

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON LABOUR

OBSERVATION VISITS TO BANARAS*

(9th and 10th December, 1967)

I

Discussions with Mr. Singh, Assistant Labour Commissioner, Banaras

Mr. Singh was working in Banaras in a junior capacity in 1957. He has again come back to the same area as Regional Labour Commissioner. The discussion was, therefore, about the changes that had taken place in Banaras in the attitudes of both labour and management.

2. Mr. Singh stated that employers and workers are now getting more legalistic in their approach. A new type of labour leadership is developing - that of lawyers. On the employers' side also help from lawyers is not an unusual thing; indeed it has become an every day affair. Lawyers on both sides being sharers of a common room in law courts are on very friendly terms; to them it is just a matter of arguing a case before the court and forgetting about it over a cup of tea once a decision is obtained. The effect of all this has been that it is the lawyer who dictates both employers and workers as to when a case in hand should or should not be settled.

3. Senior trade union leaders are not available for discussion with employers even in urgent cases. Junior leadership is not allowed to operate, since the seniors always are in fear of displacement. Frustration among the juniors affects the employers since it makes juniors more difficult to deal with. The employers also assert that where senior union leaders are available, much of the trouble or difference between labour and management gets settled without direct action.

4. Between 1957 and now, strikes of shorter duration have been on the increase. Even in such cases if a strike prolongs for about 5 days or more it continues indefinitely. In 1957 such strikes were not a usual occurrence in the Banaras area. Intervention even in strikes which are illegal is possibly a reason as to why the strike activity has increased. Government's approach of assisting unions even where strikes are not legal or are not justified has led to the situation where wild cat strikes are getting more common.

5. It has to be said, however, that the current difficulties appear to have arisen not so much because of labour-management relations being basically unsound but because of the steep price rise. Interim relief given by one of the Wage Boards had to be raised through the intervention of State Government because the price increase on which the interim relief was based had become out of date even before the decision to grant relief was taken. The general feeling in the discussions with employers and workers which any one operating in the field of labour-management relations gets is that unless the price line is held the situation will become even more difficult. In this area both employers and workers seem to have a grudge against Government though the reasons of each for this grudge are different.

6. Banaras, according to him, is a city of small employers many of whom work independently. It is these latter who have no employer-employee relations. They have a small set of looms on which they work on their own. Traders in Banaras exploit them. They have yet to get themselves organised in cooperatives which alone may help them to improve their bargaining power.

*The visits were covered by Mr. Raja Ram Shastri and Member-Secretary.

Visited a Cooperative Housing Unit:

Discussions with Mr. Abdul Rehman: Mr. Abdul Rehman has been a handloom weaver of long experience. After the scheme for housing low income groups was announced he left his old tenement somewhere in the city and occupied the present one. He had to pay initially a small amount for the membership of the co-operative which entitled him to claim a house. The house was a modest structure, a part of which Mr. Rehman utilised for fixing two handlooms on which he and the members of his family work. He is an independent worker in the sense that he buys his requirements from the market and sells his produce to the shop-keeper; there is no shop-keeper with whom he is in contact. On occasions when his family members are otherwise busy he engages a worker to run his second loom. In engaging a worker the practice in Banaras is for the senior weaver to advance some money. Money so advanced is more or less guaranteed to the senior because of the convention which they have among them of not employing a junior unless the dues he owes to the senior are settled. In case of disputes between the junior and the senior the matter is decided by a Panch.

2. Mr. Rehman narrated a number of difficulties about how the products manufactured by them have to be sold at a price which the shop-keeper accepts. This is because there is no agency to help them. A co-operative of the weavers was formed but internal quarrels made it ineffective. Another senior worker who joined the discussion said that the co-operative can function better if full time secretarial assistance is provided to it by Government. Here such assistance is available i.e. the cooperative of rich weavers, the societies are thriving.

