi among many others in the spinning shed, and the duty of examining the statistics of employees submitted to them by the managers.

This is the price paid for modern industry. Gone is the old master with his apprentices and servants working for him, and sharing alike good and bad fortunes. In



large scale company organisation the gulf between the worker on the machine and the ultimate chief appears immense. From that gulf and the barrier which it sets up to any human relations, arise strikes and lockouts and all the host of capital-labour difficulties with which the modern world is only too familiar. Though India has recently come into the world of industry, she has entered at a most critical time and has to solve not only the technical problems of industry, but also the much more intricate problems of human relationships. The Commission say in their report :

“An immense amount of thought and toil has been devoted to surmounting the technical, financial and commercial difficulties in the way of industrial development in India. We believe that this will fail to secure the results it deserves unless much more attention is given to the difficult sphere of human relationships. Weakness in this direction has already produced serious effects and the outlook in some of the centres we visited was menacing. Unless a vigorous effort is made to effect an improvement, the development of large scale enterprise is likely to be difficult and precarious.”

In a recent book <sup>1</sup> industrial relationships in the modern world were thus described : “Industrial society is crossed by a horizontal division, and organised forces are massed on each side of it. Sometimes they meet in open collision : more often they watch each other, in at least nominal peace, across the frontier, relying on treaties negotiated by them. . . . The permanent aim of their organisation and power, as distinct from their immediate objectives, is to diminish this inequality or maintain its existence, to consolidate its gain or resist encroachments upon it.” Labour’s awakening to consciousness of its own power has been the most significant event of the social history of the last fifty years in Europe, culminating in the Soviet Revolution. Labour sees that at present its co-operation is essential to production and



therefore to the welfare of the capitalists. Hence the struggles of labour take on a definite purpose: for some, equality and co-operation; for others, conquest and a sharing of the spoils; *for all, the aim is an ultimate end to the uneven balance.*

On to the life of India with its ancient customs and long established social traditions has been grafted this new growth of modern industry and modern social relations. This superstructure of human relations is the most vital and most vulnerable part of industry in India to-day. This instability in the relations between masters and men stood out in the evidence before the Commission. Everywhere the weakness of the workers was laid bare. This weakness and their lack of organisation renders them liable to exploitation in more ways than one. They may be exploited by the capitalist. They may be exploited by the politician. They may be exploited by the so-called "labour leader" who is out for his own ends. How are they to defend themselves? In the midst of the difficulties of their individual adjustment to factory and to slum, they have to go one step further, a very difficult step, and learn, as the Commission said in their report, that "only in the power to combine will they have any effective safeguard against exploitation."

What are those weights in the scale which bear down so heavily on the employers' side in this uneven balance? The largest and by far the most important weight is marked "Organisation." The evidence before the Commission in every province and in every industry contained statements by employers' associations and Chambers of Commerce. These associations are highly organised, designed to promote business interests, and through the Chambers of Commerce appointing representatives to the legislatures to safeguard those interests. They have therefore not only economic power but also no small measure of political power. On the other hand are the trade unions, most of them struggling for existence and beyond them the great



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majority of the workers, entirely unorganised. The transition from personal loyalty to his master to group loyalty to his fellows is a very difficult one for Indian workers. Nevertheless organisations of the workers, holding within them as they do the possibilities of collective bargaining, are the only sure way to redress the balance.

The second weight in the scale in favour of the employers is marked "Education." The big employers in India are highly educated and trained men. With few exceptions the workers are illiterate and untrained. With the advantage of their education and knowledge the employers can take the long view, so important in industry and the conduct of business. The ignorant worker unless he is exceptionally intelligent cannot take anything but a short view, and his immediate needs obliterate every other consideration.

A third weight in favour of the employer is the obvious contrast between wealth and poverty. It is the major contrast between employers and workers all over the world, but it is even more evident in the east than in the west. It is not the actual possession of wealth and the actual poverty of possessions which make the contrast so marked. It is the difference between security with a bank balance to fall back on on one side, and on the other precariousness with nothing but the work of his hands and his fragile health on which to depend.

### THE UPRISING OF LABOUR CONSCIOUSNESS

In the past twelve years since the war, the Labour Movement has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in India, China and Japan. The different forms which the movement has taken in the three countries reflect the varying circumstances in which it arose. In the future it will be possible to see this development a little more in perspective and to trace the contributing influences



which have built up the workers' organisations. Will history establish that in Japan, where the workers have the great primary advantage of education, they have nevertheless had to contend with the greatest difficulties in organising; while in China where the workers are least educated they have had the most encouragement?

What about India? There ten years ago and more, doubt was often expressed in various circles whether it was wise to attempt to set up in India trade unionism on western lines, because it was an alien growth. The same was said about the British Parliamentary system as the model for the Central and Provincial Governments. Nothing is more probable to-day than that the parliamentary system and trade unionism have come to stay in India. The workers have to be educated into both simultaneously.

The Commission in the report emphasised the economic origin of the unions :

“The leading industries at the close of the war were yielding phenomenal profits but wages lagged behind prices, and labour, so far from participating in the unprecedented prosperity, often found conditions harder than before. The world-wide uprising of labour consciousness extended to India, where for the first time the mass of industrial workers awoke to their disabilities, particularly in the matter of wages and hours, and to the possibility of combination.”

They go on to describe the second important influence in the growth of the unions, the political influence. “The effect of this surge was enhanced by political turmoil which added to the prevailing feeling of unrest and assisted to provide willing leaders of a trade union movement.” The industrial workers like every other class in the country were stirred by the general awakening and feeling out after independence and political expression. The air was full of such ideas and ideas travel fast and far. In addition to the general political awakening the championship by Mr. Gandhi of the depressed classes became widely known.



On the soil prepared by economic need these seed thoughts fell and bore fruit.

The establishment of the International Labour Office was undoubtedly an important influence in the growth of the ideas of combination among the workers. In order that their representative to the International Labour Conference might be representative of Indian labour, the All-India Trade Union Congress was founded in 1920. The Conventions adopted by the International Labour Conferences became widely known in Labour circles and made their appeal because they represent conditions actually achieved in certain countries, and therefore they are a definite goal to aim at.

A landmark in the progress of trade unionism in India was the Trade Unions Act of 1926. The Government of India memorandum stated: "The object of the Trade Unions Act was to give trade unions in India the necessary protection from civil suits and from the criminal law relating to conspiracy in order to enable them to carry on their legitimate activities." Unions desiring this protection were required to register, and registration involved a regular return of membership and the preparation of audited accounts. Unregistered unions had no such protection. It was evident throughout the evidence of the trade unions before the Commission that the Act had been a means of their claiming recognition from the employers.

In surveying the main industries in India from the point of view of trade union organisation, there are, as might be expected, wide variations. The Commission say in the report:

"Transport is perhaps the best organised section of industry; the railway workers and seamen support a number of live unions, and dock workers generally have some organisation. Combination is fairly general among Government employees; the stronger unions here are mainly those constituted of persons outside the ranks of labour, but there are unions of some strength within



these ranks. Printers, with their educational advantages and more settled conditions, find the formation of unions easy, but hitherto these have not proved very effective, being strongest in Government presses and weakest where the need is greatest." It is interesting to notice here that there is a parallel situation in Japan, where the organised workers in transport form 26.7 per cent. of the total numbers organised.

The Commission continue: "The textile workers have on the whole been slow to organise. Up to 1926 there was no effective organisation of the cotton mill workers in Bombay, and even now very few of the jute mill workers in Bengal can be regarded as regularly organised. In Madras on the other hand, the cotton mills where organisation began, have remained as a focus of trade union activity. In Ahmedabad, the workers, excluding the Musalman weavers, are organised in a group of craft unions, which, participating in a common federation, have a strength and cohesion probably greater than those of any other labour unions. This may be due to the strength of the trade guilds which were in effective existence as late as 1870. . . . Mining workers are poorly organised in every field and in the plantations genuine organisation on the labour side is quite unknown. Measured geographically, trade unionism is strongest in Bombay Presidency and weakest in Bengal."

Those in India who desire to see a redress of the uneven balance must set their faces steadfastly towards the attainment of effective organisation among the workers. In their report the Commission emphasise this necessity. "Legislation can act as a palliative and prevent the graver abuses, but there are strict limitations to the power of Government and the public to protect workers who are unable to protect themselves. Labour laws indeed find one of their most effective sanctions in the support of organised unions. . . . Machinery such as industrial tribunals and conciliation boards can assist labour, but its operation is seriously hampered without organisation. . . .



