

# Aspects of the Labour Movement In Madras City 1918—1920

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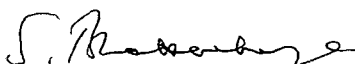
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Certified that the dissertation entitled "ASPECTS OF LABOUR MOVEMENT IN MADRAS CITY 1918-1920" submitted by M. LAKSHMANAN, for the award of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY DEGREE, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or other University. This is his own work.

We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.



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## CONCLUSION

The war and immediate post-war period marked the real beginning of the trade union movement in Madras. The first formal organisation of the workers, the Madras Labour Union, emerged in Madras at a time when there was a sharp rise in prices of food stuffs and other essentials. There was even a scarcity of foodstuffs. The wages of the workers were low and disparity between money wages and real wages was high. Added to this were the problems of ill-treatment and bad working conditions imposed on the workers. These conditions worsened in the post war period and the workers came to realize the necessity of trade unionism to fight for their own interests. The changed political climate in Madras city due to the Home Rule Movement gave them a sense of awakening. These combined forces of social, economic, and political developments gave birth to the Madras Labour Union.

It is significant that initiation for strike movements often came from the working class themselves. In organising labour unions of a lasting kind, as distinct from strikes, the Madras working class fell back upon the leaders of the political movement. Their dependence upon the political leaders was necessitated

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*M. Leishman*

## ABBREVIATIONS

B and C	- Buckingham and Carnatic Mills
Dept. of C and I	- Department of Commerce and Industry
E P W	- Economic and Political Weekly
G. O	- Government Order
Home. Poll(Deposit)	Home Political (Deposit)
I E S H R	- Indian Economic and Social History Review
I H C	- Indian History Congress
I I C	- Indian Industrial Commission
L and M	- Local and Municipal
M A S	- Modern Asian Studies
M P B E C	- Madras Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee
N A I	- National Archives of India
N L R	- New Left Review
N M M L	- Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
R C L	- Royal Commission on Labour

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

The history of the working class in colonial India still remains unwritten and many stereotypes surround the study of the working class. One of these stereotypes about the Indian working class was the inability of the working class to organize themselves and the lack of "firmness of purpose and unity of action".<sup>1</sup> The Secretary of State for India Montagu described the "placid and pathetic contentment of the masses".<sup>2</sup> It is doubtful if this notion of an inert and placid masses could have any relation to reality. In the years following the World War I the stereotype came to be increasingly questioned. Quoting the same phrase, B. Shiva Rao, one of the foremost leaders of the Madras Labour Union wrote that "the placid and pathetic contentment of the masses was disappearing particularly in the urban areas at a more rapid pace than the British officials perhaps appreciated. The industrial worker emerged definitely as one of the most significant symbols of post war India".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, Progs, March 1919, J.H. De Boulay's notes 13-1-1919. Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras caused by the speeches of Messers Andrews and Wadia.
  2. Quoted in B. Shiva Rao, The Industrial Worker in India (London, 1939), p.37.
  3. Ibid.



The existing literature on the social history of the working class is scanty. There are a few early works which throw light on the activities, social life and the character of the working class in the colonial period. Mention may be made of the works of B.P. Wadia: The Aims of the Labour Movement in India<sup>4</sup> and Labour in Madras.<sup>5</sup> The former has details about the origin and aims of the labour movement in the city of Madras and the latter is a collection of speeches delivered by B.P. Wadia at the meetings held over the period of three years from 1918 to 1920 of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill hands in Madras. These reflect the condition of the workers in the post-war period and also the thinking of the union leadership.

B. Shiva Rao's work, The Industrial Worker in India<sup>6</sup> is a study of the life of the working class of India in general. His details about the origin of the labour movement in the colonial Madras are a substantial contribution to the understanding of the labour awakening in

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4. B.P. Wadia, The Aims of the Labour Movement in India (Madras, n.d.).
  5. Labour in Madras (Madras, 1921).
  6. B. Shiva Rao, op. cit.

Madras City.<sup>7</sup>

As regards the social life of the Indian working class, the existing literature is still more scanty. However, Rajni Kanta Das's Labour in India<sup>8</sup> and Radha Kamal Mukherjee's The Indian Working Class<sup>9</sup> are more useful, the former dealing with the pre and post-war period working class and the latter with the working class of India since 20's in detail. Radha Kamal Mukherjee's is the only detailed study of the whole Indian working classes in various employments with tables of wages and working hours and standard of living.

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7. B. Shiva Rao gives details of the difficulties the workers faced and of their initiative to form a union for themselves with the assistance of outside leaders. Ibid., pp.14-15. However, R.P. Dutt attributes the foundation of the Madras Labour Union in 1918 to its "accidental character". He writes that "the Madras Labour Union was certainly the first systematic attempt at trade union organisation, with regular membership and dues, of the mass of Indian workers in an industrial centre. For this initiative all credits must be paid to its founders. But the appearance of this initiative in a relatively weak industrial centre (during the whole period 1921-33 the number of strike days in Madras was 2.8 million against 20 million in Bengal and 60 million in Bombay) reveals its accidental personal character..." R.P. Dutt, India Today (Calcutta, 1979), p.407.
8. Rajni Kanta Das, Labour in India (Berlin, 1922).
9. Radha Kamal Mukherjee, The Indian Working Class (Bombay, 1951).

The post-Independence period saw a plethora of literature mainly on the Trade Union Movement in India. These tended to be general accounts or surveys of the growth of the labour movement covering the colonial and post-colonial India. To this category belong the works of V.V. Giri<sup>10</sup> and V.B. Karnik,<sup>11</sup> These works suffer from two disadvantages.<sup>12</sup> First, they criticise the penetration of politics into the labour movement<sup>13</sup> in its early phase without considering the colonial context as in the case of V.V. Giri<sup>14</sup> and secondly they reduce the struggle of the working class in the colonial period to the confines of Economism.<sup>15</sup>

However a recent work by Sukomal Sen, The Working Class of India: The History of emergence and Movement<sup>16</sup> places the role of the Indian working class in broader perspective in the context of the colonial state and of the anti-colonial movement in India. Nevertheless these

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10. V.V. Giri, Labour Problems in Indian Industry (Delhi, 1965).
  11. V.B. Karnik, Indian Labour: Problems and Prospects (Calcutta, 1974); Indian Trade Union - A Survey (Bombay, 1966); Strikes in India (Bombay, 1972).
  12. Ibid.
  13. For discussion of a deliberate mix-up of politics and labour by the management to thwart the solidarity of the labouring class, see chapters III and IV.
  14. V.V. Giri, op. cit., p.9.
  15. V.B. Karnik, Strikes in India, p.374.
  16. Sukomal Sen, The Working Class of India, the History of Emergence and Movement (Calcutta, 1977).

works are institutional studies and have ignored the aims and self activity of the working class in broader perspective. In this connection the incisive comments of two historians concerned with labour history may be noted. According to Sumit Sarkar -

labour history in our country as well as the history of the left political movements in general tends to get reduced to a catalogue of strikes and unions, to collection of reminiscences about top leaders, or to endless and often sterile ideological controversies concerning the correctness or otherwise of a particular political line. A history from below in this largely unexplored field would probably lead to a greater emphasis on the forms of consciousness and self-activity of the working class, without belittling of course the indispensable and often heroic role of pioneer labour organisers.<sup>17</sup>

And in the view of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya -

although some of the works<sup>18</sup> purport to cover 'labour movement' actually it is a species of

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17. Sumit Sarkar, Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in Late Colonial India, Perspectives and Problems of a 'History from Below' (Calcutta, 1983).
  18. S.C. Jha, The Indian Trade Union Movement; V.B. Karnik, Indian Trade Unions; C. Revri and J.S. Mathur, Trade Union Movement in India; G.K. Sharma, Labour Movement in India, quoted in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "History from Below", in Social Scientist, vol.11, no.4, 1983, p.9.

Institutional history disarticulated from the deep-structure of its socio-economic context. Finally, some of these trade union histories also appear to merit Hobsbawm's criticism of a similar tradition in British labour history: "it tended to identify class and movement, movement and organisation or leadership of organisation, thus bypassing actual social realities."<sup>19</sup>

In the recent past, most of the studies concentrated on the main classes of workers and paid little attention to those unorganised urban poor. And even those studies which were only a few, used caste and community idiom or "paradigm"<sup>20</sup> to analyse the workers behaviour and social life. In particular, this approach is a marked feature of the regional studies on the working class in colonial India. Morris D. Morris who studied the Bombay industrial workers of the 19th and 20th centuries opines that caste was a least <sup>important</sup> "factor" inhibiting the development of trade unions because in his view, "the size and scope of many strikes from the end of the nineteenth century required the cooperation of all occupational groups in a

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19. Ibid.

20. For a critique of inadequacy of Paradigms used in social history writing, see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Paradigms Lost Notes on Social History", in Economic and Political Weekly (hereafter EPW), vol.17, nos.14-16, April 1982.

mill or the industry, including the untouchables" and does not consider on the basis of the lack of evidence that "caste served as overt bar to trade union development in the Bombay textile mills."<sup>21</sup>

This view is, however, questioned by Chitra Joshi, who on the basis of the study of the Kanpur textile workers in the twentieth century argues that a sense of caste and community persisted among the textile workers and loyalty to caste and community was reinforced by a sense of insecurity. However, while caste and community continued to manifest themselves, the "class unity" of the workers was being constituted in the process of struggle.<sup>22</sup>

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21. Morris D. Morris, The Emergence of An Industrial Labour Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854-1947 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), p.197 ff.
22. Chitra Joshi, "Kanpur Textile Labour: Some Structural Features of Formative Years", in EPW, Special Number, vol.16, nos.44-45 and 46, pp.1823-38. Richard Newmen in his monograph, Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918-1929: A Study of Organization in the Cotton Mills (Canberra, 1981), puts forward a suggestion for analysis that "...caste may be capable of adapting itself to industrialization and that it may be therefore be dynamic rather than an obstructive element..." Ibid., p.4; For a discussion of caste still serving as social security in modern times, see Subbiah Kannapan, "An Integrated View of Rural and Urban Labour Markets in the Process of Economic Growth and Welfare", Proceedings of VIII World Economic Congress of the International Economic Association, Theme 10, (New Delhi, 1986), pp.129-57.

Yet the crucial question remains as to the role of "primordial loyalties" of the Indian working class such as caste and community loyalties which are considered as potential disruptive forces<sup>in the process</sup> of class formation. The communal manifestation arising out of primordial loyalties among the textile workers of Madras in 1921<sup>23</sup> and those of Bombay in 1929 were cited as illustrative in this context. But a recent study shows that the communal flare-up in 1929 among the Bombay textile workers was the outcome of the deliberate steps taken by the communal organisations such as the Akhadas and the Suddhi movement to persuade their community members to act as strike breakers.<sup>24</sup> Similarly the causes of the communal divide among the textile workers of Madras in 1921 lay in the machinations of the Labour Board, the Government of Madras

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23. E.D. Murphy, "Class and Community in India, the Madras Labour Union, 1918-21", Indian Economic and Social History Review (hereafter IESHR), vol.14, no.3, July-September 1977. On the other hand, E.A. Ramaswamy who studied the industrial worker of Coimbatore in the post-Independence period argues that "a well organised labour movement creates powerful new loyalties and bases of behaviour which render caste, kinship and other similar loyalties irrelevant in certain contexts." E.A. Ramaswamy, "Trade Unionism and Caste in South India", in Modern Asian Studies, vol.10, 1976, p.362.
24. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Capital and Labour in Bombay City, 1928-29", in EPW, vol.XVI, nos.42-43, October 1981, p.43.

and in the efforts of the Communal leaders and the management of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. Although an identity with one's community is part of the consciousness of the average member of the Madras working class, its explicit manifestation in the form of "Communalism" - i.e., a political identity and a means of mobilisation - was by and large the consequence of the managerial and bureaucratic intervention. In this respect the thesis of Dr. Murphy is mistaken in that he tends to overlook the external interventions that generate communal and castist tendencies in their explicitly political form. "Community consciousness" instead of "class consciousness" is posited as characteristics of the Indian working class. On the other hand, class consciousness which is characteristic of the matured working class had not taken deep roots in the minds of the Indian working class who were in the process of formation. Dipesh Chakrabarty's study of the jute mill workers in Calcutta in the 1890's shows the growth of "community consciousness" among the significant sections of the Hindu and Muslim workers who typically rioted against the authorities over essentially communal demands; most of the riots turned around religious and community sentiments.<sup>25</sup>

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25. Dipesh Chakraborty, "Communal riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute mill hands in the 1890's", Past and Present, No.91, May 1981, pp.140-69.



There has also been a tendency in some of the early writings on the labour movement towards criticising unduly the early leaders of the Trade Union Movement.<sup>26</sup> The labour leaders were in the post-World War I period from professional advocates and middle class background: T.V. Kalyana Sundara Mudaliar (Thirv. vi. ka), (a school teacher by profession), B.P. Wadia (a vakil), V.O. Chidamparam Pillai (a vakil), Singaravelu Chetty (a vakil). We find that many of them were close to the Congress, and also the nationalist leadership. (Some of the labour leaders did not have any identifiable occupation, e.g. Chakkari Chetti and Marisharvathama Rao, both social and political activists from very early age.)

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26. R.P. Dutt, op. cit., p.406. Sukomal Sen, op. cit., pp.145-7. Sanat Bose, "Industrial Unrest and Growth of Labour Unions in Bengal, 1920-1924", in EPW, vol.16, nos.44-45 and 46, Nov. 1981, pp.1849-60.

Thus from this brief review of the recent trends in the field of labour historiography it is clear that there is much to be done in the labour history and that a new approach is called for to analyse and understand some of the <sup>characteristics</sup> of the Indian working class in the colonial period. However to understand the Indian working class, regional studies based on this broader framework are imperative. In this context the underdeveloped city of Madras where one of the strongest working class movements emerged in the post-war period provides the scope for analysis of the emergence of the working class movement in the complex socio-economic milieu and for analysis of some of the weaknesses which had accompanied the working class movement in this city.

The study of the working class and their movement in Madras is important in that vague generalisations have been made about the proletariat on the basis of the study of the workers employed in textile mills.<sup>29</sup> That is to

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29. The only monograph available on the working class of the Madras Presidency in particular Tamil Nadu is E.D. Murphy's work Unions in Conflict - A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres, 1918-1939 (New Delhi, 1981). But it covers only the textile workers with little reference to the workers employed elsewhere.

say, emphasis has been placed on the study of the textile mill workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, ignoring the condition of other categories of workers employed in various factories. Moreover, the condition of a particular company's workforce is used as a surrogate for the condition of the other categories of employees. This approach overlooks the distinction between the various categories of employees.

#### Objectives of Enquiry

While studying the whole workforce of Madras city in particular, the industrial classes in various establishments, a few fundamental questions are raised in the thesis. These are: How far did the conditions of inflation in the post-war years aggravate the working class discontent and unrest in Madras? What determined the relations between "white capital" and labour? What was the role of the "outsiders" in the lead of the labour movement and what impact they had on the fulfilment of the demands of the working class? What were the attitudes of the Government of Madras and the European managed establishments towards labour unrest? And equally our aim is to explore how the colonial State and the condition it created impinged on the growth of labour and the Labour Movement in Madras city in this period.