3. On an average a weaver earns about Rs. 100/- to Rs. 130/- per month. The only satisfaction he has is that he is working in his own house and is master of his time. Weavers who have come to stay in these new surroundings have lost taste with others who are still working with master weavers in the Madanpura area. (The practice prevailing there is described elsewhere). This is because the junior weavers in that area consider those who have acquired a house through cooperative as better-off and the senior weavers in turn consider the cooperative of weavers as a potential competitor to them.

4. Mr. Rehman said that it is not possible to educate the children of weavers in this locality because of economic reasons. This is the case in other areas also. A male child is an asset for work on loans; and if the male child cannot go to school, the chances of a girl being sent there are more remote.

III

Visited Mehra Silk Weaving Factory:

The factory was generally clean and well maintained. It manufactured sarees in very complicated designs. The employer complained about his difficulties right from securing raw materials to the sale of his finished products. The margin he got was very low. A good bit of work which is required in finishing sarees had got to be done outside the factory. This work consisted mainly of getting out the thread after the design had been woven on the saree in the course of its manufacture. Generally this work is distributed among the family members of weavers in the factory. This helps in maintaining better relations with workers because such work supplements family income though in a small way. The factory did not have any labour trouble in recent years. According to the proprietor, in units of that size there is better understanding between the employer and workers.

INTEXCO raw silk factory:

The Intexco factory has a small shed where individual weavers were engaged in brocade work on their own. They were reported to be not belonging to the factory. Work we saw appeared to be extremely complicated. It required remembering the proper places where 15 to 20 different threads were to be put almost in every other operation by each person engaged in it. Work is carried on with the help of a junior who though reported to be 14 years of age, looked much younger in every case. The fact that the employer of the factory was mentioning the age makes it appear as if the workers were not all that independent as claimed. Fourteen years was mentioned as the age because below that age employment is not permissible under the U.F. legislation. Our own feeling was that quite a number of these helpers could have ranged between ages 6-10. The process of brocade weaving required operation by a weaver and his helper who were working on a pit-loom at the level of the ground and another helper who was about 4-5 feet above the ground and was working the Jacquards. The Jacquard worker and the main weaver would get about Rs.100/- to Rs.120/- a month each and out of this amount they had to maintain the junior. Such juniors after about 8-10 years of rendering help to the senior themselves become senior workers. Most of these helpers had hardly entered school or had left it after a year or two of schooling. All this appeared to be quite exploitative, when seen in relation to the fact that most of the operations were in the factory premises though under a separate shed.

2. In the factory we examined a number of weavers. They have a union, and a fairly effective union, as unions stand in Banaras. The general level of earnings of these weavers was between Rs.100/- and Rs.110/- per month. Cloth woven is about six yards a day. Weavers complained that the quality of yarn they get for the weft was bad. Breakages had to be attended to all the time. If there was some relief from these breakages it should be possible to weave longer lengths and earn more. The employer's answer to this was that securing better yarn was beyond him. He also said that workers suffer as a result of breakages but employer will suffer even more. The employer, in order to improve efficiency would seek the best yarn available to him in the market consistent with the price of the ultimate product. This was a fair statement.

3. The employer also complained about competition from Bangalore. Bangalore may have an advantage in raw material. If even at this low wage the employer thinks of competition from Bangalore, it is possible that the Bangalore employer, in spite of the advantage in raw material costs, may be exploiting his workers much more.

4. By and large employment is by village groups in the sense that persons from the same village or near about would work together in one section. This, according to the workers' representative, gives workers a fellow feeling and has a statutory effect on efficiency.

V

Visit to Bhadohi to understand the working of Carpet Industry.

Bhadohi is a place about 40 miles from Banaras. It is reported to be a centre of carpet weaving industry. Of the total export trade in carpet from this country about 2/3rd is reported to be from Bhadohi. Because of this the Bhadohi town has branches of most of the important banks in the country. Most of the manufacture of carpets in Bhadohi is against orders placed on different factories. There is no manufacture unless a demand for product exists.