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*Nothing but a strong trade union movement will give the Indian workman adequate protection."*

## THE PATH OF PROGRESS

The difficulties of the trade unions are many. Among them are two which have been stressed in every preceding chapter, the ignorance and the poverty of the great majority of the workers. A trade union depends on the understanding of co-operation by the members and the willingness to sacrifice individual interests for the good of the group. Hence a certain discipline in attending meetings and obeying orders and paying contributions is required. It is not easy for anyone to exchange one community for another, and for the peasant who has left his village community accepting a trade union as a substitute is a difficult step. The diversity of language and caste and "country" make any group in a big factory town an artificial one, and it needs much patient education to show the workers their real community of interests. If to these difficulties are added the constant migration from town to village, and from factory to factory, it is apparent that the difficulties of organisation are indeed immense. Anyone who has had even the smallest experience of trade union work knows that in Europe it is a constant struggle to keep before workers the aims and objects of the union. When there is a fight involved it is not so hard. But to preserve the organisation in order that it may be effective in a possible future fight is rather like the task of Sisyphus who, whenever he succeeded in pushing a mighty rock to the top of a hill, found that it rolled down and he had to begin again.

The history of Trade Unionism in the west has shown that men and women who in a spirit of social service help the unions to get started and stand by them until the members can manage for themselves are serving the cause of the workers. The experience of China and Japan in



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Organising a modern Trade Union movement has been the same. Mr. Bunji Suzuki, the "father" of trade unionism in Japan, said in a recent speech: "The labour movement requires intellectual leadership in its first stages of development; but since I founded the first trade union in Japan twenty years ago, the labour movement in our country has developed to such an extent that it no longer demands the leadership of the educated class."

The Commission give as the two fundamental deficiencies in the Indian Trade Union movement, the lack of a democratic spirit and the lack of education. "The democratic ideal has still to be developed in the Indian worker, and the lack of education is the most serious obstacle of all. The latter difficulty does not arise merely or even mainly from illiteracy. We do not confuse literacy with education; the strength of trade unionism in the transport industries is partly due to the education which travel gives."

Another difficulty of the unions has been the attitude of the employers. This has varied from the tolerance of the millowners in Ahmedabad, to the refusal by many employers to meet trade union leaders or to answer their letters or to recognise them in any kind of way. Industrial history has shown many times that once the workers begin to organise, however ineffectively at first, the employers have the opportunity of meeting them half-way with courtesy and sympathetic consideration, and so paving the way for real co-operation in the interests of the industry. If the employers refuse to take this opportunity they have to prove their case before the tribunal of the future, for *upon them rests the responsibility of the non-co-operator*. In giving evidence before the Commission many employers stated their dislike of unions which included workers from several mills. The majority of employers also were agreed that "outsiders," i.e., men who were not workers in the industry, were undesirable on the executive bodies of unions. Certain employers found that grievances



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put forward by the union had not been previously examined by them and proved to be without foundation. Notwithstanding all these reasons the employer does not appear to the union to be playing the game when he takes refuge behind his entrenched power and refuses to answer letters or to meet leaders. *Nothing perhaps illustrated the uneven balance of power between the two groups more than this autocratic refusal to negotiate.* Refusal to the employer meant security to go his own way and be free from harassing meetings. Refusal to the union meant that it lost ground in the eyes of the workers, and every time it was rebuffed it had to begin the slow process of building up over again.

Trade unions have been obliged to concentrate very largely on organisation until they could get firmly established. The Registrar of Trade Unions in the Punjab reported for 1928-9: "The funds of the unions during their first years were mainly utilised towards their organisation, and this was undoubtedly a step in the right direction. A few are now considering schemes relating to sickness insurance and the payment of benefits like pensions, etc." In spite of their difficulties in organisation some unions have been able to provide services for their members in certain directions. The Manager of the Calcutta Claims Bureau said in his evidence: "Trade union officials in the jute mill and engineering industries have been active in filing claims (for Workmen's Compensation) on behalf of their members and this has given the Act wide publicity." This support of claims to compensation is an exceedingly important piece of work, and can strengthen the union in the eyes of its members. One of the employers in Ahmedabad said of the union: "The machinery for adjusting differences between the Labour Union and the Ahmedabad Millowners' Association has worked well which is due very largely to the goodwill and understanding prevailing between the two. The Labour Union is doing constructive work by running schools and hospitals and does not, except on rare occasions, tolerate indiscipline."



The following extracts from the report give the Commission's views on the burning question of recognition of the unions by employers :

"The question of recognition has become the acid test, and controversy over this question is fairly general. . . . In our view recognition should mean that the employer recognises the right of the union to negotiate with him in respect of matters affecting either the common or the individual interests of the members. . . . Recognition in the letter must be followed by recognition in the spirit, by a readiness to discuss sympathetically points put forward by the union, by accessibility to its officers and by willingness to let them have credit where credit is due. . . . We are anxious to see recognition based on reason and not on force, and the fact that a union consists of only a minority of employees is no adequate reason for withholding recognition. Similarly, the existence of two or more rival unions is not in itself a sufficient ground for refusing to recognise any or all of them. . . . We recommend that Government should take the lead both in making recognition of unions easy and in encouraging them to secure registration."

In the extension of the movement the Commission lay stress on the importance of an extension of trade union activities . "No amount of encouragement from employers or of assistance from the State can infuse life into unions which have nothing vital in themselves ; true vigour can only come from within. . . . One of the first needs therefore is the training of the members themselves. . . . The movement cannot prosper if it is allowed to depend almost entirely from a stimulus from the top ; there must be an internal collective will. This can be developed in various ways, all of which require time and patience. . . . A widening of the sphere of activity is most desirable, both because much is left undone that trade unions can do, and because it will strengthen the movement to find and even to create activities in which the members can participate. . . .



An extension of the co-operative movement by the agency of trade unions seems to offer a genuine opportunity in some centres. . . . The provision of adult education in some small circles would be valuable in itself and would bring strength to the movement. The opening of a reading room where there would be both books and men to read them aloud has distinct possibilities.”

On the subject of leadership the Commission have important suggestions to make: “The unions if they are to increase their strength must find organisers from within the ranks of labour. . . . What is required is the wholtime official who has been an actual worker. . . . The qualities required in the first place are literacy, organising ability and a capacity for hard, constant and patient work. When men with these qualities are obtained, their training should be undertaken. It is here that social workers, professional men and others anxious to assist the movement can render valuable service. . . . The Universities in the leading industrial centres could strengthen their contact with the industrial life of the country by assisting in this work with evening classes. . . . As a further possibility we suggest the grant of studentships at universities or colleges which are ready to co-operate.

“We hope that in legislation and administration the State and its officers will recognise the essential importance of these organisations as an integral part of the industrial structure of the country. They can make a big contribution to industrial development, and the value of that contribution will be enhanced by a policy of trust in them and co-operation with them.”

### THE DIFFICULT SPHERE OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Into the office of a manager of a jute mill comes on Monday morning a flood of letters and papers, relating to consignments of jute, to new machinery arriving, to repairs in the weaving shed, to the drainage of the lines,



to a meeting in Calcutta—to a number of important matters which claim instant attention and cannot be delegated. Among them comes a letter written by a bazaar letter writer, purporting to be from Kalil, a weaver, stating that he has been dismissed by the sardar and wants his case examined. Time presses, and the manager cannot find a minute in which to go into this case of one weaver among the 650 in the shed. At the end of the week he sends for the sardar and tries to get at the truth. He is called off suddenly to the telephone and tells the sardar to send the man to him. Saturday arrives and Kalil takes his former week's money and is paid off, and the sardar withholds the message from the manager. Kalil with a burning sense of grievance holds a meeting with his friends in the busti in the evening and for hours in the hot, foetid air they discuss his wrongs, and as they do so they remember other men dismissed for unknown causes, and their indignation becomes an angry resentment, smouldering like a banked up fire, ready to break out into flames if anyone should kick it apart. Kalil and his friends never see the manager's table heaped up with letters and business papers—they only infer from what has happened that neither he nor anyone else cares what happens to them. The manager never sees Kalil in his busti home where the drainage soaks into the floor and his wife coughs all night. *They never meet as man to man.*

Tragedies like this are the inevitable result of a big factory system and of any large-scale industry. Under the curse of sardarism and jobbery the workers have no hope of getting justice done them unless either a trade union exists which can take up their cause, or there is some adequate means of going over the sardar's head to some higher authority. The latter course for an illiterate worker is beset with difficulties. Over and over again in the evidence to the Commission came instances of workers who could not get their cases heard, in the factories, in the mines, on the railways. No one can blame the over-



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worked managers with many pressing affairs demanding their attention. Nevertheless the situation demands that on the staff of the factory there should be some person who can provide just that human contact with the workers which is at present entirely lacking.

Experiments have already been made on the railways with labour officers. There are also welfare officers in nine or ten private firms in India and in certain Government concerns. The name of the official may vary from labour officer to welfare officer or personnel officer, but the idea is the same throughout, namely, as the Chairman of the Commission expressed it : " That in all factories employing over a thousand workers there should be a special labour welfare officer helping and advising the manager on all matters of internal welfare, whose duty it would be to be in close touch with the feelings of the workers, so that he might be an intelligence officer to the manager, and so that the various kinds of welfare work might be surely based on not only the wishes but also the co-operation of the workers." The Commission's views on the need for Labour Officers in all large factories and mines have already been given. The importance of their appointment and their function at the present time cannot be over-rated.