## CHAPTER II

### Section I

#### INDUSTRIAL BACKWARDNESS IN MADRAS CITY

The City of Madras remained extremely backward in the field of industrialisation right upto 1900. In 1900, Madras was stated to have 97 "Factories" with an outturn valued at 32 lakhs. Except three cotton mills established between 1878 and 1884, there were no major industrial establishments in the city. By 1908 the mills had 1,700 looms and 17,000 spindles and employed a daily average of more than 7,000 men, women and children.<sup>1</sup>

By the time of the publication of the decennial census of 1911, there were 146 "Factories" in Madras which in total employed around 29,690 workers. Men were predominant in the factories. They numbered 28,364 as against a total of 1,326 woman workers.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the workforce was employed in major industrial concerns such as the cotton spinning and weaving mills, wood industries, metal industries.

Small industrial firms employed a workforce ranging from

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1. Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial series, Madras, vol.1 (Delhi, 1985), p.509.
  2. Census of India, 1911, vol.XII, Part II Madras (Calcutta, 1913), pp.251, 258.

15 members to 400 to 500 workers as can be seen from the tables I.1 and I.2.

The census data for 1911 and 1921 do not show a growth in the number of those employed in the major industrial establishments and but show only a slight increase in some other units. Some industries show a decrease in units and employment. In 1911 three leather industries employed 115 workers of which three were woman employees, in 1921 there were only two leather industries which had a workforce of 78. Under the heading of the construction of means of transport and communication 15 units such as tramways, boat building, coach building, electric light work, etc. were grouped. A total of 2,722 men plus 163 women worked in these factories in 1911. However in 1921, not only was there a decline in the number of the units under this heading from 15 to 11, but also the total workforce fell to 2,623 men and 11 woman employees. Similarly the printing presses which totalled 38 in 1911 employed 6,178 men plus 21 woman workers showed a decline in the number of the workers to 5,193 in the case of man and 5 in the case of woman employees.

However, the largest fall, in terms of loss of jobs, was marked in the food industries and the industries of dress. In 1911 there were eight food industries in Madras

Table I.1: CLASSIFICATION OF PERSONS EMPLOYED IN INDUSTRY, MADRAS (1911)

Description of Factory	Number of Factories	Number of persons employed		Direction, Supervision and clerical work				Skilled workmen				Unskilled Workmen				
		Male	Female	Europeans and Anglo Indians		Indians		Europeans and Anglo Indians		Indians		Aged 14 and above		Under 14		
				Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Cotton Spinning Mills	1	438	83	-	-	18	-	-	-	365	52	35	31	20	-	
Cotton spinning & weaving mills	3	9875	365	38	-	209	-	-	-	5186	-	2385	316	2106	50	
Cotton handloom factories	4	162	35	3	-	3	-	12	-	101	26	41	10	2	-	
Jute press	1	19	3	-	-	4	-	-	-	1	-	14	3	-	-	
Emoroidery works	1	25	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	25	-	-	-	-	-	
<b>LEATHER AND OTHER INDUSTRIES:</b>																
Tanneries	2	87	3	1	-	8	-	-	-	6	-	28	36	6	-	
Leather factories	1	28	-	2	-	7	-	2	-	7	-	10	-	-	-	
Button and comb factories	2	89	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	65	-	9	-	13	-	
<b>WOOD INDUSTRIES:</b>																
Carpentary works	6	760	8	3	1	48	-	1	-	57	-	14	-	5	-	
Saw Mills	1	34	-	1	-	6	-	-	-	8	-	19	-	-	-	
<b>METAL INDUSTRIES:</b>																
Iron works	2	288	-	5	-	24	-	8	-	177	-	74	-	-	-	
Iron and steel works	2	340	1	6	-	33	-	7	-	171	-	123	1	-	-	
Working iron sheets	8	309	-	-	-	23	-	-	-	96	-	124	-	66	-	
Arsenal	1	767	-	41	-	44	-	10	-	281	-	387	-	4	-	
Machinery & Engg works	4	821	5	26	-	58	-	53	-	487	-	197	5	-	-	
Municipal workshop	1	280	-	3	-	25	-	8	-	135	-	37	-	-	-	
Aluminium factory	1	260	1	4	1	12	-	4	-	186	-	146	-	8	-	
Tin workshop	1	104	-	2	-	5	-	-	-	35	-	44	-	18	-	

<u>GLASS &amp; EARTHEN WARE INDUSTRIES:</u>														
Glass Works	1	19	3	2	-	3	-	2	-	11	-	1	3	-
Brick factories	1	108	119	1	-	6	-	7	-	82	95	-	-	12
<u>INDUSTRIES CONNECTED WITH CHEMICAL PRODUCTS:</u>														
Erected Water factories	6	205	6	11	-	13	-	2	-	39	-	134	-6	6
Oil Mills	4	255	12	-	-	71	4	-	-	128	-	37	8	19
Bulk Oil Installation	4	415	7	1	-	25	-	1	-	220	-	168	7	-
Chemical factories	2	351	23	8	-	41	-	-	-	73	-	219	18	10
<u>FOOD INDUSTRIES:</u>														
Rice Mills	2	74	21	-	-	58	-	-	-	18	-	116	111	-
Bakery	1	98	-	3	-	15	-	-	-	70	-	10	-	-
Water works	1	153	154	1	-	15	-	-	-	57	-	82	144	7
Tobacco factories	1	208	-	3	-	7	-	-	-	93	-	31	1	113
Forage presses	2	67	45	-	-	6	-	-	-	6	15	38	20	15
Condiment manufacturing	1	65	20	-	-	3	-	-	-	5	-	42	17	15
<u>INDUSTRIES OF PRESS:</u>														
Boot and shoe factories	6	427	2	8	-	25	2	10	-	360	-	6	-	18
Tailoring & dressmaking	8	1001	133	14	5	63	-	6	125	694	-	182	3	42
Laundries	1	49	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	25	-	19	-	4
Furniture Industries	3	245	9	1	-	8	-	-	-	210	-	9	1	17
<u>INDUSTRIES CONNECTED WITH BUILDING:</u>														
Stone Works	1	22	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	21	-	-
Cement Works	2	326	75	4	-	21	-	12	-	28	6	261	69	-
<u>CONSTRUCTION OF MEANS OF TRANSPORT:</u>														
Railway Workshop	1	163	-	3	-	3	-	10	-	62	-	85	-	-
Tramway Workshop	1	293	-	3	-	11	-	1	-	158	-	120	-	-
Coach Building factories	5	597	2	4	-	60	-	-	-	411	-	7	2	43
Motor car works	2	61	1	9	-	10	-	6	-	22	-	14	1	-
Landing & shipping work houses	1	936	150	15	-	11	-	29	-	276	-	573	160	32
Dockyards (boat building)	1	252	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	248	-	3	-	-
Port Trust workshops	2	420	-	8	-	9	-	69	-	191	-	140	-	3
<u>PRODUCTION AND TRANSMISSION OF PHYSICAL FORCES:</u>														
Ice factory	1	54	40	2	-	3	-	1	-	3	-	45	40	-
Electric light works	2	247	2	5	-	8	-	20	-	66	-	146	2	2
<u>INDUSTRIES OF LUXURY:</u>														
Printing Presses	38	6178	21	52	2	479	-	83	-	4425	-	903	19	236
Jewellery workshops	2	398	-	10	-	42	-	5	-	268	-	31	-	42
Games and Sports works	1	53	-	2	-	3	-	-	-	41	-	7	-	-

Source: Census of India 1911, vol. XII, Part II, pp. 251-58.

Table I.2: CLASSIFICATION OF PERSONS EMPLOYED IN INDUSTRY, MADRAS (1921)

Description of Establishment	Number Total of		Direction, Supervision & Clerical Staff						Skilled Workmen				Unskilled Labourer				
	of Es- tabli- shment	persons Employed	Managers		Supervising & Clerical Staff		Technical Staff		Europ. & Anglo-Ind.		Ind.		Aged 14 & over		Under 14		
	Male	Female	Europeans & Anglo-Indians	Indians	Europ. Ind.	Anglo-Ind.	Europ. Ind.	Anglo-Ind.	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
<u>Textiles &amp; Connected Industries</u>																	
Cotton																	
Putting spinning cleaning & pressing mills	1	94	-	-	1	1	-	-	8	-	-	55	-	29	-	-	-
Cotton spinning, weaving & other mills	5	11954	846	3	2	57	20	1	301	5	-	7765	310	3476	533	327	-
<u>Leather Etc. Industries</u>																	
Other Factories	1	25	-	1	-	1	3	-	2	-	-	1	-	17	-	-	-
<u>Wood Industries</u>																	
Carpentry works	4	118	-	3	1	5	23	-	8	-	-	68	-	31	1	11	-
Saw Mills	1	2	-	-	1	-	2	-	3	-	-	3	-	13	-	-	-
<u>Metal Industries</u>																	
Iron Foundries	5	621	2	1	4	5	4	3	45	19	-	420	-	173	8	13	5
Iron & Steel	14	423	6	1	14	1	3	-	30	-	-	230	-	90	9	55	-
Alumina	1	1039	-	1	-	5	7	5	6	7	-	367	-	653	-	-	-
Chemical & Engineering	5	1812	2	4	1	15	7	5	87	108	-	801	-	762	-	24	-
Principal Workshop	1	239	-	1	-	3	-	-	17	9	-	85	-	124	-	-	-
Aluminium Factories	1	338	-	1	-	2	1	-	19	3	-	273	-	37	-	2	-
Lead, tin & Copper works	6	677	4	5	1	10	5	1	43	-	-	235	-	369	4	8	-
Alumina foundries	1	16	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	12	-	-	-	2	-
Brick & tile factories	1	47	73	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	3	-	38	50	4	23
Hydroelectric water factories	12	297	35	2	10	4	3	1	16	3	-	32	-	219	33	9	-
Alumina Mills	4	161	23	-	4	-	1	-	13	-	-	8	-	133	22	2	1
Alumina Installation	1	775	8	1	-	11	-	-	46	-	-	241	-	476	8	-	-



<u>CHEMICAL PRODUCTS</u>																	
Lac & Cutch Factories	1	8	4	-	1	-	-	-	40	-	-	241	-	476	8	-	-
Chemical drugs & medicine works	2	39	3	1	1	-	3	-	12	1	-	3	-	15	1	3	-
Glue making	1	19	-	-	1	-	2	-	1	-	-	4	-	7	-	4	-
Flour & Rice Mills	1	18	3	-	1	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	13	3	-	-
Bakeries & Confectionaries	4	65	-	-	4	1	2	2	23	-	-	17	-	16	-	-	-
(H2O) Water works	2	120	45	-	2	-	6	-	-	-	-	100	-	11	38	1	7
<u>X. FOOD INDUSTRIES:</u>																	
Tobacco, Cigar, Shuff & Condiment factories	9	435	5	2	7	5	4	2	16	2	-	296	3	75	-	28	-
<u>XI. Industries of dress</u>																	
Tailoring works	2	717	36	2	-	10	8	-	12	-	34	528	-	159	-	-	-
Laundries	1	12	2	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	5	-	4	2	-	-
Boot & Shoe factories	2	60	-	1	1	2	2	1	3	1	-	47	-	-	-	2	-
Button & Comb factories	1	24	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	6	-	6	-	10	-
<u>XII. FURNITURE INDUSTRIES</u>																	
Furniture factories	5	188	10	1	4	1	3	1	3	-	-	130	-	23	10	22	-
<u>XIII. INDUSTRIES CONNECTED WITH BUILDING</u>																	
Store, Marble Cement works	1	216	65	1	-	-	-	-	16	-	-	31	-	168	65	-	-
Lime works & Kilns.	2	19	7	-	2	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	13	7	-	-
<u>XIV. CONSTRUCTION OF MEANS OF TRANSPORT &amp; COMMUNICATION</u>																	
Ramway	1	814	103	1	-	3	9	-	99	6	-	282	-	404	96	10	-
Coach building factories	3	35	-	-	3	-	1	-	1	-	-	25	-	3	-	2	-
Bicycle works	1	19	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	8	-	2	-	6	-
Boat building	1	97	-	1	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	82	-	11	-	-	-
Motor car works	11	779	3	6	5	9	10	5	41	33	-	557	-	102	-	13	-
Port Trust workshop	1	795	-	1	-	15	9	-	7	85	-	455	-	223	-	-	-
Preparation of Road Metal	1	10	7	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	3	-	5	7	-	-
Ice factories	2	80	-	1	1	2	1	2	11	4	-	18	-	40	-	-	-
Gas & Electricity	4	783	80	6	-	32	11	1	116	22	-	186	-	449	79	4	-
Stationary works	1	41	10	-	1	-	2	-	1	-	-	21	-	10	9	6	-
Printing Press	54	5193	7	5	49	19	50	10	411	48	-	3286	-	1181	3	137	-
<u>XV. INDUSTRIES OF LUXURY</u>																	
Jewellery works	4	398	-	1	3	3	3	1	43	3	-	297	-	12	-	32	-
Book binding work	8	374	-	2	6	5	10	1	24	1	-	180	-	124	-	21	-
Photo engraving & producing works	3	64	-	1	2	-	2	-	2	-	-	44	-	11	-	2	-
Scientific, Surgical, Optical and Musical Instrument factories	1	24	1	1	-	1	-	1	6	5	-	11	-	-	-	-	-
Clock & Watch works	1	13	-	1	-	-	-	1	3	1	-	7	-	-	-	-	-

Europ. & Ang. Ind. = Europeans & Anglo-Indians; Ind. = Indians.

Source: Census of India, 1921, vol. XIII (Part 2), Madras, pp. 291-98.

which employed a total of 674 man and 440 women labourers. Though the number of <sup>units in</sup> the food industries increased by one in 1921, the number of those employed fell to 435 man and 5 woman employees.

The census report of 1911 recorded 17 industries of dress with the employment force of 1,896 man plus 144 woman workers. In 1921 there were only 6 dress industries as against 17 in 1911 and 813 men and 38 women, a decline of 239 in the case of men and that of 106 in the case of women, were engaged in these industrial units.

In contrast, industries which marked some increase in terms of employment rate, were the textile industries and the metal industries. The census report of 1911 recorded 8 textile industries including four handloom industries with a total workforce of 10,475 man and 485 woman workers engaged in them. In 1921 in 6 textile industries there were 12,948 men and 846 women employed, an increase of 1,573 in the case of men and that of 361 in the case of women over the period of 10 years. Similarly the metal industries recorded a growth in terms of employment rate. In 1911, 3,179 men and 7 women were employed in 17 industrial establishments and in 1921, 5,165 men plus 14 women were engaged in 34 units.

Most of the major industrial units in Madras as well as in the whole Madras presidency were owned by the

European capitalists. Though no specific data are available on the community or caste wise dominance of the industrial units in Madras city, the table I.3 presented below shows the community and caste wise break-up of the ownership of the industrial establishments in the whole of the Madras Presidency. The cotton ginning and cleaning mills, the metal industries and industries connected with the construction of means of transport were monopolised by the Europeans. In terms of ownership and management of these industrial units, the Europeans were predominant in the presidency in particular the Madras city (see also table I.4). The Muhammadian controlled the leather industries. The food industries were in the hands of the "castes unspecified" with the Muhammadans and Vaisyas occupying the second and third place respectively. The Printing Presses were dominated by the "other castes" followed second and third respectively by Vaisyas and Europeans or Anglo Indians.