2. There has been severe competition recently in foreign markets from countries like Pakistan, China and Japan. In Japan the work is organised on a more efficient basis whereas in China the question of pricing does not arise in view of their economic and political system. Thus though it may be possible to compete with Pakistan, there are greater difficulties of coping with competition from the other two countries. Even so, business has expanded substantially over the last 15 years. This is because persons abroad have been acquiring a taste for Oriental Carpet from this area. This was a common experience of all manufacturers in Bhadohi including Mr. Samad who has a long experience in the line and who is a public figure in Bhadohi of some standing.

3. The contract system operating in the carpet industry is somewhat peculiar. The work of drawing and raising designs is done mostly by contract labour though they work in or near the premises of the main unit. In some cases the contractor is merely a mistry type of worker. He brings his own workers, works with them and there is not much difference between what he earns and the earnings of his workers. When one of the carpet manufacturers was officially warned against employing contractors all that he did was to erect a number of small sheds in his unit and rent each one of it out to different mistries/contractors. Each of the sheds was shown as a place where the contractor was working independently.

4. When the question of education of children in the carpet weaving trade was raised the familiar ground against educating children as covered in Kashmir was again narrated. The contention from the workers' side and also incidentally from employers is that the children are required for making the family unit viable. That is why the system of child labour is common in the carpet weaving, jari and brocade work as well as in the manufacture of Banarasi sarees. According to persons who discussed this problem with us a great lee-way has to be made on the economic front before operating on the educational front.

5. Mr. Samad who has been in this trade for a very long time and who belongs to Bhadohi mentioned the difficulties in case the proposed contract labour law was enforced on the carpet industry. As a general point, Mr. Samad mentioned that a far greater discipline than is noticed currently will be needed if the conditions of workers have to be improved. At present, it appears to him that the main fight is not over. A different assessment of the problem by the parties. It was mostly because of the urge to leave which is developing in the economy. It is true that at one time the carpet manufacturing in Bhadohi had a considerable margin for the employer. That was because of cheap labour in that area. In recent years, however, the difficulties of handling labour experienced in other places are making themselves felt in this area even though labour is distributed in various villages around. Demonstrations, slogan shouting etc. have become a common feature in Bhadohi. It was conceded by the Bhadohi manufacturers that unless there is a general sense of discipline, including the employer group also, it will be difficult for the economy to get to an onward march.

6. Most of the manufacturers stated that educating children in the area where carpet weaving was a common feature was the responsibility of the State Government. The assistance which the manufacturers could give will be only marginal. Also it will be necessary to launch a literacy drive among the elders in the family of carpet weavers and other operatives who work on a similar basis if children have to be sent regularly to school and stay there till they acquire some familiarity with what is taught.

7. We visited a village where carpet weaving was actually in progress. The main weaver, an elderly man had his house on the farm. He had three looms. The preparation of the loom for carpet weaving hardly takes 4 or 5 hours. The work on a carpet depends on the intricacy of the design and the size of the carpet; the payment is on the basis of the number of threads assembled in the carpet - these vary according to the design. The weaver managed, with some marginal assistance from other members of the family, to do work worth about Rs.100/- per month on a carpet. The practice is that all the raw material including the warp, thread and wool of different colours for the weft is supplied by the manufacturer. He also gives the design which forms the basis of weaver's work. The weaver appeared to be quite satisfied because all the money he got out of it was supplementing his income from agriculture in the off-season. The arrangement with the manufacturer is such as would permit the rural weaver to adjust his work according to labour requirements of raising crop.

VI

Informal discussions which Mr. Rajendra Shastri and Member-Secretary had with employers' and workers' representatives at Banaras on 10-12-1967 at 10.30 A.M.