As a further means of contact between employers and workers there have been a few attempts in India to introduce works committees. These are generally regarded by the workers as a rival organisation to the trade union, undermining its authority and as such are often suspect. The Social Service League in Bombay who were instrumental in getting works committees organised in certain mills stated in their memorandum to the Commission :

" The League's experience in this matter has not been, it must be regretfully stated, encouraging. Given the right spirit on the side of the management, there was no reason why the joint works committees should not succeed in achieving the object for which they were designed—



viz., bringing together the management and workers to discuss in a friendly spirit matters affecting the workers with a view to clearing misunderstanding and removing causes of grievances in time. In one mill the very idea of workmen sitting in the same meeting and discussing their grievances with the officers was nothing short of a revolutionary idea to one officer's mind, and the result was that the joint works committee in that mill came to an end soon after its establishment. . . . In some mills the committees were given a trial. But the experiment proved a failure in the end. The responsibility for the failure lay with the management more than with the workmen. . . . If works committees are to be successful the employers must convince the men that a works committee is a real measure of reform and not a sham. If a grievance or demand brought by the workers' representatives before the committee is decided against the workers, and the same grievance redressed or demand granted after the workers have given a threat of a strike, the workers can have little confidence in the works committee. It is natural for most of the managers and officers to look upon works committees as an encroachment on their rights and privileges, which they have considered absolutely necessary to maintain order and discipline in the works. Unless there is a change of heart on the part of the employers, works committees can never be successful. *It is not the mechanism of the committees but the spirit that matters most.* If this spirit is forthcoming and where there are unions, they are recognised for representing the workers, the works committees should prove very useful in minimising friction between the employers and workers."

On this question of works committees the Commission say: "What we wish to emphasise is that where there is a trade union, the employer should seek its collaboration and co-operation in the establishment and working of these committees which should not be regarded or used as rivals to its influence. It is idle to expect that a committee intended



to forestall and prevent effective organisation on the part of the workers will secure their confidence to any large extent.”

In addition to the slender chances of personal contact in industrial undertakings and to the setting up of some joint machinery like works committees, there is the further possibility of contact between worker and employer through welfare work. Welfare work has become a phrase to conjure with in any country which has any considerable industrial development. Its precise value to the factory and to the individuals who work in it may be hidden in the dazzle of what is provided. In a book called *Recent Social Movements*,<sup>1</sup> published in Japan in 1929, a section is devoted to the subject of “Welfare Work in Japanese Industries,” which is eloquent of the forethought and powers of adaptation shown by the Japanese in all their undertakings. Before the war, i.e., before 1914, welfare was confined to the provision of housing and medical care and certain provisions within the factory. During the war these developed with the addition of facilities for savings banks, education for young workers and for adults, and “as this was a period of unprecedented prosperity, employers eagerly strove with one another to set up spacious dining halls, theatres, cinemas, orchestras, etc.” The post-war period showed the necessity for a change of policy, owing to industrial depression and to labour disputes. Works Committees and workers’ welfare societies formed means of contact between employers and workers, and “welfare provisions, which used in the past to be charitable acts imposed on the workers or performed as a profitable investment by the employer, are rapidly becoming co-operative enterprises between the employer and worker, or even enterprises at the initiative of the workers, stressing the importance of the workers’ personality.” The remarkable forethought of the Japanese is seen in the regular assignment of welfare funds which do not therefore vary

<sup>1</sup> Saikin no Shakai Undo, published by Kyocho Kai, Tokyo.



with the prosperity or depression of the industry. It is seen also in the periodic medical examination of workers, in the provision of pit head baths at the coal mines, in special researches into diet, in the establishment of special sanatoria for factory workers, in the teaching of new trades to women who have been excluded from underground work in mines, in the re-education of partly disabled men to learn new trades, and in many other directions. All these activities are carried out in the paternal spirit which implies, as we have seen in other chapters, the obligation of the employer to do his utmost for the welfare of his workers. A recent writer on labour in Japan says : "Employers in Japan are still lingering in the shadows of paternalism. . . . They do not look upon labour as a class irreconcilable with the capitalist, and labour unrest appears to them as a puppet show in which the mass of the working classes are but figures moving and dancing according to the will of the minority labour leaders in a mock drama."<sup>1</sup>

We have already seen the considerable amount of welfare work which has been undertaken by employers in India for the housing and health of their workers. A recent writer on welfare work in India<sup>2</sup> after reviewing the work at present existing concluded that the welfare schemes of the best firms are very valuable as an example to others, but *they are not typical*; that most welfare work is extra-mural, i.e., outside the factory proper; that there is little recognition of the importance of the arrangements inside the factory; and that there is no co-operative effort made by employers to initiate welfare schemes. The Government of Bombay memorandum to the Commission stated : "The utilisation of the spare time of industrial workers is a matter which has received but little attention from employers as a whole in the Bombay Presidency. . . . Activities expressly directed towards the development of

<sup>1</sup> *Labour Conditions in Japan*, by S. Harada, p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> *Industrial Welfare in India*, by P. S. Lokanathan.



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the physical, intellectual, material and moral powers, which is the object of those interested in the proper use of workers' spare time, are practically negligible as far as employers are concerned." The Government of Bengal stated: "There is in the Presidency of Bengal almost an entire lack of organised welfare work on the lines on which such work is conducted in the west."

To whatever extent welfare work succeeds in educating the worker and raising his standard of living, to that extent it is increasing the possibility of his contact with the employer because it is gradually redressing the balance between them. Sir Sorabji Mehta of the Empress Mills in his memorandum summed up the value of welfare work as follows: "The results of welfare work can never be accurately measured, but such work by its very nature provides facilities for the development of personality, gives opportunities for self-expression and organisation, and meets certain needs of the people which perhaps would not be met if they were left to themselves."

The Social Service League in Bombay, who have had a wide experience in welfare work in the city, made in their memorandum certain most valuable comments which are a means of testing the permanent value of welfare work: "It cannot be said that welfare activities are the outcome of a well thought out plan aiming at increased efficiency of and contentment among the workers. The employers who went in for these activities seem to be dissatisfied with the results achieved hitherto, and the workers, on the other hand, also seem to have grown more and more suspicious of these activities. Widespread and acute labour unrest has pushed back welfare work, and it is not a matter for surprise. The fact is that the essentials for success are generally lacking. Welfare work can never be a substitute for fair wages, reasonable hours, stability of employment, just and fair treatment, and sympathetic attitude in actual relations. *It is too much to expect the workers to appreciate the welfare activities in the absence of these essentials.*



Welfare work can never be successful and popular among the workers unless the employers realise that it is neither a luxury, nor a philanthropy, nor a means to divert the workers from the trade union movement, and that it can only be successful as a super-structure on the foundation of justice and fair play.”

### UNREST AMONG THE WORKERS

We have seen in former chapters how the conditions at the end of the war contributed towards giving the workers a dawning sense of power which hitherto had been almost entirely lacking. The discovery that the strike was a weapon, and a very effective weapon, was a revelation to the illiterate, unskilled workers. Here at last was a way of self-expression, of pitting their strength against the management, and of wresting from them concessions which no individual could have secured alone. Here also was a way of forcing a hearing from those in authority and at last having some of their many grievances attended to. When Kalil the weaver in the evil-smelling busti related his troubles to his friends, the injustice done to him became an injustice inflicted on the group. All the time, in the factories and on the railways, actions against individual workers by the sardars and managers are stoking up the smouldering fires of resentment. The kicks which will cause these banked up fires to break into flames may come from any quarter. Whether the strike is successful or not does not materially change the worker's point of view. If it is successful, he is encouraged to try again next time. If it fails, even if he suffers acutely during it, he does not give in but bides his time and broods over his resentment, determined to act more forcibly next time.

All those who have been in close touch with Indian workers during the past ten years, and all who study the evidence before the Commission are deeply conscious of the “strike mentality” and the cumulative effect of years of



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Industrial unrest. The actual disputes between 1921 and 1928 are examined and tabulated in No. 43 of the Bulletins of Indian Industries and Labour, which is worthy of careful study. The causes of the disputes are there examined as well as the demands of the strikers and the results ultimately achieved. The most enlightening study, however, can be made by reading in the evidence to the Commission the accounts of the big jute mills strike in 1929 as related in the separate accounts of the employers, the workers and the Government. The big strike of 1929 at Tata's Iron and Steel Works can be studied in the same manner, from all three points of view, and also the situation in Bombay which culminated in the Strike Inquiry Committee.

## AN INCREASING STRUGGLE

The Indian Merchants' Chambers of Bombay stated to the Commission: "We regret the emphasis which is constantly put in imitation of the western world on the conflict between the interests of capital and labour." Is that conflict not a real one? Are the interests of Kalil the weaver in the jute mill in Calcutta identical with those of Mr. A. and Mr. B., the managing agents for that mill? Is it true that capital and labour are watching each other in nominal peace across a frontier? The thought of an increasing struggle between workers and employers in India is menacing not only to general peace and order but to the whole welfare of the country, which is depending on industrial development to absorb some of the 30 million inhabitants which have been added in the past ten years. We have seen that the past ten years in industrial centres have not been a record of peace but of war. What of the future? The evidence before the Commission has at least shown certain developments on the frontier between the two forces, some of which are hopeful, others ominous.