The traditional money lending community, the Chettiars had no major industrial role in the presidency.<sup>3</sup>

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3. The Chettiars, as entrepreneurs emerged only after 1930's, that is after the loosening of the colonial control over the economy of the Madras Presidency, but their investment was mainly in the field of textile industries and banking. See for details, Raman Mahadevan, "The Development of Modern Entrepreneurship in the Chettiar community of Tamilnadu, 1900-1930" in Indian History Congress, vol.II, Proceedings of the Thirty-fourth session, Chandigarh, 1973.

Table I.3

Name of Industries	Registered Companies who are		Private persons who are														Number managed by						Total									
	Government or Local Authority		Europeans	Indian	Both	Europeans or Anglo-Indians	Indian Christian	Musalman	Parsis	Vaisyas	Brahman	Tiyas	Vellalas	Chettis	Nayars	Nadars	Other Castes	Castes un-specified	Europeans or Anglo-Indians	Indian Christians	Musalman	Parsis		Vaisyas	Brahman	Tiyas	Vellalas	Chettis	Nayars	Nadars	Other Castes	Castes un-specified
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	
<u>Textiles and Connected Industries</u>																																
Cotton ginning and cleaning Mills (1)		28	18	1	10	1	15	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	158	26	5	14	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	173	228
Cotton spinning, weaving and other Mills (2)	1	9	6	3	5	21	19	-	1	4	22	-	6	1	-	8	10	18	21	19	-	-	6	17	-	5	10	-	3	16	115	

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Leather Industries

Tanneries (3)	1	1	3	-	65	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	-	-	9	3	1	63	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	12	81		
Leather factories	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2			
Metal Industries	7	49	2	1	4	2	4	-	2	-	3	4	-	-	3	12	57	2	3	1	-	2	-	1	3	-	7	24	100		
Food Industries	37	22	12	1	8	12	62	1	53	31	4	15	7	1	18	42	250	32	12	60	1	59	29	3	26	9	6	11	56	267	556
Industries of Dress	2	1	-	-	-	3	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	6	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	14		
Construction of Means of Transport	5	10	3	1	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	5	12	1	3	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	-	8	27		
Printing Presses (4)	4	5	9	-	14	12	2	-	5	21	2	6	2	2	-	5	52	19	13	-	-	4	18	2	6	-	4	-	10	82	140

- Note: (1) Excess of nine due to the joint ownership of seven by Hindus and Muhammedans and two by Hindus and Christians.  
 (2) Excess of one due to the joint ownership of a Hindu and a Muhammadan.  
 (3) Excess of two due to the joint ownership of a Muhammadan and a Hindu and of a European and a Hindu.  
 (4) Excess of one due to the joint ownership of a Hindu and a Musalman.

Source: The Census of India 1921, Madras, vol. XIII, Part II, pp. 306-311.

**Table I.4: European dominance in industries in Madras**

<u>Description of Establishment</u>	<u>Total Number</u>	<u>Registered companies with Directors</u>	<u>Number managed by Europeans or Anglo Indians</u>
		<u>Europeans or Anglo Indians</u>	
<u>Metal Industries</u>			
Brass, Tin and Copper works	15	5	5
<u>Industries connected with chemical products</u>			
Aerated water factories	15	3	3
Bulk oil installation	1	1	1
<u>Construction of means of Transport and Communication</u>			
Tramway works	2	2	2
Motor car works	13	5	7
Port Trust works	1	1	1
Gas and Electric works	6	5	6
<u>Industries of Lotory</u>			
Jewellery works	13	1	1
Book-binding works	10	2	2
Photo engraving and Map producing company	3	1	1
Scientific industries	1	1	1
Clock and watch company	1	1	1

Source: Census of India, 1921 Madras, vol.XIII, Part II, pp.309-11.



Similarly the Parsis who controlled the textile industries of the Bombay city were conspicuously insignificant, owning only five cotton ginning and cleaning factories. The business community of Vaisyas had some ownership in the food industries.

In other words, the traditional communities involved in business had no major share in the industrialisation of the Madras Presidency. This is clear from the fact that the new upstarts under the label "other castes" and "castes unspecified" who were not classified under any of the old traditional castes came to dominate and own the textile industries, food industries and printing presses. The table also indicates an absence of any single caste or community dominance in the Madras Presidency as far as ownership or management of the industrial units were concerned, except Madras where the European community predominated in business world.<sup>4</sup>

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4. However, Dr. Baker is of the view that there was a diversification and expansion of the economy and new industries such as tobacco processing industries and sugar industries were established. But the data we have of the overall growth of the economy of the Madras Presidency in particular, the Madras city, do not support his argument. For details of his argument of the diversification, of the economy on the basis of the statistical data, see C.J. Baker, "Figures and Facts; Madras Government Statistics" in C.J. Baker and D.A. Washbrook (eds.), South India: Political Institutions and Political Change 1880-1940 (Delhi, 1975), pp.204-31.

According to the decennial census of 1921, the number of persons employed in various factories, big and small, was 30,854 of which men were 29,463 and women constituted 1,391 in total.<sup>5</sup> Over the decade the increase noticed was 1,164 workers, though the number of industries as returned in the census of 1921 was 171 as against 147 in 1911. The number of workers employed in the factories was quite disproportionate to the total number of the city population, as the table I.5 illustrates it.<sup>6</sup>

Table I.5: Population, number of factories and workers in Madras city for 1911 & 1921.

Year	Population in Madras	Number of Factories	Number of workers
1911	5,18,660	147	29,690
1921	5,26,911	171	30,854

In Madras, the existing large industrial units of this period were controlled by the European capitalists. Most of the important industrial companies such as cotton mills, transport, port trust, engineering and chemical, were dominated and monopolised by them. Even the management of these firms was in the hands of the Europeans, as the

5. Census of India, 1921, vol.XIII Part B. Madras (Madras, 1922), pp.291-98.

6. Census of India, 1921, vol.XIII, Part II, Madras, pp.4 and 291, 298. Census of India, 1911, vol.XII, Part II, Madras, pp.251-58.



census tables for 1911 and 1921 will show. The dominance of modern industry by European businessmen was supported and reinforced by, as A.K. Bagchi points out, a whole set of administrative, political and financial arrangements within India. The European businessmen had erected organisations and institutions for building up their advantages and protecting them against intruders all over India. They were organised in Chambers of Commerce to which very few Indians were admitted. The Madras Chamber of Commerce had practically <sup>no</sup> Indian members before the first world war.<sup>7</sup> Of the 24 trading members of the Madras Trades Association, only 7 were Indian trading firms in 1916.<sup>8</sup> The institutions of the Chambers of Commerce and Trade Associations, in the words of A.K. Bagchi, "provided excellent means for adjusting the interests of different groups to one another and for eliminating unnecessary competition".<sup>9</sup>

The prominence of the European capitalists in trade and industry was helped by their control of the money market. The Bank of Madras never had an Indian director

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7. A.K. Bagchi, Private Investment in India 1900-1939 (New Delhi, 1980), p.170.

8. Evidence (Report of the Indian Industrial Commission) (hereafter IIC), vol.III, Madras and Bangalore (Calcutta, 1919), pp.221-22.

9. A.K. Bagchi, op. cit., p.170.

on its board since its establishment in 1878 and until its amalgamation into the Imperial Bank of India in 1921.<sup>10</sup> The Bank of Madras granted finance to British owned and managed firms, in particular the cotton mills. Out of 9 mills which were financed by the Bank of Madras, the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills were the only firms in the city of Madras which received banking facilities.<sup>11</sup> Confidence was reposed only in the European capitalists while granting the loans. And new industries were hardly covered under the borrowing scheme.<sup>12</sup>

Enterprising indigenous businessmen in Madras had no access to the organised money market. They found the existing system opposed to the growth of industrial development in the city as well as outside. They found it difficult to compete with the British or European firms which were backed by the discriminatory policy of the Government of Madras. The indigenous entrepreneurs were denied permission to start industries in Madras city. For example, Mr. Parathasarathi Naidu was refused permission to establish paper mills within the limits of the Madras

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10. Ibid., p.171.

11. Evidence (Report of the IIC), vol.III, Madras and Bangalore, p.282; See for further details of the Bank of Madras and its activities, Sir W.B. Hunter's Evidence (Report of the IIC), vol.III, Madras and Bangalore, pp.275-95.

12. Ibid.

Municipal Corporation. However, he established mills on his own account at Peravellore outside Madras city and started manufacturing various kinds of country paper and paste boards and kept on supplying them to the Government. But when other mills were started in Calcutta in 1888, the patronage he was receiving from the Government of Madras was diverted to new channels. He was unable to run his business and face unequal competition from the Calcutta firms and he closed down his mills in 1915 due to lack of business support and market for his goods.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the lack of the Government's encouragement, or lack of market for finished products, some enterprising Madras businessmen built up their trade equal to the British firms. The case of the Messers. English Cycle and Motor Importing Company, however, shows that such success was possible in fields where there was only trade involved.

The Messers. English and Motor Importing Company was started by the joint proprietors, A. Subrayalu Naidu and V. Surya Prasad Pantulu on a comparatively small scale at Cocanada in 1904. Within eight years of its establishment, their extensive business demanded the

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13. Srinivasa Iyengar (ed.), Encyclopaedia of the Madras Presidency and the Adjacent States (Madras, 1921), p.766.

shifting of their Head Office to Madras. Owing to the rapid increase of business in the sale of motors, they were able to open their motor works in 1912 in Mount Road in Madras. They dealt in all kinds of motor accessories and the well known witchitra service cars, motor cycles etc., for all of which they acted also as sole agents. Their business and stocks equalled the other British companies in the same trade.<sup>14</sup>

But the range and extent of business controlled by the Indian business groups could hardly equal that of the European capitalists, in particular the Binny and Company and the Parry and Company in Madras, which had a wide business network outside the Madras city with record of high profit and dominance in the business world.<sup>15</sup> Interlocking of interests of European firms brought them into one group and placed them in a stronger position. It was done through the directorship of various firms by a single individual. Sir Clement Simpson who was the Director of the Binny and Company was also the Director of the Tramway Company and also the Electric

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14. Ibid.

15. For details, see A.K. Bagchi, op. cit., pp.189-91; The Tercentenary Celebration Volume (Madras, 1939), pp.263-70.

Supply Corporation<sup>16</sup> which together employed a large proportion of the total workforce in Madras City.

The indigenous entrepreneurs lacked proper channels of investment and were handicapped by the lack of finance and absence of joint stock companies for the promotion of industries. A leader of the business community, P. Thyagaraya Chetti told the Industrial Commission that the Madras businessmen had "no stock share, money market any where in the whole presidency."<sup>17</sup> Even in 1930 Madras possessed no regular stock exchange. One witness confessed before the Banking Enquiry Committee that the number of companies operating in the Madras Presidency could be "counted on one's fingers."<sup>18</sup>

The role of the Government of Madras in the process of industrialisation in Madras was conditioned by a policy of laissez-faire.<sup>19</sup> Though a department of industries

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16. G. Slater, Southern India its political and Economic Problems (London, 1936), p.325.

17. Evidence (Report of the IIC), vol.III, Madras and Bangalore, p.51.

18. Evidence of T.N. Krishnaswami in Report of the Madras Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee (hereafter MBEC) (Madras, 1930), vol.III, p.725.

19. But in the nineteenth century the Government of India followed what is characterised accurately as "discriminatory intervention" and evinced interest in the construction of railway lines and public works to "aid the merchant". For details of discriminatory interventionism, see S. Bhattacharya, contd...p.26..

was created in 1906, its contribution to the growth of industries in the Madras city was negligible. The Department under Alfred Chatterton was successful only in the manufacture of Aluminium in a pioneering factory. However proposals to utilise the power from the Periyar dam for industrial development in Madras fell through owing to the opposition of the Inspector General of Irrigation. Again proposals to start a wood-distillation factory were squashed as a result of opposition from a committee of non-official gentlemen who objected to a government factory of large scale because it would interfere unduly with private enterprise.<sup>20</sup> On similar grounds as well all efforts of starting pioneer factories by the Government of Madras were squashed by Lord Morley who was then the Secretary of State for India in his despatch of 29 July 1910.<sup>21</sup>

After 1910, there was no initiative from the Government of Madras to pioneer industries in the city

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"Laissez-faire in India", IESHR, vol.II, no.1, Jan.1965 pp.1-22. For details of the bureaucrats' obsession with laissez faire and of difficulties faced by Lord Bentinck, the Government of Madras, in the establishment of a Government controlled Bank in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth century, see S. Ambirajan, "Laissez faire in Madras", IESHR, vol.II, no.3, July 1966, pp.238-44.

20. A.K. Bagchi, op. cit., p.51.

21. Ibid.

or in other parts of the Presidency, which remained industrially backward upto the end of the first World War. The Industrial backwardness of the presidency was recognised by all the non-official bodies such as the Southern India Chambers of Commerce which was founded in 1909, the Madras Chamber of Commerce and the Bank of Madras. The Madras Chamber of Commerce recognised the backwardness of the presidency in industrialisation and accepted "the principle of establishing Government pioneer factories in order to introduce new industries and to prove whether a new industry is commercially practicable. Capital for new industries is not readily obtainable and unless Government are prepared to embark on the expense of establishing factories progress in the industrial world in India will be slow".<sup>22</sup> Similarly the Secretary and Treasurer of the Bank of Madras felt that "...in this Presidency Government should pioneer industries and establish demonstration factories".<sup>23</sup>

In fact, however, the European capitalist lobby was averse to government initiative to promote non-European business enterprise. A bill named the Madras

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22. Evidence (Report of the IIC), vol.III, Madras and Bangalore, p.304.

23. Evidence (Report of the IIC), vol.III, Madras and Bangalore, p.276.

State Aid to Industries Act was passed in the Madras Legislative Council in 1922. The Act stipulated so many conditions for the grant of aid to "nascent industries" and "cottage industries" that up to January 1930 out of 41 applications received for aid, only 10 applications were accepted and the rest were refused on various grounds as these did not satisfy the conditions in the Act.<sup>24</sup> The State Aid Act however was feared to threaten the interests of the British capitalists.

The Madras Chamber of Commerce objected to some of the provisions of the Act. Mainly it objected to the 4 (b) clause which stated that "aid may be given to industries to be newly introduced into area where such industries are undeveloped" because it considered that:

"though an industry may not hitherto have been established in a particular area, such area may constitute one of the sources of supply of raw material to the industry established elsewhere or a buying market for the finished product of such established industry. In such a case the new development would not only be source of harm to the industry as a whole but would itself stand only a very small chance of responding

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24. Evidence (Report of the MBEC), vol.III, p.1154.



to the Aid granted by the State and would court disaster".<sup>25</sup>

Thus European capitalists opposed the establishment of new industries in places where raw materials were available, for the establishment of such industries in proximity to the sources of raw materials was likely to deprive the European owned factories in Madras of raw materials.

The other reasons for the failure of the efforts of the Provincial Government to pioneer new industries or to spread industrialisation were, as A.K. Bagchi points out, the inability to start on large enough scale and failure to survey the local market or sources of materials.<sup>26</sup> The same reasons helped and reinforced the domination of the European business houses in Madras right from the beginning. Their domination of the market and a few major industrial concerns left no scope for the industrial expansion in the city of Madras upto the post-war and later period.

The lack of industrial expansion in the city was reflected in the slow expansion of the city and in the

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25. Report of the proceedings of the Madras Chamber of Commerce, January-December 1922 (Madras, 1923), p.185.