The following were present:-

1. Mr. S.C. Agarwal Labour Adviser
2. Mr. Vishwanath Singh Secretary, Hind Mazdoor Sabha, Varanasi Region
3. Mr. Furshottam Bajpai Education Officer (Trained),
Asstt. Secretary, Varanasi Zastoz Daskar Union,
Varanasi (AITUC).
4. Mr. Raj Kumar Mehra Partner, Shree Silk Mills.
5. Mr. R.K. Agarwal Secretary, Banaras Employers Association.
6. Mr. S.L. Vishwanathan Secretary, INTUC (U.P.), Varanasi.
7. Mr. Dhulchandra Tiwari Member Ex-Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh, U.O.
8. Mr. Sanesh Chandra Mehrotra School Teacher, Varanasi.
9. Mr. Bisheshwar Mukerjee AITUC
10. Jawhar Lal President, Banaras Press Mazdoor Sabha.
11. Mr. C.L. Agarwal Manager, Mehra Silk Mills, Nadesha - Varanasi
12. Mr. B.N. Singh Additional Regional Conciliation Officer, Varanasi.
13. Mr. J.S. Kapur Labour Inspector, Varanasi.

The employers' organisation in Banaras - Banaras Employers' Association - consists of traders, manufacturers and managers of commercial establishments. It also includes individuals who are working on their own like master weavers. The organisation was started in 1957. This has been its pattern of work since then.

2. One of the functions of the Association is to establish healthy labour management relations. This is its major activity, though the Association also helps members in their other difficulties with Government/local bodies/public authorities.

3. It renders advice to its members on the Shops and Commercial Establishment Act, Industrial Disputes Act, Factories Act, Provident Fund Act but major work again relates to Industrial Disputes Act.

4. By and large the experience of the organisation has been that Banaras labour is not difficult. It works efficiently if the employer knows his workers and the legal rights of workers. The present difficulties are mainly because of high prices; they do not arise out of any basic difficulties between employers and workers.

5. The price situation has, however, given a handle to outsiders and to some extent it has led to an agitational approach in the labour management relations with the help of outsiders.

6. There have been no major strikes in Banaras, though some strikes of a minor nature namely because of misunderstanding between employers and workers have taken place. In the last two years workers have been feeling that apart from Government, employers also should be held responsible for not holding the price line.

7. On the side of workers the major problem is that of differentials in earnings amongst workers in the higher paid categories and others. As regards the former, Banks and Engineering units were cited as instances whereas in the low paid categories all textile units were included.
8. Minimum wage should be fixed but it should be revised if there is a price rise. In fact if an arrangement is possible of linking the minimum with price rise workers would prefer it.
9. Non-implementation is one of the problems which is agitating all sections of working class. Such non-implementation is both on the side of Government and much more so on the side of employers.
10. workers advocate summary trial in such cases and award of deterrent punishment.
11. Unions in Banaras have not been able to devote time to the problems of implementation so far as working conditions are concerned. Most of their time is occupied in settling wage disputes. When wages reach appropriate level, it should be possible to look into these other problems of labour.
12. Governmental intervention cannot be done away with. It is possible that in this intervention some discretion will be involved on the part of the Government in power but even with that discretionary power intervention may be necessary.
13. Because of the multiplicity of unions it has not been possible to get the maximum benefit of organisation. In creating multiplicity of unions, employers also have a hand. (This was denied by the representatives of employers).
14. Industry-wise union may be difficult to operate. If organisations are plant-wise, both employers and workers could derive maximum benefit.
15. One of the points which causes delay in the settlement of disputes is the writ provision in the Constitution. This cannot be done away with without amending the Constitution but there are cases where even after a decision on writ petition is in favour of workers no relief becomes available because of the employers' ability to go to court again on some other point which can be in their favour. Lawyers from the employers' side make the position worse.
16. workers' organisations would prefer to have a separate labour court. This was because the formalities observed in civil courts on many occasions are to the disadvantage of workers. Labour courts should be organised in such a way that they will provide quick relief and even where appeals are permissible against such disputes it should be appropriate if a measure of relief is granted to workers on an interim basis.
17. For better implementation of legislation there should be registration of all manufacturing units irrespective of the number of persons they employ. (Employers did not favour this suggestion because they think that the Government will find it impracticable).
18. There should be ^a regional minimum fixed and it should be revised according to price rise.
19. All labour laws should be published in the local languages.