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Several times in meeting witnesses the Commission made a special appeal for a new attitude between workers and employers. In Madras on a most controversial question of recognition by the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills of a trade union a member of the Commission said: "The Madras Labour Union is not an illegal body. It has a right to exist. It has existed for many years, and it will continue to exist. Friendly relations have not existed between you and the Madras Labour Union. Would it not be desirable, seeing that it is going to exist, to get into contact with it and to see that that institution is made somewhat useful to your workpeople? You will not mistake me when I say that better relations would be productive of all-round good to your workpeople. I do not believe anything but good will come of some understanding."

The Commission say in their report: "The prevalence of strikes affords an indication of the extent of unrest, but strikes are merely the symptom most evident for the public of underlying discontent. The attempt to deal with unrest must begin rather with the creation of an atmosphere unfavourable to disputes than with the machinery for their settlement. It is precisely here that in our view Indian industrial organisation is weakest."

There is not, however, in the facts revealed to the Commission the weight of evidence on the side of improved relations that might have been hoped for. The weight of evidence on the other side is overwhelming. The evidence of the Government of Madras on industrial relations was terse and discouraging: "There is no joint deliberation between employers and workers in any industry. The workers are not organised. The capitalist does not budge an inch in extending any concessions or in redressing any grievances unless he is moved by a large body of workpeople. There is no love lost between employer and worker in this country. Both sides are not free from blame. Workers do not ask for legitimate grievances,



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nor do the capitalists understand the workers' difficulties and try to meet them till the last moment when it is too late to mend matters."

In Bombay the Chamber of Commerce were pessimistic about the future: "Bad as the situation has been in the past there are those who think that Bombay has still more serious labour troubles ahead. Communism has now stepped in and is busy encouraging the worker and organising him to demand that which he cannot earn." The Bombay Textile Labour Union on their side said in their memorandum: "The millowners' credit with the workers is so low to-day that their every action is for some time to come likely to be looked upon with suspicion. Moreover, past experience has shown us that they do not want to have joint machinery and talk to the workers on equal terms."

The process of adjusting human relations is one which calls for time, patience and goodwill—all to an unlimited extent. In the press of business in modern industry it is extremely difficult to find the time and the patience to clear out of the human machine the small grit of daily rubs and misunderstandings. Goodwill is apt to depend on the available time and patience, rather than time and patience depending on unlimited goodwill. Infinitely remote from the employer with his many claims seems the outlook of the worker with his many needs—and the gulf between the two widens daily.

One thing in the future can be taken for granted, and that is that workers in India will be increasingly influenced by ideas from other countries. This means that ideas of trade union organisation and of labour-capital conflicts will come to them from the west through the inter-visitation of labour representatives. From China and Japan will come ideas of resisting exploitation, of some common action among the workers of the oriental countries to achieve better standards of living and greater freedom for leisure and education. From Russia will come ideas



of class war and class hatred with the ultimate goal of management by the workers. All these ideas will penetrate and no group of workers can be isolated from them. What effect will they have? What will the Indian workers make of them?

Once more we come back to the desperate need of the workers for education. Japanese workers are far more equipped to cope with ideas from other countries and with their own situation because they can read newspapers, and they have access to all the realms of educated thinking. The Indian worker without this equipment is the prey of new ideas, the victim of his own harassed feelings, struggling against ill-health, at the mercy of any and every kind of leader. The one sure hope of getting the workers to see and appreciate the needs of industry and the point of view of the employer is to educate them, so that they can have at least that vantage ground from which to approach the employer. Education will not solve every problem of relationships. But it will at least raise them to a level where there is some equality of approach. It will redress the balance in setting free the latent power and the latent goodwill of the workers to meet the same power and goodwill in the employers.



## CHAPTER X

## PROTECTOR OF THE POOR

“To swell your profits you are ready to sink all feelings of humanity and to sweat your mill hands to any extent. . . . Strong efforts will be made to bring the matter to the notice of Government and to make it interfere in this matter and to bring to an end this degrading and disgraceful spectacle of cold-blooded inhumanity.”

*Meeting of Bombay Millowners' Association, 1905.*

“Whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required. . . . Whereas also the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries;

The High Contracting Parties, moved by sentiments of justice and humanity as well as by the desire to secure the permanent peace of the world, agree to the following:

*Preamble to the Labour Section (Part XIII) of the Treaty of Versailles, 1919.*

## THE PRICE OF PROFIT

ABOVE the battlefield where the “organised forces are massed on either side,” the keen observer stands, watching and listening. Down in the mêlée he could see and hear nothing for the dust and tumult of the conflict. From above



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he can distinguish the well-knit, well-ordered, well-disciplined units on the one side; the huddled, disorganised, undisciplined mob on the other. Bending low he catches faint sounds of battle cries from either side. From the well-ordered side he hears the slogans, "Profits," "Dividends," "Combines," "Protective tariffs." From the other side float up shouts of "Sweated Slaves," "Oppressed Masses," "Exploited Workers," "Justice."

"How exaggerated," thinks the keen observer. "That struggle has no reality." Then he remembers the past. He recalls that the beginnings of modern industry were called the Industrial Revolution. He is reminded of the price that was paid for large profits.

No real understanding of the present industrial situation in India can be achieved without going back into the past. A thin grey book<sup>1</sup> with an official looking cover contains within it enough damning evidence on the beginnings of Indian industry to provide battle cries for any labour force. The ugly history of the Industrial Revolution in India from about 1860-1870 repeated some of the worst phases of the Industrial Revolution in England at the beginning of the century. The governing factor in both revolutions was the desire of the manufacturers for quick returns, for easy profits—a desire which was also that of the shareholders who invested in the new undertakings, and of the agents who were put in to manage the factories on the basis of a commission on production. Profits are the normal expectation of industry, and neither owners nor shareholders nor industry itself could survive without them. Profits can be just and reasonable, or they can be colossal and unjust when drawn from the sweat of underpaid labour. The profits of the Industrial Revolution in India were mainly of the latter kind. Here was the raw

<sup>1</sup> *Bulletin of Indian Industries and Labour*. No. 37. *Indian Factory Legislation*. By A. G. Clow.



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material close at hand. Here was the human labour to work in the factories, cheap, submissive, accustomed to toil long hours from sunrise to sunset with no regular rest; under these conditions industry was very profitable, and the investments were more than justified. A few of the pioneers of Indian industry, like Mr. J. N. Tata, stand out for their humane treatment of their workers. For the rest, temptation was too strong for them, and profits rolled in at the expense of the men, women and children who toiled in the mills.

These early manufacturers in India had also behind them the support of the economic doctrine of "Laissez Faire." That doctrine, though losing weight in England, was still sufficiently current to encourage employers to believe that industry should look after its own affairs, and that interference either by the State or by any outside body was detrimental to its real interests.

As a result of appeals both from India and from England, the Government of Bombay appointed a Commission in 1875, and when it had reported, the Government of India drafted a Bill "to protect children and young persons employed in factories." In the survey of Indian factory legislation already quoted, it says: "The Bill was generally condemned, especially in Bengal. It was alleged that it was quite unnecessary and had been introduced in consequence of agitation by ignorant English philanthropists and grasping English manufacturers. . . . One employers' association remarked: 'Nothing could be more pleasing than the sight of the smart little children, generally full of health and good spirits, working at the spindle.' . . . The Bombay Millowners' Association deeply regretted that the Bill should have been introduced, for it considers that legislative interference of any kind is wholly unnecessary and will be most injurious not only to the manufacturing interests of the country, but to the country generally."<sup>1</sup> History was busy repeating itself. The opposition to the early Factory Acts in England had been couched in much

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 7.



the same language, embodying the two principles of "So good for the children to be employed" and "Hands off Industry."

In 1881 the first Indian Factories Act was passed. It prohibited the employment of children under 7 years of age, limited the hours of children aged 7-12 to 9 hours a day, exclusive of an hour's rest, and required that they should be given 4 holidays a month. The Act applied only to factories where power was used and where over 100 people were employed. No limitation was placed on the hours to be worked by adults. This Act was indeed "a triumph for conservative opinion." Fifty years have gone by between the passing of this first Factories Act in India and the report of the Royal Commission on Labour. Behind the proposals of the Commission lie fifty years of oppression, of sweating, of unjust gains. Such history is not readily forgotten, and not a few of labour's claims in India to-day call up the conditions of the past.

#### A NEW FATHER

With the passing of the first Factories Act of 1881, the Government of India entered upon a new relationship to industry. The State now became the father of the workers, the protector of the poor, by assuming the right to stand between them and their exploiters. Two years later, by the issue of the famous Famine Code, the State declared its paternal responsibility for the general population in times of great need and scarcity. This assumption by Government of authority to protect by law a certain class of workers in the country was an inheritance from England, but was encouraged and supported by the Indian reformers who took up the cause of labour. The efforts of these reformers and the struggle to extend the Factories Act should be followed in the admirable summary contained in Bulletin No. 37. It is only possible here to point out two important developments which



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took place before the passing of the Factories Act of 1911 which was the next big landmark in Indian industrial history.