26. A.K. Bagchi, op. cit., pp.51 & 55-56.

low level of migration from the rural parts.<sup>27</sup> Related to this was the question of unemployment among casual labourers who were driven from its rural areas by poverty into the city in search of livelihood. The Royal Commission on Labour was told by the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills Management that there was "extensive unemployment" among "casual labour".<sup>28</sup> The members of the Royal Commission recorded that they saw many people standing at the gates of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills for job.<sup>29</sup>

The industrial backwardness of Madras and the extensive unemployment substantially determined the life of the working class in Madras city. It restricted the activities of the working class, limited the movement of the workers from one factory to another and determined the level of wages for the industrial workers in Madras city.

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27. C.W. Ransen, "The Growth of the population of Madras" in the Madras Tercentenary Celebration Volume (Madras, 1939), p.320.
28. Evidence of Hargreaves, in the Royal Commission on Labour in India (hereafter RCL) 1931, vol.III, Part II, p.170.
29. Kabir-ud. Mohmed, a member of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, in RCL, vol.II, Part II, p.170.

## Section II

### CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASS IN MADRAS

To pursue the study of the life of the workers employed in factories and other places is not an easy task, due to the paucity of evidence. This is even more true of the "lumpen proletariat" or "sub-proletariat".<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly the workers and the "lumpen proletariat" lived together in para cherries and shared in common features of cherry life. But to bring them into light is difficult, given the lack of materials on that score. However, with the limited data gleaned from the vernacular newspapers and the Government reports and files, we can sketch the conditions of the workers in the Madras city.<sup>2</sup>

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1. S. Bhattacharya, "History from Below", Social Scientist, vol.11, April 1983, p.10.
  2. Sources used in the following pages are the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, the Salary Committee Report of Madras Presidency Fortnightly Home Dept (Pol) files from 1914 to 1922, the report of the Factory Act 1918 and files related to strikes in Madras during the period under study. These reports concern themselves with strikes and position of the managements and the labourers in relation to their demands. Except the factory report and files related to strikes at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, others are mere reports of strikes. Yet these throw light on the causes of the strikes, which are relevant for the study of the conditions of the workers in the factories. Of the non-government sources, in particular, the vernacular the Swadesamitran is useful.

Impact of World War I

Though the outbreak of the First World War had not affected the city population immediately, its impact came to be felt by the populace in course of time. The effect was seen in the rise of prices of the foodstuffs. The prices of rice, sugar, matches, kerosene oil, flour and mutton shot up and tended to rise and rule above normal.<sup>3</sup> Price rises were caused by trade dislocation in the import of rice from Burma, of oil and other necessaries which were in great demand during the war period. For a while in 1914 trade declined and business activities slumped. "The general financial position", a report said towards the end of 1914, "is not likely to improve."<sup>4</sup>

Side by side with the price rise, small savings were depleted. Withdrawals from savings from the post offices occurred on large scale even in 1915. Withdrawals exceeded deposits, emptying postal deposits and savings.<sup>5</sup> Mostly the middle income people withdrew their savings in order to meet a high rise in prices of foodstuffs. In the following tables rise in prices can be seen from

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3. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), 16 October 1914, File No.61, October 1914.
  4. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), 16 December 1914, File No.43, January 1915.
  5. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), 2 March 1915, File No.56, March 1915.

1914 to 1919:

Table I.6<sup>6</sup> Average Retail Prices of Certain Articles of Consumption in Indian Families from 1914 to 1919 (in Rupees)

Name of Article	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919
Rice	5.66	5.33	5.76	5.68	6.50	9.15
Ragi	3.40	3.09	3.16	3.28	3.80	6.72
Dhall	6.32	7.12	5.38	5.39	5.74	12.66
<u>Condiments and Spices</u>						
Chillies	7.70	11.55	8.78	8.55	13.71	21.95
Tamarind	4.84	4.11	4.28	4.98	4.67	4.11
Saffron	6.33	5.11	6.58	8.03	8.23	9.02
Black Pepper	30.85	30.85	30.85	30.85	56.57	59.15
Corinander	4.11	9.96	8.55	7.36	6.24	9.89
Fenugreek	7.38	7.92	8.61	12.92	12.92	13.75
Ghee	82.29	61.71	61.71	61.71	61.71	61.71
Salt	1.28	1.28	1.28	1.28	1.28	1.28
<u>Vegetables</u>						
Onion	2.35	2.74	2.35	2.06	2.06	4.57
Potato	4.11	4.57	4.11	5.14	6.43	10.28
Gringelly oil	20.57	20.57	20.57	19.29	21.43	30.86
Firewood	0.42	0.38	0.33	0.38	0.55	0.44
Kerosene oil per gallon	0.76	0.56	0.63	0.63	0.75	0.69
<u>Cloth manufactures</u>						
Piece goods shirting per lb	0.76	0.86	0.88	1.88	3.15	3.38

Note: Prices are in rupees per Imperial maund of 82½ lb or 40 seers of 80 tolas each. For kerosene oil the unit adopted is specified against it.

6. Report of the Salary Committee, Madras Presidency (Madras, 1919), p.11.

Table II.7:<sup>7</sup> The Index Numbers of Retail Prices of Some Articles of Consumption including house rent in Madras city. An average of the prices 1890-94 = 100

Articles	1912	1919
Rice	141	238
Ragi	158	324
Dhall	149	283
<u>Condiments and Spices</u>		
Chillies	165	218
Tamarind	123	101
Saffron or turmeric	123	102
Black Pepper	137	223
Corinander	147	174
Fenuqreek	146	219
Ghee	136	166
Salt	40	41
<u>Vegetables</u>		
Onion	54	107
Garlic	135	-
Potato	93	238
Gringelly oil	131	199
Firewood	157	142
Kerosene oil per gallon	80*	187
Standard clothes	133*	464
House rent	153	210**

**Note:** Prices are in rupees per Imperial maund of 82½ lb or 40 seers of 80 tolas each. For kerosene oil the unit adopted is specified against it.

Figures marked with single asterik denote index numbers of wholesale prices in the groups concerned. These have been entered as retail prices are not given for the articles.

Figure marked with double asterik denote index numbers of house rents of small types of houses in Triplicane and George Town in Madras City.

7. The Salary Committee Report, 1919, Madras Presidency, pp.3-4.

In contrast to the rapid rise in prices of food-stuffs in the war and post-war period, there was a slow movement of wages of the skilled and unskilled workers engaged in various types of occupations. This can be seen from the following table of rates of wages per day in Madras for 1911 and 1916.

Table II.8:<sup>8</sup> Rates of Wages in Madras City as taken in the quinquennial wages censuses held in 1911 and 1916

	1911			1916		
	R	A	P	R	A	P
1. Unskilled or common labourers	0	2	9	0	3	9
		to			to	
	0	7	9	1	8	0
2. Workers in iron and hardware	0	3	9	0	5	4
		to			to	
	1	8	0	2	4	0
3. Copper, Brass and bell metal workers	0	4	0	0	4	10
		to			to	
	1	5	4	1	8	0
4. Carpenters	0	2	0	0	5	4
		to			to	
	1	8	0	1	7	0
5. Masons and builders	0	6	0	0	6	6
		to			to	
	0	14	0	0	11	0
6. Cotton weavers and industry	0	6	0	0	6	4
		to			to	
	1	12	0	0	9	6

8. Prices and Wages in India, 1923, p.173.

From the table II.8, it emerges that the "unskilled workers or common labourers" earned less, but the difference between the unskilled and skilled workers in terms of wages was not substantial. Even among the skilled workers there was an average wage differential of two annas. The workers employed in the major establishments were better off. For instance, the employees of the Southern India Railway (Perambur) earned better wages than these engaged in the skilled and unskilled jobs. The table below confirms this.

Table II.9:<sup>9</sup> Average Wages including allowances of the Southern India Railway employees, Perambur, Madras, 1914 (Rupees per mensem)

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Traffic	35.84
Loco running	16.74
Engineering	23.84
Traffic Adult clerks	22.60
Workshops	14.70

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Wage differential among the Southern India Railway employees was more marked between skilled and unskilled employees. Employees in traffic, engineering branches and traffic adult clerks who might be considered as, the fringe of the middle class were better paid than those

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9. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File no.29, March Progs 1919, Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.



employed in workshops as the above table shows.

There was no improvement in the levels of wages even in 1917 or 1918. Before the end of the first World War, the differential between the skilled and unskilled workers can be observed from the following table.

Table II.10<sup>10</sup>: Daily wages of the skilled and unskilled workers in Madras Presidency including Madras city and Tirunellvely district for 1917 and 1918

Main classes of labour	In factories in the Presidency						Factories in Tiru- nellvely 1918			Outside factories in the same dist. 1918		
	1917			1918			1918			1918		
	R	A	P	R	A	P	R	A	P	R	A	P
<u>Skilled Labour</u>												
Engine Driver	1	3	0	1	1	10	0	10	10	0	10	1
Fireman	0	7	6	0	7	10	0	7	10	0	8	0
Fitter	0	14	4	0	13	9	0	14	1	0	11	8
Blacksmith	0	11	6	0	13	2	0	10	10	0	13	0
Carpenter	0	10	9	0	11	0	0	9	11	0	12	0
Brick layer	0	10	6	0	10	6	0	8	0	0	10	0
Mason	0	10	3	0	11	8	0	10	11	0	12	0
Spinner	0	7	6	0	8	11	0	5	4	0	6	0
Weaver	0	9	0	0	9	7	0	5	6	0	12	0
<u>Unskilled Labour</u>												
Collie	0	5	3	0	5	6	0	8	4	0	8	5
Messenger	0	4	0	0	4	11	0	5	10	0	5	0

10. Report on the Working of the Indian Factory Act, 1919, G.O. 3146 TNA, 12 June 1919.

Not only was there wage difference between skilled and unskilled workers employed inside the factories and outside the factories. There was also unequal wage difference among the unskilled workers. The unskilled workers working outside the factories in Tirunellvely district earned better wages than those unskilled employed inside the factories in the same district and were better paid than their counterparts in 'factories in the presidency' which included Madras City. The low scale of wages which was common among the workers employed inside the factories and those employed elsewhere is also true of the employees in the British owned Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. It was claimed that "their wages were on a higher level than those paid by other mills and Sir Clement Simpson can justly be called a good employer".<sup>11</sup> However the following table shows the contrary to such a claim.

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Table II.11a Daily Wages of the Selected Workers in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras from 1918 to 1922 (figures in decimal)

(1)	1918 (2)	1919 (3)	1920 (4)	1921 (5)	1922 (6)
<u>Mechanic Room</u>					
Driver	.87 to 1.25-	1.06-	1.20-	1.25-	
	1.57	1.93	2.12	2.32	2.5
					contd...p.41..

11. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, March Progs 1919, Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.

11a. Prices and Wages in India, 1923, pp.219-21.

table II.11..contd...

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Fireman	.40- .90	.53- 1.00	.57- 1.00	.70- 1.20	.70- 1.20
Wood or coal cooly	.40- .42	.46- .5	.51- .56	.94- .62	.60- .62
<u>Mechanic Shop</u>					
Carpenter	.53- 1.64	.62- 1.93	.68- 2.	.78- 2.32	.78- 2.25
Moulder	.45- 1.89	.62- 2.12	.68- 1.5	.78- 1.81	.75- 2.0
Hammerman	.40- .48	.53- 	.57	.70	.65- .70
<u>Card Room</u>					
Jobber	.76- 2.0	.81- 2.25	.89- 2.46	1.28- 2.76	1.37- 2.79
Stripper	.43- .56	.53- .65	.57- .71	.68- .81	.68- .78
Card tender	.34- .45	.46- .53	.51- .57	.50- .68	.60- .68
<u>Bundling and Bailing Department</u>					
Big Pressman	1.28	1.26	1.42	1.34	1.32
Small Pressman	.43- .5	.5- .54	.54- .62	.68- .73	.65- .73
Cooly	.42- .46	.46- .53	.51- .51	.60- .68	.60- .68
<u>Binding Department</u>					
Bricklayer	.5- 1.5	.53- 1.56	.68- 1.7	.65- 1.9	.65- 2.0
Tank digger	.40- .5	.53- .62	.48- .65	.60- .73	.60- .73
<u>Waste Pickets Department</u>					
Waste picker	.51- .43	.43- .46	.45- .51	.60- .65	.60- .70
Slubing Frame	.68- .79	.82- .89	.93- .95	1	.96- 1.0
Intermediate frame	.54- .65	.57- .71	.71- .79	.82- .90	.76- .95
Roving Frame	.46- .53	.55- .62	.56- .65	.68- .81	.68- .81

In the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills there was no uniform wage scale adopted, as is shown in the above table. Workers in the different departments had different wage scales. More fortunate were those in the mechanic room and carding rooms. There also only the skilled workers and jobbers earned better wages. Big Pressman in the Bundling and Sailing Department had an edge over other employees. The lowest paid workers were the coolies and waste paper pickers whose average wage per day between 40 and 41 paise.

The table II.11 also shows unsteady wage levels over the five years. For instance, the average daily wages of the Big Pressman in the Bundling and Bailing department stood at Rs.1.28 in 1918, declined to 1.26 in 1919, rose steadily to 1.42 in 1920, but declined to 1.34 in 1921 and to 1.32 in 1922. This unsteady wage level within five years was caused by the management's policies to curtail the wages of those who were active in the Madras Labour union. Low wages were part of the working conditions of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill employees. Even as late as 1929, the wage level of an unskilled worker stood at Rs.12-6-0 per month. When the manager of the Carnatic Mill was asked by the Royal Commission if that was 'a fair wage for the maintenance of himself, his wife and two children', he answered, "comparatively

it is, as far as local conditions go".<sup>12</sup> This statement can be tested by relating the wages to the cost of living. In 1914, the year of the outbreak of first World War, on an average a family of three members required a sum of Rs.13-9-3 and that of 11 members Rs.42-0-7. The following table will show the real cost of "bare living" in typical households in Madras per mensum in the year of the outbreak of the World War I.

Table II.12<sup>13</sup>: Cost of 'bare living' in six Households in Madras City in 1914

	1914		
	Rs	A	P
1. Father, mother and 1 infant	13	9	3
2. Mother 2 sons	21	13	4
3. 1 man 3 women 1 child	25	10	1
4. 3 men 1 woman 1 child	25	14	11
5. 2 men 3 women 1 child	28	11	8
6. 2 men 4 women 5 children	42	0	7

The post-war period saw a steep rise in the prices of all the foodstuffs. The expenditure of the family as well rose. Below is a table which shows average family's

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12. Oral evidence of Hargraves, in the Royal Commission on Labour, Evidence, vol.III, Part 2, p.185.
13. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, March Progs, 1914; Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny Mills in Madras.

cost of 'bare living' in 1916 in Madras.

Table II.13<sup>14</sup>: Cost of 'bare living' in six Households in Madras City in 1918

	R	A	P
1. Father mother and 1 infant	17	2	5
2. Mother 2 sons	27	9	9
3. 1 man, 3 women 1 child	32	4	2
4. 3 men 1 woman 1 child	32	8	3
5. 2 men 3 women 1 child	36	11	1
6. 2 men 4 women 5 children	53	9	6

'Bare living' included rent, food and clothing, but no 'luxuries'. All were stated to have fallen into debt.<sup>15</sup>

What emerges from the above data is that there was on the one hand a low level of wages and on the other there was a steady rise in prices from 1914 to 1919, to above the normal level. As a consequence of this, the workers whether coolies or men employed in the railways or the British owned Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, suffered, their low wages being insufficient to cope with price rise.

14. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, March Progs. 1919, Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.