The first of these took place in 1884. In that year the Bombay Government appointed another Commission on conditions in factories, and while this body was taking evidence a group of mill hands held a meeting at which they drew up the following demands which were forwarded to the Commission :

1. A complete day of rest every Sunday.
2. A recess of half an hour.
3. Limitations of the hours of work from 6.30 to sunset.
4. The payment of wages not later than the 15th of the month following that in which they were earned.
5. Compensation for injuries and disablement.

Thus was the Labour Movement in India born, making demands some of which took more than forty years to realise.

The second important development was the publicity given to the existing conditions in the factories. In 1905, a trade boom led to large fortunes being made. It led also to an attempt by certain employers to improve working conditions and agitate for a 12-hour day for men workers. There was a stormy meeting of the Bombay Millowners' Association in August, 1905, at which, after a fierce fight, a resolution in favour of a 12-hour day was carried. The quotations at the head of this chapter, given again here, were taken from speeches made at this meeting. "To swell your profits you are ready to sink all feelings of humanity and to sweat your mill hands to any extent. . . . Strong efforts will be made to bring the matter to the notice of Government and to make it interfere in this matter and to bring to an end this degrading and disgraceful spectacle of cold-blooded inhumanity."

In the following month a blast of indignation hot as a noon-day wind came from the *Times of India*. The article



was headed "Bombay's Slaves." To quote again from Bulletin No. 37<sup>1</sup>: "The editor framed a terrible indictment of the conditions in the Bombay mills, dealing in turn with the long hours in a foetid atmosphere, the effects of the terrible physical strain on the operatives, their intense desire for shorter hours even if their earnings were reduced, and the imperative necessity for legislation. He then went on to deal with child labour, and described the deliberate violations of the Act, the working of children by night, the employment of 'immature adults,' the necessity for a certificate of physical fitness, and the failure of the inspecting system. . . . Finally he added: 'The system goes on, no check is placed upon the rapacity and greed that is working the life out of tens of thousands of helpless impotent people. The dividends roll in, the millowners pass pious resolutions, but the iniquity continues, the bitter cry of the oppressed workers is unheard. Let those who think the story is exaggerated watch, as we did, the saddening and unforgettable sight of these jaded and forlorn victims of the Moloch of gain hurrying to their work once more, after snatching a few hours' sleep.'"

The Factories Act of 1911 was preceded by a Factory Labour Commission whose investigations showed clearly the evils of excessive hours of work, and in particular the abuses connected with the employment of children in open defiance of the law. The Act of 1911 reduced the hours of children in textile factories to 6 a day and made the possession of an age certificate compulsory. The hours of men workers were limited, in textile factories only, to 12 a day. New provisions for health and safety and for effective inspection were introduced.

Before the next stage in factory legislation was reached the war was over and the first International Labour Conference had met in Washington, U.S.A., in 1919. It is said of this period: "The most important effects of the war, as far as factories in India were concerned, were

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 35.



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those produced on the workers. The increased demand for labour added to the strength of their position, while the rise in prices and profits and the general unrest which followed the war led to a greater consciousness of their power and a strong disinclination, not generally apparent before, to work for long hours or to accept disagreeable conditions. For the first time in India, the desire of the operatives became a potent force in securing improved conditions and more stringent legislation.”<sup>1</sup>

### NEW WINE IN OLD WINESKINS

The “desire of the operatives” was indeed becoming “a potent force in securing improved conditions.” From 1919 onwards the desires of labour, fermented by a blend of ideas coming from the International Labour Office and from Soviet Russia, became a heady wine which threatened to burst the old wineskins.

From the first Conference at Washington in 1919, India took her full part in the deliberations and councils of the International Labour Office. This sudden accession to rank as an important industrial power in the eyes of the world had certain very important effects in India. In the first place it became a matter of national pride and status that industrial conditions in India should not lag behind the standards set by the International Labour Office. There was no longer any possibility of hiding these conditions. The International Labour Office threw a powerful searchlight on to factories, mines, railways, and all that affected the lives of the workers. Questions asked in Geneva about why women worked underground in mines in India were echoed around the world. The single greatest contribution of the International Labour Office to the world of labour has been the publicity given to its investigations, its conferences and to the ratification of the Conventions. The published diagrams, showing the ratification by

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 54.



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countries of the Conventions relating to hours of work, child labour, unemployment, etc., make known to the world the standing of any country with regard to labour legislation. An international labour conscience has been created, and increasingly countries are measured in the eyes of the world against the standards set up by the International Labour Office.

In the second place, with India's accession to rank as an industrial power, has come a revolution in the part played by labour. The representation of India at the annual International Labour Conferences consist of Government delegates, employers' delegates, and workers' delegates, as laid down in the constitution of the International Labour Conference. Now for the first time Indian workers' delegates came into close touch at Geneva with workers' delegates from other countries. "Labour's Charter" contained in the Conventions of the International Labour Conferences became known among the leaders of Indian labour. Throughout the evidence supplied to the Commission are demands by trade unions for public labour exchanges, minimum wage machinery, sickness and unemployment insurances—all schemes for the benefit of labour which had been discussed at Geneva and embodied in Conventions.

It is true that the great majority of workers plod to and from the factory to their homes with little thought for anything but the daily round and the daily food. It is true also that many employers and many observers see only that aspect of Indian labour. Yet there are new ideas fermenting among the workers and among those who try in one way or another to forward their interests. From the exchange of ideas at Geneva and the knowledge of labour conditions in other countries, a thin trickle of information percolates slowly through the labour world in India, causing a gradual breaking up of the former passive acceptance of bad conditions and a rising discontent. In the early days of Indian factory reform, employers supported their conservative stand by saying that labour



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made no demands for conditions to be altered." Fifty years later a Chamber of Commerce told the Commission in giving evidence: "Labour obviously desires its conditions improved. Like *Oliver Twist*, it wants more and more and more."

In this awakening of labour in India it is impossible to overlook the part played by ideas coming from Soviet Russia. Whether the Communist system as such commends itself to Indian labour leaders or not, at least they are beginning to know that in one country the worker in the factory has the first consideration in allotting the good things of life. "The proletariat is the most privileged person in Russia. He has more ample security than others and he is garnering an ever-increasing measure of comfort. The best in the land in education, amusement, living quarters, above all in social prestige is his."<sup>1</sup> Is it surprising that the new wine in India is threatening to burst the old wineskins?

In the third place, India's accession to rank as an industrial power has been accompanied by a series of important industrial labour laws. The Commission say in their report: "Nearly the whole of the present labour code of India dates from 1922 or later." Mr. P. P. Pillai, Director of the Indian Branch of the International Labour Office, writing in the *Asiatic Review* in July, 1929, said: "The association of India with an organisation commanding the prestige of the International Labour Office has been instrumental to an appreciable extent in accelerating the pace of humane labour legislation in the country." The course of the new legislation and the discussions arising round it should be studied in Bulletin No. 37 and in the digest of legislation given in the memorandum of the Government of India to the Commission.

The Factories Act of 1922 involved radical changes in the former Act of 1911. The most important were those following the undertaking given at the International Labour

<sup>1</sup> *Humanity Uprooted*, by Maurice Hindus, p. 183.



Conference at Washington. The minimum age of children was raised to 12, and under the age of 15 they could only be employed for 6 hours a day. Night work for women was prohibited and the exemptions for ginning factories were withdrawn. No women were to be employed before 5.30 a.m. or after 7 p.m. The maximum weekly hours in factories were limited to 60, and the daily limit to 11, with a rest interval of one hour after 6 hours' work. The scope of this new Act was much widened by including all power factories employing not less than 20 persons, with power to local Governments to extend it to factories of 10 or more persons, either with power or without. Two amending Acts were passed in 1923 and 1926, mainly dealing with administrative details.

The next section of protective legislation concerned the workers in mines. The Mines Act of 1923, as we have seen in Chapter V, limited the hours of work to 54 below ground and 60 above; and prohibited the employment of children under 13. Revised regulations passed in 1928 introduced the exclusion of women from underground working; and an amending Act in 1929 introduced the system of 12-hour shifts.

The most novel feature of the post-war legislation in India has been that dealing with trade unions and trade disputes. The Trade Union Act of 1926 conferred on registered trade unions a measure of protection against civil suits and prosecutions for criminal conspiracy. The Trade Disputes Act of 1929 established Courts of Enquiry and Conciliation Boards for the settlement of industrial disputes. The repeal of the Workman's Breach of Contract Act in 1926 had, as we saw in Chapter VI, an important effect on the conditions of work on the plantations.

Before passing on to the special consideration of one piece of legislation, the Workman's Compensation Act, we shall glance at the position of China and Japan, as they too were influenced by the International Labour Conferences.



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India was not the only oriental country at the Washington Conference in 1919. China though represented there was expressly excluded from the operation of the Conventions. The past ten years of civil war in China have made it impossible to introduce any effective measures of protection for the increasing number of workers in large scale industries. With the gradual consolidation of the Nationalist Government at Nanking, the constant pressure from unofficial sources, and the organisation of the workers, it has been made possible to take certain steps to improve the conditions of the workers. Three recent labour laws have been promulgated by the National Government, one regulating Labour Unions, one on the conciliation and arbitration of Industrial Disputes, and the third a Factory Law regulating conditions of employment according to international labour standards. In a foreword to a pamphlet setting out these laws the Director of the Department of Labour at Nanking said: "Care has been exercised to study the particular needs of the situation in China, and these laws were enacted by the Legislative Council after prolonged deliberation and discussion by various groups concerned, representing the views of the Government, the workers and the employers. The application of these laws ushers in a new chapter in the evolution of administrative work in China, as well as initiates a new experiment in the gigantic task of social reform for a quarter of the population of the globe." The Chinese Factory Law as it stands on the statute books represents rather a goal than a state which can be attained in a short time. The difficulties in enforcing the law are many and great, and are at this moment the subject of investigation by a Committee sent out by the International Labour Office at the request of the Chinese Government.

Japan at the Washington Conference had to face a very different situation. Hitherto Japan had had no protective legislation for the workers which was in any way comparable to the standards set by the International Labour



Conference. In a monograph on industrial legislation in Japan, Mr. Ayusawa of the International Labour Office asks this pertinent question: "Was Japan in common with the rest of the world to accept the standards which the Washington Conference set up, at the risk of the ruin of her growing industry? Or was she to beg exemption in order to secure her industrial position?" At the International Labour Conference in Geneva in 1925 the Indian delegates pointed out the difficulties experienced in their cotton industry owing to Japanese competition under unequal conditions, especially as regards hours. Mr. N. M. Joshi made a specially strong plea to Japan to ratify the Conventions relating to hours of work and night work for women, on the ground that the progress of workers in India and China would be measured against that of Japan and limited accordingly. Finally in 1926 the hours of work for women and young persons under 16, were limited to 11 a day, and from July, 1929, night work for them was abolished. Even now there are no restrictions on the hours of male workers in Japan.

#### ENTIRELY NEW TO INDIA

Of all the labour legislation in the past ten years, probably none has more directly benefited the Indian worker than the Workmen's Compensation Act. This Act, as described in the memorandum of the Government of India to the Commission, "provides for the payment of compensation if personal injury is caused to a workman by accident arising out of and in the course of his employment. . . . The compensation is based entirely on the earnings of the deceased or injured man. The Act is administered not by the ordinary civil courts, but by special commissioners appointed by the local Governments. . . . The liability to compensation, the amount of compensation and the persons to whom compensation is payable are determined by the law itself, and cannot be varied by any tribunal.



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The Commissioners are not authorised to take the initiative in securing for workmen what is due to them under the Act, and an application can only be made to them if some question has arisen between the parties which they have been unable to settle by agreement. In the case of death, however, the employer must deposit the compensation with the Commissioner who alone is authorised to distribute the amount among the dependants of the deceased workman."

In the report of the Commission there is an important chapter on the subject of workmen's compensation. In the volumes of evidence there is also to be found detailed information about the working of the Act in the different provinces. There is thus excellent material at hand for studying the working out of this particular Act. The Commission say in their report :

"The introduction of the Bill was attended by considerable apprehension ; the measure was one of a type entirely new to India and the migratory character of Indian industrial labour, the comparative paucity of medical and insurance facilities and the strong tendency to litigation appeared to raise problems which were much less serious in the countries on whose experience the legislature had to proceed. But the fears expressed when the Bill was under consideration have been unrealised. . . . So far as the administrative point of view is concerned, there is much to support the opinion of the Bengal Government that the Act has been an unqualified success."

In reviewing the working of the Act the Commission point out its chief defect, a weakness which would have been expected in the present stage of Indian labour :

"In one important respect we regard its success as incomplete for it is evident that up to the present workmen, and to a less extent their dependants, have not taken full advantage of the benefits conferred upon them by the legislature. It is evident that Indian workmen and their dependants are only gradually coming to a realisation of



their rights under the Act, and this process is still far from complete. That there are large numbers of workmen who do not receive compensation when it is due to them would be clear from the low proportion of claims made on account of disablement."

After considering the evidence from the different provinces on the working of the Act and its possible extension, the Commission came to the following conclusions :

"The mere enactment of a law giving *all* employees the right to claim compensation would certainly fail to prove effective unless some form of compulsory insurance were adopted, and we do not think that in present circumstances such a step is reasonably practicable. . . . We consider that the method of advance should be to include first workers in organised branches of industry, whether these are hazardous or not, and secondly to extend the Act gradually to workers in less organised employment, beginning with those who are subject to most risk."

Where it is proved that workers have wilfully disobeyed some safety rule, compensation can be withheld. The Commission recommend on this point :

"The withholding of compensation for fatal accidents which are covered by the exceptions gives rise to great hardship to individuals, and is not likely to have any appreciable educative effects on other workmen. We recommend that the exceptions should not apply in the case of fatal accidents."

### DO THE WORKERS KNOW THEIR RIGHTS?

The value of the labour code in India to the workers depends primarily on the compliance of employers with the requirements of the law. But it has also been proved in other countries that in so far as the workers know their rights, they can claim the protection of the law on their



behalf. In the evidence before the Commission the replies to their question "How far are the workpeople acquainted with factory legislation?" were extremely unsatisfactory. Two of the provincial Governments answered the Commission's questions with:

"Little attempt has been made to educate the workers in their rights and duties under the law. The result is that very few workpeople possess even an elementary knowledge of the factory law and rules."

"The posting of abstracts in the vernacular fails in its object, and that is to acquaint the workers with the protection which is legally due to them. Children in jute mills are afraid of the inspector instead of looking on him as their protector, which attitude is really a reflection on the understanding and ignorance of their parents, and the influence of the sardars who control both."

Possibly the two most striking examples of ignorance of the law revealed in the evidence before the Commission were the repeal of the Workman's Breach of Contract Act in Assam<sup>1</sup> and the exclusion of women from the coal mines.<sup>2</sup> In neither of these instances had any effort been made to acquaint the workers with changes which vitally affected their welfare. In the case of the Workmen's Compensation Act the benefits due to workers are often unclaimed through ignorance. The employers on the whole take no responsibility for informing the workers of their rights beyond the legal requirement of posting an abstract of the Factories Act in the factories. Yet the vast majority of the workers are without the ability to read. There is wide scope here for work to be done by trade union and social service agencies in educating the workers in their rights. Trade unions have already done some work along this line in assisting their members to claim compensation. A study of some of the efforts made in England and elsewhere to give workers some knowledge of their rights and some understanding of the power of the law to safeguard these

<sup>1</sup> Chapter VI.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter V.



rights should indicate future lines of progress in India. The conception of the State as the protector of the poor has yet to be grasped by "the poor" themselves.

### BRINGING THE OFFENDERS TO BOOK

If the conception of the State as protector of the poor has not yet been grasped by the workers, the employers on their side have been made aware of it and in some quarters have much resented it. Many employers mean to make money in the quickest way, and if the law prevents them they will ignore the law. In the chapter on seasonal factories (Chapter III) we have already seen how some of the owners of ginning and other factories work on a very small margin of profit, and any extra work they can squeeze out of their workers by evading the legal hours brings additional profit to them.

In all industrial countries which have a labour code, the administration of the labour laws is all important in the interests of the workers. Laws on paper may be excellent; laws in practice may be flouted by the employers so that the existence of these laws on the statute book is of little value to the workers. In Britain the observance of the factory laws in recent years has depended on three things: the factory inspectorate, public opinion, and the knowledge and support of the workers themselves who are ready to give evidence on the infringement of the law. We have already seen that in India the ignorance of the workers about the laws made to protect them renders it impossible to look for any effective measure of support. The Chief Inspector of Factories in Bengal said in his evidence before the Commission:

"The workers are in the first place ignorant that they are illegally employed, and in the second place they are frightened of victimisation by sardars if they gave evidence. It is significant that not a single worker in the Bengal jute mills during the currency of the 1922 Factories Act has



voluntarily offered to give evidence on infractions of the employment provisions of the Act."

When the Commission were taking evidence in London from experts in different Government departments, the Chief Inspector of Factories for Great Britain told them that public opinion in Britain was all against employers evading the factory law—it was considered "bad form"—and no employer liked to face the publicity of a prosecution. Such a public opinion has yet to be made in India.