15. Ibid.

Though the work people were given some concessions in the form of war allowances, these were insufficient and the Government recognized change in the real wage levels after the war:

"Before the war industrial wages were to a great extent based on a level of bare subsistence. There was practically no margin, and with the rise in prices the work people have found themselves unable to support themselves and their families and have consequently been willing to adopt desperate measures."<sup>16</sup>

## II

Since the beginning of the War money wages tended to lag behind price rise and there was much distress felt by the workers. To make both ends meet the workers desperately sought various means. Commonly they resorted to loans from the money lenders. We have some scattered data on the burden of indebtedness and the circumstances leading to indebtedness.

The British owned Addison and Company which employed around 500 workers was one of the earliest companies which witnessed labour dispute. Even workers who had put in 12 to 13 years of service received no benefits and allowances. Wages were low. In the following table

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16. Ibid.

the number of years of service, their salary and indebtedness of the workers can be seen.<sup>17</sup>

Table II.14: Number of years of Service, Salary per month and debt incurred

Number of years of Service	Salary per month in rupees	Debt
13	20	100
10	18-8-0	150
8	16-0-0	*

\* Not given.

From the above table it may be observed that those who were paid less wages incurred larger debts. A witness to the Royal Commission on Labour in India admitted that "those who get less are much more in debt than those who get more."<sup>18</sup> Various causes contributed to workers indebtedness. Primarily low wages put workers at the mercy of money lenders. A representative of the Tramway Company Union told the Royal Commission on Labour that he had investigated the conditions in about 400 houses of his own tramway and 300 or 400 people in the mill area, including coolies, porters and workers

17. Swadesamitran, 23 July 1919.

18. Oral evidence of B. Shiva Rao in the RCL in India, vol.III, Part 2, p.226.



in the railway department. He found that those who received ₹.60 per month were "indebted to money lenders" but those who were receiving less than ₹.60 were entirely "at the mercy of money lenders" borrowing money to such an extent that they found it impossible to repay.<sup>19</sup> Though this statement is made in 1929, it reflects observation made in the 1920's.

A woman representative of the Women Social Welfare Society who investigated the cases of indebtedness among the woman workers a few years ago (possibly in 1924 or 1925) told the Royal Commission on Labour that the members of the Society had

"examined 23 women in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills and 132 in the Chooli Mills. Of the former only one out of the 23 was out of debt. Of the 22 others 5 had borrowed at 25 per cent interest, 9 at 75 per cent and 8 at 150 per cent. In the chooli mill only 5 per cent out of the 172 women were out of debt. Out of the remaining 167, three paid an interest of 36 per cent, 59 paid an interest of 75 per cent and 100 paid an interest of 150 per cent."<sup>20</sup>

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19. Oral evidence of the Tramway Company employees Union in RCL, vol.III, Part 2, p.119.
  20. Oral evidence of Mrs. Bhagirathi Sri Ram in the RCL, vol.III, Part 2, p.145.

Habits of drinking, social customs and bribery also forced the workers into debt.<sup>21</sup> Indebtedness and low wages were not confined to industrial workers. This was a common feature in the whole workforce of the Madras City, whether they were Government employees or corporation workers.

For example, in a statement published in the Swadesamitran the postal men who were the central government employees, narrated their problems. They said that

"We are around 379 workers and we are poorly paid men. We have families to look after. On an average a family consists of five members; our average wage per month comes to 18-2-6. If expenditure of a person in the family is calculated out of this amount, it will be Rs.3-10-1. But real expenditure is more than what is given as wages to meet it. In real life the expenditure of the family amounts to Rs.3-1-3 per month. Considering the high prices of necessaries of life our wages are insignificant at this period of inflation. We are not leading a life free from poverty. Even 4 measures of rice which are available for Rs.1 do not give us any sustenance. We lead

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21. B. Shiva Rao, in RCL, vol.III, Part 2, p.238.

life on an empty stomach on most of the days in a month. We want a basic salary fixed at Rs.25 and gradual increase of it to Rs.50 over long period of twenty years. We also request you to give us 20 per cent allowance for house rent which is high in Madras in recent times.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to the problems of the postal messengers were the difficulties faced by the employees of the hotels in Madras. We have scant evidence as to where they were employed. But the petition which they had sent to the Corporation of Madras shows that they sought the intervention of the Corporation. "The hotel employees" (Oottal Thoulaligal) drafted a memorandum of their demands and submitted it to the President of the Corporation of Madras.<sup>23</sup>

They demanded 2 annas allowances for rice and 1 rupee increase in their salary. If these minor demands were conceded, they said, their income would rise to roughly Rs.17-12-0 per month. But the reaction of the Corporation President P. Thyagarayachetti, to their demands was one of indifference. His speech in the Corporation of Madras on their problems underestimated

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22. Swadesamitran, 13 March 1920.

23. Swadesamitran, 25 February 1920.

their real grievances. His speech is worthy of full quotation. He said:

The authorities of the railways and other companies are providing 4 measures of rice for Re.1 to their employees. It is desirable for the corporation of Madras also to introduce such policy. But the implementation of such scheme by the corporation will cost the Exchequer Rs.65,000/- more per month and declaring of increase in salary will throw additional burden of one and a half lakhs on the corporation.

He further continued:

The hotel employees seem to be too ambitious and seem to demand much. Too much of ambition in life is dangerous: They are not in as miserable or shameful condition of life as their counterparts in the Tramway Company or the mill hands. Unlike those employees, hotel servants are most of the time free and during their leisure time, husband and wife earn a lot of wages ranging from Rs.10 to 60 per month. So that the life of the hotel employees is more secure as compared with the lower or other classes of workers. Even if we grant their demand for increase of salary, we should not forget to consider the fact that every increase in salary of the corporation employees will have direct impact on the capacity of the tax payer; every increase is an additional burden on his shoulder which we cannot accept.

We have to see these problems and workers employed in the corporation also seem to have joined the striking employees and demand double their salary. Harisharvathama Rao<sup>24</sup> is a good man. We hope that he himself will try to solve the problem by conciliating the demands of the hotel employees.<sup>25</sup>

P. Thyagarayachetti, one of the founders of the "Justice Party" treated in a similar way the problems of the sweepers who were mostly Adi-Dravidas. In a memorandum which they had submitted to the Corporation President, they explained their difficulties of low wages and condition of life. They said in the memorandum that normally a family of the sweepers had four members. To eke out a living husband and wife devoted their leisure time to earning some amount and earned Rs.10 to 15 per month. This was necessary for maintenance of normal life since the average income of the sweepers per month was only Rs.12. The sweepers said that the amount earned was usually spent on rice alone, the major item of consumption of the family being rice.<sup>26</sup> They said:

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24. Harisharvathama Rao was the drafter of the Memorandum on behalf of the employees and represented their union.

25. Swadesamitran, 25 February 1920.

26. Swadesamitran, 1 March 1920.

We are not able to continue our normal life. 50 measures of rice which we buy for Rs.15 are an insufficient quantity. We consume 50 measures of rice within 15 days, though we take a few morsels of food and ganjee (a liquid boiled rice) and unnutritious food. We have to pay house rent, buy clothes and meet other expenses out of this amount. We go without normal necessities of life. Most of our days are spent in poverty.<sup>27</sup>

The Corporation President told the representative of the sweepers however that "they are better fed, housed than any other class in the city and if they strike, we will appeal to the general public not to throw their refuse on the streets".<sup>28</sup> Thus the overall picture towards the end of 1920 and after was that these wage earning classes irrespective of their place of employment were in economic distress.

#### Welfare Schemes

Welfare measures undertaken by the Government of Madras or the Corporation of Madras, or the Managements of the British industrial companies were all outcome of

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27. Ibid.

28. Ibid. The life of the teachers in the corporation managed schools was as well pitiable. One enquiry committee noted that the salary the teachers were receiving was insufficient to make them lead a "decent life". And when it recommended increase in their salary, it was turned down by the corporation. Proceedings of the Corporation of Madras, 1920.

constant struggle waged by the workers against their employees. Industrial benefits such as Gratuity Fund or Provident Scheme were anathema to employers who were mainly Britishers. Advantages of these schemes were stressed by leaders such as Thiru Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar as early as 1919. He encouraged the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills to start a co-operative society to help themselves in times of strike or distress. The Government took note of this with alarm.<sup>29</sup>

The tramway workers were the first in demanding welfare schemes. The tramway employees demanded an institution of Provident Fund for workers, provision of clothes and bonus of one month wages in recognition of their services. The management of British interest brushed aside those demands as extraordinary and extravagant and these could not be accepted by the management.<sup>30</sup>

Even though the working class recognised the advantages of having a Provident Fund scheme or gratuity scheme, these by themselves were not security against the employers' arbitrary action. Far from being sources

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29. Home Dept. Poll. A. File No.242-249, March Progs 1919; Unrest in Madras due to alleged activities of Home Rule Politicians.

30. See, for further details, Swadesamitran, 26 March 1919.

of benefit to the working class, Provident Fund schemes became instruments in the hands of British capitalists, of coercion against the workers. For example, the management of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills seized a portion of the gratuity fund when the workers went on strike. It refused to return it till the workers apologised and agreed to refrain from strikes for one year.<sup>31</sup>

In these circumstances a gratuity fund had more disadvantages than advantages for the working class. This is well summed up by B.P. Wadia with regard to the seizure of a quarter of the gratuity fund by the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. He asked:

What is the use of a gratuity if it is to be a strike insurance? Is that the way English labour would tolerate such a course for one hour? The labourers do not want attractive toys when their stomachs are empty, their limbs are weary, their spirits are crushed. The labourers have fully realised the situation but whatever may happen in the future, they will refuse to be cowed down to be silent or work like slaves.<sup>32</sup>

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31. Home Dept. Poll. A. File No.242-249: Unrest in Madras due to the alleged activities of the Home Rule politicians.
32. Home Dept. Poll. A. File No.242-249, March Progs 1919: Unrest in Madras.



Even as late as 1929 and after, the workers were penalised by the seizure of gratuity funds. An witness confessed to the Royal Commission on Labour that -

the feeling is that they (the the employees of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills) cannot be certain of the gratuity being given to them. If it is a provident fund, they feel that there is a greater certainty of their being paid the money.<sup>33</sup>

Only the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills provided some welfare facilities which however benefited only the highly paid staff. This was described by G. Slater:

There were large and pleasant compounds... one containing bungalows (for white managerial staff) and club houses for the staff, the other schools for children of operatives and half-timers, in which they were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, English and the principles of spinning and weaving under the supervision of the British kindergarden teachers.<sup>34</sup>

#### Working Conditions

British employers arbitrarily imposed new rules and regulations on the workers in order to curtail the

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33. B. Shiva Rao, in RCL, vol.III, Part 2, p.239.

34. G. Slater, South India Its Political and Economic Problems, p.239.

employees' political activities. Most notorious in this connection was the Management of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. It changed the normal working hours of the workers to curb the late arrivals of its employees. The changed working hours scheme insisted on the presence of the workers 15 minutes before their usual time.<sup>35</sup>

Usually workers had a short time for recess, though they worked for 10 hours which was as per the Factory Act lower than normal hours fixed by it.<sup>36</sup> The Buckingham management enforced strictly the rules of conduct. The practical problems of the employees like habitation in distant places far away from mills, cold season and medical cares and diseases were given least consideration.<sup>37</sup>

The workers' collective actions were considered impudent and disloyal. In 1920 the workers employed in the British Addison and Company were fined, when they

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35. Swadesamitran, 29 October 1918.

The table of hours of working with changes made in the normal hours of working

	<u>Morning hours</u>	<u>Evening hours</u>
From January 1 to March 15	6.30-11.50	12.30-6.00
From March 15 to Sept. 30	6.00-11.50	12.30-5.30
From Oct. 1 to Dec. 15	6.00-11.50	12.30-5.30
From Dec. 16 to Dec. 31	5.15-11.50	12.30-5.45

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

went in a group to represent their demands. Their collective action was dubbed as union activity. And persons connected with the drafting of the memorandum and its submission were dismissed.<sup>38</sup>

The British Managements could not tolerate those who were considered to be at the bottom of union organisation. They were summarily dismissed. The Swadesamitran reported that on flimsy grounds such as that of "sleeping" during working hours, or non-disposal of "files" and failure to carry out some orders of seniors, British managements dismissed the workers who were actually involved in the union activities.<sup>39</sup>

The workers suffered many more problems. The number of holidays for the workers were a few. That was why, the tramway employees demanded one month's holiday on the ground that they were working for more than 11 to 12 hours per day.<sup>40</sup> In such situation the workers had no alternative to adopt except absenteeism. It increased from 6 per cent to 25 per cent before 1922 even in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills which claimed to have achieved a committed workforce. It was not that

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36. Swadesamitran, 17 March 1920.

39. Ibid.

40. Swadesamitran, 12 March 1919.

workers earned high wages, lived happily and wanted leisure. The fact was that the workers did not settle down in the city and often visited their village home and needed respite from work.

As absenteeism increased among the workforce, the employers developed a technique of dealing with those who absented themselves without leave. Either forfeiture of their salary was ordered or dismissal order given. Sometimes both were resorted to. In this way the workers in the Government Press and other private establishments were dismissed and their salary forfeited.<sup>41</sup>

These were some of the special features of relation between British capital and labour in the colonial city of Madras in this period. These conflicts between employees and employers got reflected in their relations in every day work experiences. These were further heightened by the use of force and the display of racial feeling characteristic of capital labour relations in Madras. The use of police force which was at the disposal of the big industrial concerns was an instrument to keep the factories working. In major industrial companies such as the electric supply corporations, police or military personnel were sometimes drafted for running

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41. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), 20 June 1919, File No.50, August 1919.

industrial units. Complaints against such actions had little impact on the Government or the British capitalists.

The Government of Madras kept at the disposal of the management of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills the police which the latter used to maintain "law and order", keep away from the mill gates striking workers and to make possible the easy entry of blacklegs into the mills.

Often the posting of police personnel at the strike places resulted in rioting, pelting of stones and finally in firings.<sup>42</sup>

Alongside of the use of police force was the display of racial superiority by the British capitalists. It was more manifest in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. The managers in the mills displayed their racial feelings against the workers of low caste origin, though it was also shown against the upper caste workforce. The low caste men were ill-treated, kicked and beaten up.<sup>43</sup> The Royal Commission on Labour pointed to the incident of the branding of a worker by an European assistant with hot iron but the manager of the Carnatic Mills, denying it, said that "the man may have been

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42. See, for details, chapters III and IV.

43. Swadesamitran, 14 December 1918.

touched with an instrument".<sup>44</sup> Thus the ill-treatment of the workers in the foreign capital owned industries became a part of the life of the working class in this period.

#### Standard of Nutrition

Rice and Ragi formed the staple food of the Madras city workers. Table II.15 and the statements of the postal messengers, the sweepers and the hotel employees show that rice was the staple diet of the workers in particular. Meat or egg was not at all consumed (a large number of workers were, of course, vegetarian by choice). Meat was not even mentioned in the index numbers of retail prices of foodstuffs in the table. The Madras workers ate not only less nutritious food. Compared to their counterparts in other parts of India, for example, Bombay, they consumed less quantity of foodstuffs per day. This can be seen from the following table.<sup>45</sup>

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44. Oral evidence of Hargraves in the RCL, vol.III, Part 2, p.174.

45. Turges Kuczynski, "Conditions of workers 1880-1950" in V.B. Singh (ed.), Economic History of India, 1857-1956 (Delhi, 19 ), p.617.