Supported by public opinion in Britain, and unsupported as yet by public opinion in India, the factory inspectors are the officials to whom is entrusted the administration of the law. In Britain one of the best traditions in the civil service has grown up round the factory inspectorate, both men and women. They act as adviser to the employers and friend to the workers and are often a valuable intermediary between the two. They have converted what might appear a thankless task of surprise visits and prosecutions into a constructive building up of better and more humane conditions. When giving evidence before the Commission in London the Chief Inspector of Factories in Great Britain said that he considered the chief qualities for a successful factory inspector were personality and common sense. He also said that in all his very long experience he had never known a case of an inspector taking a bribe or failing to prosecute because he was friendly with the employer. It is obvious that the integrity of the inspector and the tradition which he builds round his office are two of the most vital factors in the administration of the law and the protection of the workers. In India the inspectors, working against much more formidable obstacles and with a far smaller measure of public support, are already building up a similar tradition. Their work receives practically no public notice. Yet between the official covers of the annual reports of the chief inspectors lies a record of patient and unflagging effort to get employers and the public to act fairly by the workers. Their work



may not be dramatic, and it is often very thankless, but it is full of human interest and of actual achievement.

The difficulties of an inspector's task in India appear almost overwhelming. He can rely on a few employers to observe the law; many employers he finds indifferent about whether it is observed on their premises or not; many others intend to flout the law except when the inspector visits the factory. The Inspector of Factories in the Punjab told the Commission: "Thirty-eight cases (for working over hours) were instituted in 1928, but the inspector's difficulties are many in bringing the offenders to book. It is well known that a reward is paid to anyone in the factory centre or villages giving information about the inspector's arrival: chowkidars are also kept on the railway stations by factory owners with a view to obtaining timely information about the inspector's visit. Fake registers are maintained and no factory worker would dare give evidence against his employer." Even when the inspector does manage to arrive at a factory unheralded, a very difficult thing to do in India, while he enters by the front door and is addressed by the manager or overseers, the under-age children are hurriedly sent out by side doors or hidden in bales of cotton.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of inspection, the number of convictions in British India for breaking the law has increased from 351 in 1921-3 to 1,310 in 1927-9, thus showing a greater stringency in enforcement. Prosecutions in themselves however are not always a deterrent because the fine inflicted as a result of prosecution in the courts may be and often is quite inadequate. From the Inspector of Factories in the Punjab came evidence of this means of escape for the employers who intended deliberately to break the law: "One of the chief difficulties in enforcing factory regulations is that adequate punishments cannot be obtained in courts. It becomes a sound business proposition for a



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factory occupier to work his employees overtime and risk being detected by the inspector : if he is taken to court the fine will be anything from Rs. 10 to Rs. 50, and that amount is made up by one hour's illegal work, and it is fairly safe to presume that the inspector cannot turn up more than once a month."

The inadequate punishments given to breakers of the law reflect the general public apathy about factory conditions and the welfare of the workers. With a public opinion which was alive to the needs of the workers, magistrates would not dare to make so light of these prosecutions. To meet this situation and to support the factory inspectors the Commission make recommendations which are given in their chapter on administration.

In every sphere of industry the worker, ignorant, and helpless through his ignorance, is the victim of the intentions of his employer. The State intervenes with a labour code to protect him from the intentions of unscrupulous employers who would exploit his ignorance. In this protective code of labour legislation India leads the eastern countries. When will these laws be as effective in practice as they are excellent on paper? The answer awaits the decision of the Indian people.



## CHAPTER XI

## A COMMON CONCERN

“ I think it obvious that the fortunes of our civilisation, both material and spiritual, depend in the major degree on the character, ethical and economic, of its industry, and in the minor (but still important) degree on the character of its politics. If our civilisation goes wrong, or fails to achieve real value, in the matter of industry, going right in the matter of politics will be no great triumph. Healthy industry will give birth to healthy politics. Whether, *per contra*, healthy politics would ever give birth to healthy industry seems to me highly doubtful.”

PROFESSOR L. P. JACKS, *Constructive Citizenship*, p. 178.

## THE POWER OF THE PUBLIC

In October, 1929, when the Commission were approaching the shores of India a leading article appeared in the *Times of India*, entitled “ The Charter of Indian Labour.” In it there was a challenge flung out, barbed with sarcasm and stinging to the touch like a douche of icy water.

“ Whether the Government will base any future legislation on what the Labour Commission recommends, or whether India’s leading capitalists and merchant princes will even read the Report we do not know. . . . Industrial India is still in its infancy. Bombay and Calcutta for all their splendour, merely provide temporary work for a minute portion of the surplus agricultural population.



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The workers, driven to the towns by necessity, wander back to their native villages as soon as they can. . . . How are we to establish a permanent industrial population? Without security there can be no permanence. Fundamentally this is the most important question with which Mr. Whitley and his colleagues have to deal."

Is the survey made by the Commission, so unique in its scope and material, to grow dusty on the shelves? Are India's industrial workers to continue ignorant and inefficient, the victims of disease and overcrowding in the cities—at the expense of India's progress as an industrial nation? The answer to these questions and to the challenge of the *Times of India* lies with the people of India, and, in so far as they share in India's industrial welfare, with the people of Britain. The underlying problems are to be found in every country newly embarking on an industrial era. The solution of these problems is indeed a world concern, though focussed in India through the work of the Commission. Without public support the work of the Commission will fall to the ground, dead and useless; with public support behind it, it will accomplish a revolution to set the workers on a new path of progress.

One good omen for the future needs to be remembered. At a time when political feelings and differences of opinion in India ran higher than at any other recent period the Commission were able to say: "We are happy to record the fact that political controversies have not prevented many who hold widely differing views in politics from co-operating with us for the benefit of labour."

In the final chapter of their report, entitled "Labour and the Constitution" the Commission review the present situation and make certain proposals with regard to future legislation, and the administration of the labour laws:

"Recently the world has awakened to the fact that lack of progress in one country constitutes an obstacle to progress in others. . . . To divide India, at this stage, into a series of units which could only progress inde-



pendently would be a definitely retrograde step. . . . It is certainly true that India's relations to the world of international labour make it desirable that she should preserve her unity in this matter. We have no hesitation in recommending that legislative powers in respect of labour should continue with the Central Legislature and that the provincial legislatures should also have power to legislate. Labour legislation undertaken in the provinces should not be allowed to impair or infringe the legislation of the centre or its administration."

The Commission, after recommending that Labour Commissioners be appointed in all the provinces and in the Central Government, propose that a new body should be set up, whose importance for the future of Indian industry will be evident :

"We recommend the constitution by statute of an organisation (the Industrial Council) by which representatives of employers, of labour and of Governments would meet regularly in conference." Its functions are to be as follows :

"1. To examine proposals for labour legislation referred to it and also to initiate such proposals.

"2. To promote a spirit of co-operation and understanding among those concerned with labour policy, and to provide an opportunity for interchange of information regarding experiments in labour matters.

"3. To advise Central and provincial Government on the framing of rules and regulations.

"4. To advise regarding the collection of labour statistics and the co-ordination and development of economic research."

Older industrial countries have learned by bitter experience that Governments consisting of the landlord-employer class, even when diluted with well-intentioned middle-class people, do not give due weight to the needs and aspirations of the workers. The "haves" very rarely see the world and society from the angle of the "have-nots." The social



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and political blinkers worn by the privileged members of society make it imperative that labour should have its own spokesmen in the councils of the nation and not be forced to rely on the good intentions and short memories of other groups. Moreover, measures which are designed to improve the social amenities of one end of society always involve a faint touch of hardship in the comforts at the other end of society. More taxes must be levied; someone must pay for better houses, more drains, more hospitals. Hence labour, for whom primarily the amenities are intended, must have its own champions. The Commission make the following proposals on labour and the franchise :

“The presence of representatives able to voice the desires and aspirations of labour and to translate these into concrete proposals is essential for the proper consideration of measures specially affecting labour. . . . The proper representation of labour is itself educative; the recognition of its claims as a part of the body politic will bring increased responsibility and a sense of unity with the community as a whole. Conversely, exclusion of labour from a fair share in the councils of the nation will inevitably drive it to rely unduly on other means of making itself felt, with injury to itself and to the nation.”

### A RADICAL REVOLUTION

When the Commission landed in Karachi this document was presented to them “for their attention” :

#### THE INDIAN LABOURER'S CHARTER

1. I am a human being and not a mere soulless machine.
2. I want a hygienic house to live in.
3. I want my children to be educated free.
4. I want to be a skilled worker.
5. I want to be saved from the moneylender's clutches.



6. I want to be protected from the "politics" of the priest.
7. I want the abolition of drink and drug shops.
8. I want the eradication of brothels, gambling dens and the exclusion of sensational cinema films.
9. I want a guaranteed subsistence allowance which will keep me above the itch of corruption, material as well as moral.
10. I want sufficient leisure for self-cultivation and self-realisation.
11. In short, I want my well being to be assured by beneficent legislation, for otherwise employers will not ameliorate my lot.

Education, housing, health, indebtedness and industrial relations: these are the five cardinal points on which harmonious progress in Indian industry turns. If the 357 recommendations of the Commission, as they are listed in the report, are examined, the most important will be found to centre round these major needs of the workers. The Indian Labourer's Charter makes the same emphasis.