**Table II.15: Daily Consumption of Food by Workers  
in Bombay and Madras in 1923<sup>46</sup>**

Foodstuffs	Industrial workers in	
	Textile industry in Bombay	Textile industry in Madras
Cereals	1.29	1.13
Pulse	0.09	0.07
Meat	0.03	-
Salt	0.04	0.05
Oils	0.02	0.03
Food adjuncts	0.07	0.09
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.54</b>	<b>1.37</b>

The Industrial workers in Madras weighed less compared to prison mates in Madras in 1920. While the average weight of spinner in Madras was 113.64, the average weight of prison mate was 114.38. Moreover the table below shows distinctively the level of disparities in the consumption of foodstuff per man per year in Madras and other countries.<sup>47</sup>

46. Similar data for Bombay industrial worker is given in R.P. Dutt, India Today. The author refers to the Report on an enquiry into working class Budgets in Bombay for the same reference. For details, see R.P. Dutt, India Today, p.35.

47. "The diet in the case of the United States is that for a workman. The diet of the nation as a whole amounts to 2,664 pounds per head per year which includes 1904 pounds of solids and 760 pounds of liquids or milk. The figures for Japan represent the national diet. Figures for India represent the diet of a Madras prisoner".

Monthly Labour Review, June 1920;  
The Annalist New York, 6 Sept. 1920; The Hindu,  
11 Nov. 1920 quoted in R.K. Das, Labour in India,  
p.162.

Table II.16: Food Consumption per man per year in 1920  
(Quantities in Pound)

Articles	United States	Japan	Madras
Meat	140	21.5	0
Fish	4	50.5	0
Eggs	30	2.1	0
Legumes	28	35.4	144
Bread and cereals	340	309.4	456.4
Vegetables	420	459.4	148.2
Sugar	63	14.1	0
Fruit	200	29.7	0
Other foods	33	0	228
Total	1275	902.8	741.4
Milk	500	2.2	0
	1775	905.0	741.4

### Housing

Connected with the standard of living is the standard of housing. In 1921, Madras extended over 29 square miles and a population of 5.3 lakhs. In the next decade, 1921-31 the growth was phenomenal: a 22.8% increase.<sup>48</sup>

48. C.W. Ranson, "The Growth of the Population of Madras" in Madras Tercentenary Celebration Volume, p.320.



Table II.17: The Growth of the population of Madras from 1901 to 1931

Year	Population of Madras City	Absolute decennial increase	Per cent decennial increase
1901	509,346	56,828	12.6
1911	518,660	9,314	1.8
1921	526,911	8,251	1.6
1931	647,230	120,319	22.8

In the early 20th century the rural poor of neighbouring districts, in particular, the people in the Chinglepet district, were "driven"<sup>49</sup> into the city in search of livelihood.<sup>50</sup> Most of these rural migrants were Adi-Dravides who found neither job nor shelter in the city. According to the 1921 decennial census report, the total number of occupied houses in the city by 1921 was 64,621 as opposed to the total of 526,911 population.<sup>51</sup> Since there was lack of proper planning for city improvement in Madras which has been rightly described as "a product of laissez-faire" by C.W. Ranson,<sup>52</sup> the migrants

49. Ibid.

50. The Statistical Atlas of the Madras Presidency, 1924, p.11.

51. The Census of India, 1921, Madras, Part 2, vol.13, p.339.

52. C.W. Ranson, op. cit., p.324.

established their own settlements called, in Madras parlance cherris. There were nearly 200 para cherris in Madras. Most of the inhabitants were Adi-Dravidas and by occupation factory employees and wage earners.

The reason for the overcrowding of the cherris was sudden acceleration of population growth, we have also evidence of the prevalence of high rent even for small houses in the post-war period. Though specific data for one room or double room houses are lacking, the table given below will show the general trend of rise in house rent in Madras for 1918 and 1919.

Table II.18:<sup>53</sup> House-rent per year (in rupees)

	1918	1919
<u>George Town</u>		
<u>Kachileswara Division</u>		
Lowest typical house	156	156
<u>Seven wells Division</u>		
Lowest typical house	168	168
<u>Park Town Division</u>		
Lowest typical house	144	144

House rents shot up in centres of business. Park Town and George Town recorded the highest rate of house

53. The Report of the Salary Committee, Madras Presidency, 1919, p.13.

rent. As business and commerce became active in the post-war period, the businessmen started to move up to these parts and were prepared to pay even high rent charges; those inhabitants who had paid less house rent were evicted and even those who were living on the verandas themselves were not able to get a place for shelter as the whole place was turned into business area.<sup>54</sup>

House rents of single rooms were exorbitant ranging from 8 annas to Rs.2 giving opportunities to landlords to exploit the "land boom"<sup>55</sup> by building more and more of the flimsy huts.<sup>56</sup> Though we do not have any knowledge as to the percentage of income of the classes that was spent for rent in 1920, it was calculated in 1943 that in Madras about 19 per cent of the income of the working classes went for rent alone.<sup>57</sup>

The Government of Madras started showing concern for the haphazard growth of the city, together with the problems of congestion in certain localities. It instituted the City Improvement Committee to go into the question of city development in 1919. The Committee

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54. G.O. 908, 6.7.1920, Local and Municipal, TNA.

55. Ibid.

56. R.K. Mukherjee, The Indian Working Class, p.278.

57. Ibid.

brushed aside the major question of housing which affected all the classes of the city population. T. Aruminatha Pillai, a member of the Legislative Council said that "defect in that (Town Planning Bill) is that this bill more or less aimed at the aesthetic nature of the improvement of the city, but for a moment forgets the needs of the poorer and the working class which is most essential in this city."<sup>58</sup> However he warned the Government that "if the interests of the people were neglected, they would "break out of bounds and then no government will be able to stand the huge avalanche".<sup>59</sup>

But L.A. Cammeidar, a British member of the Legislative Council on 24-2-20 said on the question of housing of the poor without regard to the condition of those living in the Para cherris.

the social service leagues are working as a wrong policy in forming co-operative societies with a view to the occupants of the para cherris, acquiring the ownership of their sites. Many of these para cherris are situated in fairly decent localities. Their value is depreciated at present purely owing to their occupants. My idea would be to acquire and expunge the entire

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58. G.O.No.908, 6-7-1920, Local and Municipal, TNA.

59. Ibid.

para cherris, make a good lay out and sell at a profit.<sup>60</sup>

Even the Salary Committee did "not consider that it is necessary to provide Government peons and clerks with quarters at Government expense or to grant them special allowances to meet house rent," in the post-war period.<sup>61</sup> But the Governor Lord Willingdon felt the need for the accommodation of his menials employed in the Governor's Palace. He requested the Government of India to sanction his plan for constructing 50 houses for menials at the cost of Rs.51,000. The Home Department was however reluctant to sanction the funds on the ground that "...peons quarters are not of a necessity". Lord Willingdon's main object for constructing menial quarters was that his servants were living in the bazars and they were bringing into the government house disease.<sup>62</sup>

The only British Company which provided some housing facilities for its employees was the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. But its housing policy benefited the higher paid labour aristocrats in the company.<sup>63</sup>

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60. Ibid.

61. The Report of the Salary Committee, Madras Presidency, 1919, p.31.

62. Home Dept. Police A, File No.245-253, Progs December 1920.

63. G. Slater, op. cit., p.239.

There was no housing policy for the workers, though steps were being made in this period to construct quarters for the workers, in particular Government menials.<sup>64</sup> By 1930, there were 459 houses in the Parambur and nearby villages for the employees of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. And only 9 per cent of the workforce was benefited by such housing scheme.<sup>65</sup> The employees in the Tramway Company, the Burma Oil Company and other British establishments were not covered by any scheme by their employers.

A consequence of the absence of proper housing policy in the colonial Madras was the overflowing of the population in the insanitary cherris, "while many have no shelter, but sleep on the streets or on the verandas of godowns and shops".<sup>67</sup> The Royal Commission on Labour reported in 1930 that in Madras City, 25 one-room dwellings sheltered 150,600 persons or one-fourth of the population. For want of drainage and in the absence of latrines the cherris were filthy places. "Streams of sewerage filter over the pathways, epidemic disease frequently manifest itself in the plague pots and both the sickness and mortality rates of their inmates reach high levels."

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64. Home Poll Part I, File No.93/1/1921. Incendarism at the Panchama Mills in Madras.
65. Oral Evidence of Hargraves, in RCL, vol.III, Part 2, pp.168-9.
66. For details, see Oral evidences of the Tramway Company employees union in RCL, vol.III, no.2, p.118. Also for details of the Kerosene Oil Workers Union, see RCL, vol.III, Part 2, p.147.
67. Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, p.274.
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commented the Royal Commission on Labour on the condition of the para cherris.<sup>68</sup>

In 1920 the percentage of deaths in the number of single room tenants was 60.5 and in the number of double-room tenants 19.6. Various social and economic problems contributed to high rate of mortality. T. Aruminath Pillai noted on the causes of the high rate of mortality in Madras that:

Poverty leads to bad-housing and consequent over crowding. Poverty whether through lack of employment or drink, the dirty state in which the houses and children are kept and the ignorance and carelessness as to feeding and care of the infants are the main factors for our large infant mortality figures.<sup>69</sup>

This sums up the life of the Madras City working class in the post-war period. Conditions of low wages, bad working conditions, ill-treatment and bad housing the working class came to live with. The prospects of improvement in their life in that period under study seemed remote. In the

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68. Ibid., p.275.

69. G.O. 908, 6 July 1920, Local and Municipal TNA.

following chapter we will discuss the early origins of the labour movement in Madras and the efforts of the working class to liberate themselves from the oppressive conditions of working and living we have described above. We will also discuss the attitudes of the bureaucrats and the European capitalists towards labour unrest.



CHAPTER III  
INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES AND STRIKES:  
1918-1920

There were many obstacles to be overcome before successful unionisation of employees was effected. Heterogeneous composition of workforce, distribution of workers in different employments, low level of literacy, etc. posed initial problems to any effort to bring workers into union. Above all what posed major threat to workers a unity was the attitude of the Managements and of the Government towards the workers. The managements of factories and cotton textile mills showed their utmost antagonism to any attempt at unionisation of the workers. Attempts to unionise the employees were dubbed as attempts directed at politicization. In the face of labour unrest along side of political turmoil, strong links were established between the Government and capital, particularly European capital.

Urge for Workers' Union: the Home Rulers

Rise and spread of Home Rule Movement in Madras was significant in that it touched the hitherto untouched segment of the population, the workers. In Madras city it drew support not only from the middle and lower middle class, but from the labouring class as well. Various

sections of the labouring class, including even employees of the government looked to the political leadership and sought ways of overcoming their problems. For instance, the Government report cites an interesting incident which shows the appeal of Mrs. Besant's personality to the class hitherto untouched:

At a garden party given in her honour and that of Messers Arundale and Wadia on 26th September 1917, a number of peons spontaneously paid their homage to the patriots by garlanding them and making nameskarams, and this was without the previous knowledge of either the host or hostess or of the three guests. The significance of this incident will be grasped in the light of the strike in progress among Bombay Postmen, and the circumstance that the postal peons in Madras have followed suit and are presenting memorials for increased pay and allowances to the Post Master General. They evidently imagine that Mrs. Besant will be able and willing to help them.<sup>1</sup>

As a general rule political leaders actively encouraged sections of the working class to unionise the workers there were strikes which indicate a presence

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1. Extracts from Demi-Official Fortnightly Reports of the Government of Madras, 5 October 1917, Home Poll. Dept. Political A Proceads. March 1919, nos. 242-9.

of "strike consciousness" among employees prior to the development of a "union consciousness". Unions and associations were new institutions the economic advantages of which the workers were unaware in most of the cases, due to their illiteracy and low economic and social status.<sup>2</sup> Even in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills where a workforce of above 10,000 employees was centered, there was little consciousness among them to form unions for themselves before 1918. Upto March 1918, there was no union for workers, though steps were taken to form associations.

In some instances the meetings of labourers were held under the auspices of a religious society. In one of such meetings held under a society which was in existence for 30 to 40 years, Thiru. vi. Kalyana Sundara Mudaliar (Thir vi-Ka) exhorted the workers to form an association to better their prospects and improve their conditions. The Government considered that "the objects (of the association) were of a purely religious nature and no

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2. In the initial period the idea of unions for workers was not linked by the employees. At a meeting of the employees of the Parambur Railway workshops held on 3 February, when a chairman of the meeting explained to them the advantages of having a union, he was jeered at and blamed by some sections belonging to the locality "for sowing seeds of discontent among the workers and for causing strikes." Home Poll. Dept., 18 February 1918. File No.16, March 1919.

interest was taken in the condition of the labouring class until December when the subject was mooted in connection with the working of the Madras Presidency Association".<sup>3</sup>

The non-trade union leaders evinced interest in the sphere of labour and wrote special leaders on the bad conditions of the life of the workers. Divan Baghadur P. Kesava Pillai, a former member of the Legislative Council and the President of the Madras Presidency Association under whose aegis the meetings of labourers were held in the past mentioned in a lead article in the Indian Patriot "the hard conditions under which mill hands (of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills) are made to work without adequate compensation in these days of scarcity, while mill owners are making enormous profits" and stressed the need for action and "combined work" apparently suggesting the union of the political and labour leadership.<sup>4</sup> From the early times the necessity of organising labour on political lines formed part of the goals of the Home Rule Press in Madras. The New India in its issue of 28th June 1918 and the Common Weal of 21st June 1918 took up

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3. Home Pol. Dept., 20 March 1918, File No.21, May 1918.

4. Demi-Official Fortnightly Report of the Govt. of Madras, 17 January 1918; Home Dept. Poll. A. March Progs 1919, Nos.242-249.

the cause of labourers and emphasised the need for mobilising labour for the furtherance of "the Home Rule directly and indirectly by adding to the ranks of the soldiers for freedom and Home Rule".<sup>5</sup>

Thus the Home Rule Press in Madras saw labour as a significant force to be <sup>made</sup> a part of the political movement. In this period of political unrest the Home Rule Movement and labour awakening thus became intertwined. B.P. Wadia himself recognised the potential power of the working class to form part of the national movement. "It is necessary", he said,

to recognise the labour movement as an integral part of the national movement. The latter will not succeed in the right direction of democracy if the Indian working classes are not enabled to organise their forces and come into their own.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Demi-Official Fortnightly Reports of the Government of Madras. 5 July 1918; Home Dept. Poll. A. March Progs 1919, Nos. 242-249. Home Poll. Deposit 1st May 1918, File No. 65, May 1918. The Government of Madras specified the Hindu and the New India as advocates of Gandhiji's methods of campaign in other parts of the country.
7. B. Shiva Rao, The Industrial Worker in India, p. 15.

Nevertheless the role of the working class as an integral part of the national movement began only when two philanthropic members of a religious body G. Ramanujulu Naidu and G. Chellvapathy Chetti approached the Home Rule publicist, B.P. Wadia to enlist his support to undertake the work of organising the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills.<sup>8</sup> The immediate interests of the workers were kept in the forefront. Thus in the meeting held on 27 April 1918 when the Madras Labour Union was founded, the main objective of the union was stated to be, "to improve the moral and social condition of not only the members who join the union, but also of the labourers of Madras."<sup>9</sup> Above all, to enable the workers to have a practical knowledge of the working of the union, B.P. Wadia encouraged the rank of the working class to join a special cell instituted by him.<sup>10</sup>

Except the Home Rule Movement there was no other party to make any attempt to bring workers into union. The main Home Rule Newspapers such as the Indian Patriot, The Hindu, the New India, the Swadesamitran and the Desabhaktan carried massive doses of politics and labour

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8. Ibid., pp.13-14.

9. B.P. Wadia, Labour in Madras, p.9.

10. Ibid.

news. The Press played a significant role in bringing the workers' conditions into light. The New India carried a news item on "labour and capital" in which it said that "the Home Rulers should encourage and direct the awakening of labour, for it has no mean advantage in these days of critical political strife."<sup>11</sup> B.P. Wadia, the main spokesman of the Home Rule was very actively involved in labour. The Government considered him as "the most dangerous worker in the direction of awakening of labourer" and he revived the Sunday labour meetings in the city of Madras.<sup>12</sup>

In opposition to efforts of Home Rulers for a union formation, a special meeting was held on 5 April to start an union called South Indian Labour Party accepting the creed of South Indians Liberal Federation. But this attempt hardly off.<sup>13</sup> Wadia realised the importance of workers' unions mainly for welfare of workers and he aimed to establish an office or reading room in the labour quarter of Perambur and to found an organised labour association.<sup>14</sup> The formation of labour association was

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11. Extracts from Demi-Official Fortnightly Reports of the Government of Madras, 1 May 1918. Home Poll. Dept., Political A. Progs March 1919, Nos.242-9.  
 /was Unrest in Madras/ due to the alleged activities of Home Rule politicians.

12. Ibid.

13. Home Pol. Dept., 19 April 1918, File No.64, May 1918.

14. Extracts from Demi Official Fortnightly Reports of the Govt. of Madras, 5 Oct. 1917, Home Dept. Poll. A. Progs March 1919, nos.242-9. Unrest in Madras was due to the alleged activities of Home Rule Politicians, NAI.

an essential part of the workers' welfare programme as conceived by Wadia. Home Rulers such as B.P. Wadia and nationalists like Thiru. vi. Ka. Chakkarichetti, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai were <sup>the</sup> main figures who shaped the course of labour movement in its earliest phase.

They succeeded in forming the first formal union in Madras called Madras Labour Union (MLU) for the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills on 27 April 1918.<sup>15</sup> Since its formation the union was faced with persistent charges of outsider's manoeuvre, political motives and selfish interests. However, the MLU was a forerunner of other subsequent labour unions or associations (in Tamil 'Sangams') in Madras. Its foundation initiated a process of consciousness among various labouring classes who became motivated by the idea of unions to represent their grievances.

But unions became the focus of labour disputes. And in every dispute between capital and labour the question of union recognition and leadership of outsiders were involved. It is on these issues the management concentrated their attention. In the process the managements put heavy pressure on the workers, tried to wreck the strength of

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15. A letter dated 20 May 1918, Home Dept. Proceedings of Dept. of Commerce and Industry, File nos.1-69, for 1918, Industry, NAI, Filed.



the unions and used all means to combat and defeat them.

### Employees' and Bureaucrats' Attitude

There was a strong homogeneous European group in Madras which was united by the racial and economic interests. This strong united European group had a direct access to higher echelons in power and this enabled European capitalists to assert their power in times of capital labour crisis. Their easy access to political power and sympathetic response of the Government to the demands of capital rendered possible the frequent use of the brutal police power and other coercive methods to beat down any show of resistance by the workers.

The European interests strongly opposed the intervention of outsiders in all the European companies. The outsider, often a nationalist, came under the suspicion of the management which considered him out to mobilise labourers for "political" interests rather than for the advancement of the working class interests. This strategem the Europeans used systematically to break the outsiders' links with the labouring class.

But the 'outsiders' help became a necessary prerequisite for the workers who relied on him for organisation and leadership as their direct involvement in the organisational efforts invited strong repressive actions of the managements in the shape of dismissals. Above all,

the workers' dependence upon the outsiders was necessitated by the intransigence of the European capitalists. The workers sought the outsiders' assistance, only after their efforts to get their grievances redressed had proved futile. This was as true of the working class in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills as that of the skilled workers in the Government run printing presses in Madras.

In the immediate post-war period which aggravated the acute economic tension in terms of hike in prices of foodstuffs there was little scope for the working class, either skilled or unskilled, to prove their strength by way of organisation on their own or by staging a strike and leading it among themselves. They were ill-prepared to risk their jobs in the period of massive unemployment in Madras. However, the major strikes in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, Burma Oil Company and other establishments show the determination with which the working class were prepared to endure the long duration of strikes with attendant stress and strain. Most of the strikes were systematically organised and led by the outsiders. The efforts of the outsiders and the workers compelled the European management to submit to some of the demands of the workers. Nevertheless, the strength of 'white capital' in relation to labour

aided by the active assistance given by the Government in the form of police protection, in other words the coalescence of the Government and 'white capital' at some stages of capital and labour strife, disadvantaged the inchoate working class. The pronounced bias of the Government of India and that of the Government of Madras in favour of the interests of "White Capital" became evident in June 1918, when the Madras Government, fearing the outbreak of labour strikes in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras, requested the Home Department of the Government of India to issue a special notification under the Defence of India Act 1915, prohibiting any strike so as to keep the production of war materials undisturbed for the successful prosecution of the War. The Department of Commerce and Industry, after some delay issued a notification disregarding the views of C. Sankaran Nair, a member of the Executive Council in the Government of India. The Indian member pointed out -

"consequences of such a course if it is intended to apply this notification to the case of mills. So far as Railways are concerned, there can be no doubt of our moral right to interfere, as Railways are, or ought to be, public property. In the case of Mills it will be said we are advancing the interests of capital as against labour."<sup>16</sup>

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16. Home Proceedings, Dept. of Commerce and Industry, Nos.1 to 8, July 1918, C. Sankaran Nair notes dated 29-6-18.

Moreover his request for an institution of an enquiry into the conditions of workers in the Mills received cold response as it was considered "premature" and "unacceptable to the employer" in the prevailing situation in Madras.<sup>17</sup>

The Buckingham and Carnatic Mills authorities' opposition to the MLU was implacable as it was headed by Home Rulers, agitators against British rule. As the MLU was mainly representative of the workers of the B and C Mills, nearly 10,000 workers were brought under its control. It was used as a political platform for education of workers on nationalist ideology. The implications of the political tone of the MLU were far reaching. It educated the workers on political ideas and developments at every strike meeting and gave a direction to the pent up feelings of labourers. Because of these reasons the management as well as civil servants opposed the MLU with all their strength.

As early as July 1918 the B and C Mills sent requisition to the Government of India directly, seeking a certificate to the effect that "the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills are employed on war work", to circumvent the possibility of a strike due to the activities of

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17. Ibid.

the MLU.<sup>18</sup> Antagonism against the MLU of B and C Mills is manifest in the official reports of the Government of Madras when the first strike took place in November 1918, 9 months after the formation of the MLU. The mill authorities and civil servants considered the strike as the outcome of political manoeuvres rather than economic distress.<sup>19</sup>

Endorsing their views, Mr. Mackenzie of Messers Mac Neill and Company, Mr. Tosh and other representatives of Calcutta Jute Mills opined that the question involved was really not a "labour question at all". They claimed that the work people engaged in the B and C Mills were "better cared for and better housed than the work people at any other mills in India". They also maintained that the object of Mr. Wadia was "to carry on agitation against the European employer without any real regard for the interests of the work people". They further said that he levied "black mail" on Indian employers and concluded that "the agitation was a political one carried on with the object of injuring foreign control of industries and

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18. Industries, Department of Commerce and Industry 1918, Filed. November, nos. 10-12, NAI.

19. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No. 29, Proceedings March 1919, papers relating to the Strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.

with the object of exciting disaffection against all Europeans in this country."<sup>20</sup>

This view was shared by civil servants as well. One official felt that strikes were "motivated by their (Home Rulers) hatred of Europeans and their desire to get rid of European enterprise so that they may use it as a political weapon". But he doubted Home Ruler's capability to mobilise strength, for "firmness of purpose and unity of action are not characteristic of India".<sup>21</sup> S.R. Hignell, secretary in the Department of Commerce and Industry observed:

There seems little doubt that Mr. Wadia and his friends are exploiting Indian labour in Madras for their own purpose. I regard this movement as one of the most sinister of those we have to face at the present moment.<sup>22</sup>

As regards methods to combat strikes there are differences within the bureaucracy. Home Department Secretary, J.H. DeBoulay expressed the opinion that "strikes are not unlawful, nor is it unlawful to instigate

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20. Ibid.

21. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, Progs March 1919. Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.

22. Home Poll Part I, File No.93/1/1921. Incendarism at the Panchama Mills in Madras and report of assault by caste strikers the police and fire brigade.

a strike". In his opinion "so long as in their methods these people (strikers) abstain from incitement to violence, they cannot be touched by the law", but he pleaded ignorance as to "how law could be devised to meet the case".<sup>23</sup>

The same official noted the ineffectiveness of any law to make a strike unlawful. He said:

for it is not the question to make a strike unlawful, condition is not likely to be helpful... The underlying notion is racial hatred. We have clear people animated by racial hatred appealing to ignorant people only inflamed by greed...<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, in the opinion of another civil servant in the Department of Commerce and Industry, political unrest in the shape of labour troubles called for drastic steps. He recommended "prosecution of men of Mr. Wadia's stamp" (implying Thiru. Vi. Ka and others who were in the labour movement), if the artificially worked-up strikes were to be prevented. Since he could not handle such issues, he left it as a "matter for the Home Department" to tackle and devise suitable methods to combat it.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, Progs March 1919. Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.

24. Ibid.

25. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, Progs, March 1919. Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras, D.N. Strathis notes appended, dated 18 January 1919.

On the question of legislation as well for setting up a machinery by which the labour disputes could be solved, there was no agreement among the officials.

The civil servants debated over whether an Act similar to the British Conciliation Act 1896<sup>26</sup> could be legislated for India, but did not recommend it because,

the passing of an Act might encourage disputes rather than tend to lessen them. Briefless vakils would very probably secure the opportunity of using work people to apply for the appointment of a conciliator in hopes of creating business for themselves, and the work people would be likely to acquiesce as they would feel sure that failure before the conciliator would not result in a reduction of wages.<sup>27</sup>

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26. "In 1896 an Act was passed in England to make better provision for the prevention and settlement of trade disputes the title of which is the conciliation Act of 1896. This Act provides that where a difference exists, or is apprehended between an employer and workmen, the Board of Trade may (a) enquire into the causes of the difference; (b) take steps for the purpose for enabling the parties to the difference to meet together; (c) Appoint a person or persons to act as conciliator or as a Board of Conciliation, and on application of both parties to the difference appoint an arbitrator; Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, Progs March 1919. Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.

27. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), File No.29, Progs March 1919, Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras... G.S. Barnes notes appended, dated 1.2.1919.



The official's line of thinking coincided with that of British employers and their representative body, the Madras Chamber of Commerce. It had sent a telegram to the Department of Commerce and Industry drawing attention of the Government of India to the atmosphere of labour unrest which affected Railway workshops, tramways and cotton mills in Madras. It attributed "the deplorable situation" to Home Rule Politicians who enticed labour into politics and so urged immediate steps to prevent "inflammatory" speeches at labour meetings.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly the Madras Trades Association sent a telegram to the Government of India complaining that "the present labour unrest is inimical to industrial development and calculated to lead to breaches of peace."<sup>29</sup> To this telegram the Home Secretary responded by noting "Home Rulers are undoubtedly endeavouring to exercise a sinister influence on labour and it is natural enough for the Madras Trades Association and Chamber of Commerce to

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28. Home Dept. Poll (Deposit), file no.29, Progs March 1919. A telegram dated 11 December 1918 from the Madras Chamber of Commerce to the Department of Commerce and Industry, appended to the Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras.
29. Home Dept. Poll A., Progs 1919, nos.242-9, unrest in Madras due to the alleged activities of Home Rule politicians. A telegram dated 13 December 1918, from Madras Trades Association to the Government of India.

come running to the Government of India about for support."<sup>30</sup>

But Arnold David has claimed that the Government was influenced by a laissez-faire approach. Actually the colonial government's policy was one of qualified laissez-faire, a kind of discriminatory interventionism. Two facets of their policy can be seen during this period. Government refused to interfere in labour relations as long as labour disputes did not distress white capital. But as soon as interests of British capital were threatened by labour unrest, laissez-faire was broken and support was lent to the capitalists. The ultimate aim was to protect interests of British capitalists.<sup>31</sup>

The Madras Labour Union which had the privilege of being the first formally constituted union in India was the most harassed union in the city of Madras. The Buckingham and Carnatic Mill authorities had shown their resentment not only against the leadership of the MLU, but also against the work for their association with it. This was very clearly seen in the first lock out of November 1918, when the workers abstained from work as a protest

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30. Home Poll Part II, File No.93/1/1921, Incendarism at the Panchama Mills in Madras.

31. "The Madras Government hesitated to intervene in labour disputes affecting private enterprises, partly from a lingering attachment to laissez-faire, partly from lack of first hand knowledge of industrial conditions." Arnold, D., The Congress in Tamil Nadu, 1919-1937 (New Delhi, 1977), p.69.

against the arbitrary change of working hours from 6.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. The change was effected as a step to curtail the epidemic of absenteeism which became a common phenomena among the union members, so the management argued. Late arrival of the workers was also put forward as reason for the change. When the workers arrived 15 minutes late at the gates, they were turned back. Those so turned back gathered together at a nearby ground to chart out a course of action as a protest. They decided on strike and the management acted swiftly against their decision by declaring a lock out. By declaring a lock out, the company had thrown a workforce of nearly 10,000 workers out of jobs and thrown them into despair. Furthermore, to protect the mills, the company requisitioned the stationing of the police at the gates. The whole operation was carried out in a sweep.

The reason for such action against the workers was that the workers should desist from participating in the union activities. The Swadesamitran condemned the stationing of the police at the gates without any reason warranting it. It said:

Without a knowledge of conditions of workers and sense of sympathy towards them, inviting the police, in the name of maintaining order at the gates, does not amount to a fairness on the part of the management. Ever since

the union was formed by the workers, disbandment of the union seems to be the main calculation of the management.<sup>32</sup>

Even though the lock out affected the war production, the company director Simpson was relentless in his methods of enforcing the same rules. "As far as the rules are concerned, I am very strict... Even if the lock out continues for another six months, I am prepared for it."<sup>33</sup> In such situation, the workers had no option except to accept the new system of working hours. B.P. Wadia, the leader of the MLU himself disliked the strike as it affected the war production. He asked the strikers to go back to work.<sup>34</sup> And the workers, without any option open to them, returned to work accepting the new working conditions.<sup>35</sup>

Again within one month of the end of the first lock out, another lock out was declared in November at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. This time, the excuse

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32. Swadesamitran, 29 October 1918.

33. Ibid.

34. Home Poll Dept., Political A, March 1919, nos.242-9, unrest in Madras due to the alleged activities of Home Rule Politicians. Labour unrest in south India. Wadia's reply to mill authorities statement, published in Pioneer, dated 16 December 1918.