To meet the cost of the changes proposed in education, housing and health the general public will have to put its hand in its pocket. These are not cheap reforms. Slum clearance, for example, is very costly. Will the proposals of the Commission be supported if those who live comfortably have to pay for them? The Commission met in taking evidence many instances of attacks on present conditions but very few instances of willingness to shoulder the responsibility and the cost of changes. One of the jute companies in Calcutta who were themselves doing an immense amount of welfare work, speaking of the privately-owned bustis near their mills said to the Commission: "The appalling living conditions probably will continue until the large landholders, who never visit their holdings, acquire a better knowledge of the conditions and a greater sense of responsibility for them. Landlords, *if so inclined*, could do much to prevent the construction



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of filthy hovels and the maintenance of insanitary conditions on their land.”

In addition to the reforms proposed by the Commission which are costly, there are many which are relatively inexpensive in terms of money, but which would go far to re-create industry and to pave the way for a new spirit between employers and workers. Such reforms as the appointment of employment officers and of women supervisors of women workers, the provision of creches and of simple canteens, a different attitude towards trade unions : these changes do not make heavy demands on the pockets of employers or of the general public. To put them into effect, however, demands a sense of responsibility towards the workers, and a willingness to experiment in the direction of ameliorating their lot. Will these proposals, costly in time and thought and interest, be supported?

Along two specific directions the public can exert influence. One is the watching of new industrial areas in order to see that town plans are properly made and properly carried out, so that the ghastly slums of Bombay and Calcutta may not be repeated in the new industrial centres. In the other direction the public can find out by means of questions in the Legislatures if the workers in Government and municipal concerns have good working and living conditions. As the Commission report states, Government is the largest employer of labour in India. To Government railways, factories and workshops must be added all the municipal workers on transport and public services. Government is expected to be, and should be, a model employer. In the evidence before the Commission it was apparent that with one or two exceptions Government works were at least on a par with those under the best employers, and well in advance of the minimum requirements of the law.

Being willing to pay for reforms ; holding a watching brief for new industrial areas ; exercising a right of questioning on the conditions of work of public employees ;



accepting the burden instead of constantly passing it on—this is one side of the responsibility of the public. There is still another side.

### THE SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE COMMUNITY

For the whole community, men and women, the most important challenge in the Commission's report is that of finding and training the right workers to carry out the new proposals. Factory inspectors, labour officers, welfare workers, medical officers, skilled investigators—all of these are called for. If the report is to be translated into action they must be forthcoming and must be trained. This call to professional service in the field of industrial labour is the first and most imperative challenge to the public.

The second challenge is that to personal service. There are a number of societies in India, such as women's organisations and social and religious bodies, which are in one way or another undertaking service for industrial labour. Very few of these came forward to give evidence before the Commission. To search the volumes of evidence for information supplied by social service organisations is to court disappointment. With one or two notable exceptions very few organisations sent in evidence, or had any noteworthy information to contribute.

The most outstanding need of the moment is for more extensive and more accurate information about the lives of the workers. The Commission make the following statement on this in their report :

“ We have already referred to the limited information available in respect of the standard of living of the industrial classes and we have stressed the importance of taking steps to remedy the present deficiency. There seems to be an impression in some quarters that the collection of such statistics is a luxury in which only rich countries or provinces should indulge. This, in our view, is a profound error. *It is on facts that policy must be built*, and so long as



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there is uncertainty as to the facts, there must be confusion and conflict regarding the aim. The absence of accurate statistics regarding the life of the workers constitutes a serious handicap to intelligent efforts to better their condition."

They proceed to say that the three main subjects on which information is most urgently needed are the wages, earnings and expenditure of the workers. But there is a note of warning: "The collection of statistical material from the workers on any extensive scale requires special qualifications. For an untrained investigator to descend on the workers' homes and collect such particulars as he can in a casual visit is valueless. The preliminary difficulties have been faced already by the Bombay Labour Office, and they have evolved a technique which can be studied with advantage by others who propose to embark on similar inquiries. We recommend that wherever possible, investigators should undertake a course of training, with that or some other office which has conducted a successful inquiry."

Having given this warning the Commission lay great stress on the value of surveys undertaken in a scientific manner by social and religious workers, private economists and university students: "We believe that all these agencies would do well to limit themselves to intensive enquiries, i.e., to the thorough investigation of a very limited field. In a small group, the analysis of their income and expenditure, their families, their indebtedness and its causes, their migrations, their absenteeism and its causes, their sickness, their housing, and the inter-relation of such factors offer an almost unlimited variety of useful inquiries. The universities of India are mostly situated in cities and towns of some industrial importance, and inquiries of this kind could be conducted by students of economics working under the direction of the university staff and in co-operation with a Labour Office. . . . We recommend to university authorities everywhere the examination of the possibility of making work of this kind an obligatory part of the course in



economics. We believe . . . that it would assist in bringing the universities of the country in closer contact with industry, an end which should be earnestly pursued."

## REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

Eighty years ago the seeds of industrialism were sown in India. Until recent years the growth has been slow. Now it is accelerating month by month and year by year. To plant modern mills and mines on an ancient agricultural community, and to speed up the pace of industrialisation when the world of labour is in turmoil, and when Soviet Russia is evolving a new industrial state, is indeed to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. The prolonged disturbances in China are evidence of such a reaping. The sowing of the wind and the reaping of the whirlwind in the Dutch East Indies were thus described by a Government official there: "Forced by circumstances, agricultural collectivism gave way to economic collectivism. This change in the economic sphere produced a spiritual revolution which spread among the ancient native institutions. The basis of the former community was destroyed. Everywhere a feeling of uneasiness and of restlessness took possession of the population; individualism increased, as well as competition and the need for credit. Traditional social standards vanished without being replaced by anything else on which to depend. The result was a profound social disturbance. Communist propaganda was not slow to take advantage of these circumstances."<sup>1</sup>

This description bears a close parallel to much of the disturbance which is apparent in both field and factory in India. "Un revolution spirituelle"—"un malaise social"—these are the symptoms found in many parts of India

<sup>1</sup> Le Communisme aux Indes Hollandaises par J. T. P. Blumberger.



to-day. Wherein lies the cure? The Commission find cause for optimism as they look ahead. Will that optimism be justified?

“We rejoice at the evident signs of the awakening of the general conscience which greater knowledge and the ferment of thought in India are combining to produce, and the progress already visible should hearten all those who believe in the possibility of advance. It is on the growth of the will to progress in the community generally, in those responsible for government and for the control of industry and in the workers themselves that the hope of the future lies.”

### THE STAGE IS SET

Under a huge pandal<sup>1</sup> sits a crowd of the kind which can be seen any day in the Legislative Assembly, in a Provincial Legislature, at any big public function in an Indian city. They are people with stakes in industry as owners or shareholders; with stakes in politics as voters and members of councils; with stakes in human welfare as human beings who through education have had their eyes opened. Beyond the pandal, some distance away, are the shadowy figures of Chinese, Japanese, Negroes, Americans, Europeans—the typical assembly that can be seen at the International Labour Conferences at Geneva. These keep their eyes fixed on the crowd under the pandal rather than on the stage, watching the effect upon them of the scenes enacted.

\* \* \* \*

The curtain rises. A jungle road is seen, leading from the country to the town. It is only a rutted track, edged with a fringe of palms, bending this way and that, and

<sup>1</sup> Tent.



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between them some scrubby thorns. Through the trees on the right can be seen a glimpse of the thatched roofs of a village.

A factory whistle is heard in the distance. Instantly a chorus of sounds begin, in which can be distinguished the chug-chug of an oil engine, the banging of hammers on steel plates, the scrape of a shovel on coal, the slithering of leather belts over pulleys, the rattle of the windlass at a shaft, the clanging of a tram bell. The sounds rise to a crescendo and then die down. The factory whistle blows again, a long shrill blast.

Narayan from the cotton mill enters, stops to listen to the factory whistle, looks back at the roofs of the village. Then he turns to the audience saying, "Give me the right to work without paying bribes." Behind him come a procession of people, each as they enter the stage stopping to listen to the factory whistle with a harassed expression, and turning a regretful glance on the roofs of the village they leave. Tulsi and Tilasari from the jute mill ask: "Give us a clean busti to live in, away from that so bad smell." Sham Lal, holding in his hand the rag with which he polishes the railway engine, murmurs: "Give us enough to eat; we are too weak to work." Parbhu comes forward with his pick and lantern and says: "Give me leisure to live happily, not all day buried in the coal mine." Oti Goa from the tea garden, with his hoe in his hand, stammers out, "May I have the right to return home if I cannot be happy in this new country?" Ratna from Bombay shows her four children, crying: "I have lost six others. Save our children for us who must work."

After an interval two small boys stumble on to the stage. They stand and chant together: "We are N. and F. Grandfather sold us to the master weaver. We do not want to make carpets. Set us free to go and play." The last two to enter are Kalil the weaver from the jute mill and Sonoo the rover from the cotton mill. From Kalil comes the request: "Give us security that the sardar may not



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dismiss us suddenly." Sonoo lifts his heavy eyes saying :  
"Deliver us from debt so that we may live better."

They stand in the ruts of the road while the palm trees bend this way and that, and they fold their hands in the gesture of greeting and say together : "Of your kindness educate us ; of your kindness lift us up ; of your kindness organise us."



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