35. Swadesamitran, 1 November 1918.

was that the weavers in the weaving Department threw shuttles at an Weaving master, who was an Englishman on 25 November 1918. The management dismissed one worker. On 27th the workers demanded his reinstatement. On the same day another officer was assaulted and fifty to sixty workers stoned him. As the workers became furious over the treatment of the weaving department labourers by the English foremen, the management tried to curb the militant attitude among the weaving section. It put up a notice which declared that all the departments except the weaving department would be opened and asked those who were prepared to work in the mills to report before 1 December.<sup>36</sup> As the workers refused to accept the new conditions to the detriment of the weaving section workers, the management declared lock out. The workers' gratuity fund was seized.

The management took this decision because it found the causes of the workers unrest in the activities of the MLU. The company blamed the Union for assault on the weaving master, charged it with having harboured those who were guilty of such action and demanded the handing over of those found guilty. But Wadia said that those persons involved in the case of assault were not the

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36. Swadesamitran, 13 December 1918.

members of the union and they were provoked by ill-treatment. "There is little doubt," he said, "that European officers of the mills have not been straight in their treatment of the labourers".<sup>37</sup> But the management did not relent.

Nearly the whole workforce suffered due to the lock out. There was no relief to them and inflation was high at this period. Wadia appealed to the management to open the mills to relieve the sufferings of the workers. He said: "The prices rule high. There is a danger of famine in the city. In such situation hundreds of workers are suffering without employment. In spite of their poverty and sufferings, they still maintain their patience and are within bounds of law."<sup>38</sup> For the management, outsider's interference, i.e. the role of Thiru V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar and B.P. Wadia in the MLU, was objectionable. It refused to have an intermediary between the management and the union to resolve the dispute.<sup>39</sup> Eventually the management allowed C.F. Andrews to act as a negotiator and both came to an agreement by which

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37. Home Poll Dept. Political A., Progs March 1919, nos. 242-9. Labour Unrest in Madras.

38. Swadesamitran, 10 December 1918.

39. Ibid., 14 December 1918.

the management reasserted its right in matters of dismissals, no dismissed persons were taken back; 7 days leave were granted.<sup>40</sup> The company, however, kept the gratuity fund under its control and was prepared to release it only after 12 months of workers good behaviour.<sup>41</sup> Accepting these conditions workers returned to work on 16 December. The company attained its ends through its blunt adoption of the policy of lockouts which in the words of Wadia "are meant to bring the labourers to a position where they may find it necessary to disown the labour union and compel its dissolution".<sup>42</sup>

Main issues of labour were often overshadowed by those questions of union interference and its activities. Worker's problems such as, better working conditions, higher wages and other facilities received scant attention due to overemphasis placed by the managements on the outsider's leadership of the unions as the representative of labour.

#### Tramway Company and other Employers

If we turn to Tramway Company, we are faced with similar pattern. The main issues were outsider interference

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40. Ibid., 17 December 1918.

41. Home Poll Dept., Political A. Progs, March 1919, nos. 242-9, "Unrest in Madras".

42. Ibid.

and issue of better working conditions. Tramway Company was a European owned company and it employed around 1,200 employees in various branches of the company. The management of the company was under the control of Mr. Simpson who was also one of the Managing Directors of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills.<sup>43</sup> The interlocking of companies was not merely confined to activities of business. It was extended to preservation of their interests. The Tramway Company followed the B and C not only in terms of its business interests, but also in terms of imitating and adopting the same techniques as were used by the B and C Mills to put down workers' unrest, in times of tramway workers' strike.

The first major strike of Tramway workers took place in March 1919 when the attitude of the Tramway Company's management towards the workers was exposed. The workers went on strike on 11 March, an important Hindu Festival day in connection with the Mylapore temple. The main demands for which the workers declared strike were privilege leave on full pay for 15 days to one month per year; an increase of wages by two annas a day in the case of men in the car shed and workshops; an eight hour day instead of nine hours day; and third shifts

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43. Slater, G., South India: Its Political and Economic Problems, p.323.



instead of two in the case of men employed in the car shed.<sup>44</sup> But the joint manager of the company published a statement showing that the wage costs of the Company had risen from 15,217 to ₹.24,230 per month from 1914 to 1919, and the average per head per month from ₹.14.08 to ₹.20.43. And the company refused to grant any concessions to the workers.<sup>45</sup>

The company raised an objection to the intervention of outsiders in the labour problems. Every day meeting at the Tramway Company gates was addressed by B.P. Wadia, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasunders Mudaliar, Chekkari Chetti, A. Rangaswami Aiyangar, the Editor of the Tamil Vernacular Swadesamitran and other prominent nationalists. They demanded an institution of a board of arbitration to resolve the dispute.<sup>46</sup> A Government report said, "the immediate issue which blocks discussion between the parties in the question whether the President of the labour union, a merchant, should or should not be mediator in negotiations. The company objects to the intervention of outsiders".<sup>47</sup>

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44. Home Poll Deposit, 20 March 1919, file no.48,

45. Ibid.

46. Swadesamitran, 26 March 1919.

47. Home Poll Deposit, dated 2 April 1919, file no.49.

The workers had found no relief from any quarter. The public were able to contribute only a sum of Rs.1,277 to the workers relief fund,<sup>48</sup> at specially convened meeting at the Gokhala's Hall, which was addressed by Mrs. Besant and Wadia who appealed to the public to donate funds for the Tramway workers.<sup>49</sup> In spite of a poor response to the tramway men of the public, in terms of their help, the workers stuck to their decision to carry on strike. One worker announced at a strike meeting held on 21 March:

"We have not struck work in expectation of money. We are driven into path of strike by economic distress. In spite of lack of sympathy of the public for our cause, we, the workers, are one in our decision to remain on strike."<sup>50</sup>

The Corporation of Madras under J.C. Molony itself supported the contention of the management with regard to payments and did not recommend any steps to be taken to relieve the workers' sufferings.<sup>51</sup> Indifference shown by the Corporation of Madras, the Madras Government and the management of the Tramway company was criticized

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48. Ibid.

49. Swadesamitran, 26 March 1919.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

by A. Kasturi Ranga Aiyangar at a public meeting held on Marina in support of the striking tramway men. He noted:

The Government would have taken steps to solve the problems of the workers if the similar strike had taken place in England. But in our country the Government is not only indifferent, but it disregards the interests of the public. The management runs the Tramways on contract basis with powers granted to it by the Government. Were the Government interested in the solution of the dispute, it would have solved it. But unfortunately it does not at all move.<sup>52</sup>

The company, however, decided to institute a board of arbitration consisting of the president of the corporation J.C. Molony and T. Rangachariyer, this was perhaps a decision forced on them in view of the impending Satyagraha movement led by Gandhi on the national level. The workers agreed to the constituted board to which most of the demands were referred for arbitration. The Swadesamitran hoped that "the Board of Arbitration will satisfactorily decide over the workers' demands". And the workers

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52. Ibid., 4 April 1919.

returned to duty on 4 March.<sup>53</sup>

In this period the managements of the foreign owned industries and factories adopted measures which smacked of bellicosity towards the workers, to curtail union activities. In spite of such attitudes as were shown by the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills or the Tramway's company, strike became a common phenomenon among the workers, including the low wage earners. For example, the employees of the Madras corporation struck work in March 1919, in protest against the suspension of some maistries for their alleged failure to give adequate information as to the cause of the damage caused to a mould. Though the strike ended within a week, it however shows a "strike consciousness" among the low wage earners in support of their fellow-workers.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly the employees of the Christian Literary Society, a British concern, struck work, when a compositor was dismissed from his service for his refusal to do the duty of an absent wheeler.<sup>55</sup> Though the strike was in the

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53. Ibid., 5 April 1919. The President of the Tramway Union was removed from his post and the Secretary to the manager took over it. The removal of the president from his post and transfer to a post of patron cleared the main obstacles to negotiation between the management and the men." Home Poll Deposit, 2 April 1919, file no.49.

54. Home Poll Deposit, 2 April 1919. File No.49.

55. Home Poll Deposit, 20 June 1919, File no.50.

nature of protest against the dismissal, it grew into a strike for economic benefits. The strikers demanded 10 per cent increase in wages, 15 days leave with pay and one hour for tiffin recess. But the demand were considered exhorbitant and dismissed as impracticable for implementation.<sup>56</sup> And the strike was ended with no benefits being announced to the workers in July.

Instance of 'spontaneity' was also noticed in a big concern of the Indian Aluminium Factory in Madras. The employees struck duty demanding higher wages and better working conditions, though the company maintained that a substantial increase in wages had been recently granted and other concessions offered. The company contended that the workers had left their work place without a previous notice to the management and on that ground it refused to consider any of their demands. But within a fortnight of the outbreak of the strike, a settlement was 'amicably' reached between the workers and the management in July.<sup>57</sup>

Techniques of dealing with workers, adopted by the British firms varied and changed from company to company, and from time to time. For example, the

56. Ibid.

57. Home Poll Deposit, 3 July 1919, File no.51, August 1919.

management of the Addison and Company used skilful methods to outwit workers. On 13 May 1919, the employees went on strike. But they had returned to work the next day after the Managing Director had promised to give them an increase of pay. However, workers resolved to strike as their demands were not conceded and as they were told that 10 per cent increase in pay promised would not apply to men of long service. Mr. Harisharvathana Rao, the leader of their union, persuaded them to go back to work as usual with an assurance that he would send a letter to the Manager and that they should await reply. Before any reply was received from the Manager, the management struck at the solidarity of the workers. The foreman of the press, who was involved in the formation of the union inside the press was dismissed on the fake charge that he had failed to carry out the orders of the superintendent in respect of some urgent work. The dismissal of the foreman led to declaring of strike by the workers who demanded higher wages and reinstatement of the dismissed worker.<sup>58</sup>

But the management announced some minor concessions disregarding the demand for reinstatement of the dismissed

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58. Home Poll Deposit, 4 June 1919, File No.49, July 1919. For details of the problems of the workers and management's reaction to the workers' problems, see Swadesamitran, 23 July 1919.

worker. The concessions included among others, an increase of 10% to all employees who had completed one year's service and whose pay did not exceed Rs.40 per month and rice allowance of 2 annas. The workers accepted these concessions and returned to work.<sup>59</sup> No voice was raised in support of the dismissed foreman and the objective of the management's policy to remove a troublesome person, was achieved.

The same trend continued into 1920 and 1921, years of intense labour strike. Frequent strikes followed by lockouts coincided with political developments. Strikes broke out in the Tramways, the Electric Corporation Company, the Burma Oil Company, and the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. Here the workers acted in unison for their own rights. The case of the Tramway men can be stated as illustrative of this attitude.

On the morning of 26th January, a deputation representing the employees of the Tramway men, had waited on Symonds, the Director of the Company and had demanded an increase of 2 annas per day per head and in addition a 25 per cent increase to compensate for the rise in cost of living.<sup>60</sup> They also demanded a bonus of one

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59. Home Poll Deposit, 4 June 1919, File No.49, July 1919.

60. Home Poll Deposit, 4 Feb. 1920, File No.79, Jan. 1920.

month's pay per annum to be given at the end of financial year. The management tried to convince the deputation with a statistics of wage bills that the wages bill for the tramway men had risen from Rs. 14,000 to Rs. 30,000 per mensum between 1914 and 1919 and that their present demand would result in a further monthly increase of Rs. 13,000.<sup>61</sup>

However the deputation was unconvinced of the wage statistics and went away. Immediately it sent messages to the Central Shed and other places to stop all the trams. By 12.30 p.m. the workers on service responded and brought all the trams to a halt. All the trams were left where they happened to be on the roads. The company swept into action and employed Anglo-Indians to clear the block of empty trams. On Saturday only a limited service of about 15 trams was commenced "under police protection".<sup>62</sup> The Madras Government and the authorities concerned took no immediate step to put the trams on the rails and as a result the public were inconvenienced. The Andhra Patrika commented:

The tramway authorities rejected the reasonable demands of the workers and missed a fair opportunity. The public are suffering...

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61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.



Since in countries like England, the Governments themselves control the management of tramways and railways, they will have the convenience of the public as their sole object without caring so much for profits. But as the management of railways and tramways in India rests in the hands of companies, they care more for their own profits than for the convenience of the public. How long are the people to wait and suffer like this.<sup>63</sup>

For the first time Lord Willingdon, the Governor of Madras, intervened in the labour dispute, interviewed the representatives of the workers and the management. No major change was brought about by the intervention of the Governor. The company in the meantime put up a notice announcing new conditions of work and concessions and asking the strikers to accept them. These were:

- (1) No salary would be given for the period of strike;<sup>64</sup>
- (2) an immediate increase of wages, 20 per cent for men drawing 8 annas a day, 15 per cent for men drawing up to Re.1 and 10 per cent for those drawing more than Re.1;
- (3) a rice allowance of 2 annas a head till the price of rice came down to 4 measures; and (4) the opening of a non-contributory provident fund at 5 per cent. However

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63. Anahra Patrika, 28 January 1920. MNMR.

64. Swadesamitran, 2 February 1920.

the fund was not to have retrospective effect, but special consideration was promised for those men of long service.<sup>65</sup>

One of the conditions which workers must accept was that "If they have any real grievances, they must inform either the Governmentally appointed Labour Commissioner, or any officer about their grievances. Without their knowledge they should not strike under any circumstances".<sup>66</sup> On these conditions the workers returned to work on 3 February. The positive outcome of this strike was assurance from the Governor of Madras with regard to the constitution of the Labour Board to deal with the problems of capital and labour relations.<sup>67</sup> During this strike the main question was on the issue of wages and economic benefits. No question of outsider's intervention or union recognition was involved in the dispute. The workers themselves carried out a strike and won minor concessions.

The condition of the skilled workers themselves was not very different from that of textile workers in Madras during this period of severe capital and labour strife. No leadership emerged from even the ranks of the

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65. Home Poll Deposit, 19 February 1920, File No.88, July 1920.

66. Swadesamitran, 2 February 1920.

67. Desabhaktan, 2 February 1920. MNNR

skilled workers. Outside leadership intervened at the earliest stage even in the case of the printers as well. As early as April 1919, 100 workmen belonging to the several presses of the city met and resolved to form a union called "the Madras Printing Pressmen's Union" with Gandhi elected as its president. On 20th April 1919 the union of the pressmen of the Government Press was established under Harisharvathama Rao.<sup>68</sup> The workers employed in the two Government Printing presses in Madras were unable to get their demands redressed when the printers numbering about 1,500 struck work on 7 April 1920,<sup>69</sup> after their formal process of petitioning to the higher authorities to resolve the long standing grievances of the printing workers, had been tried in vain, the Government acted swiftly by issuing a notice on 13 April 1920 that

those who fail to report to duty or those who do so with any excuses or those who abstain from work for false fear of victimisation will lose the benefits of leave and pension scheme, if they do not come to work before 14th April at 9 A.M.<sup>70</sup>

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68. Home Poll Deposit, 14 May 1919. File No.47, July 1919.

69. Swadesamitran, 8 April 1920.

70. Ibid., 14 April 1920.

In the face of such a threat, the strike petered out within a week in spite of the fact that it was supported by the compositors, foremen, clerks and proof readers apart from the ordinary categories of the workers. Even the deputation of twenty representatives selected from among the workers to meet the superintendent of the Government Press produced no result.<sup>71</sup>

#### Electric Supply and Oil Workers' Strikes

The Electric Supply Company was a British firm which was connected with and was under the Tramway Management. The Director of the Tramway Company Symonds was also the director of the Electric Supply Corporation. It employed around 400 workers in Pallavaram near Madras. The workers in the electric supply corporation were hard pressed and their job was laborious. They were to stand near big fire furnaces braving heat. Their wages were low and there was a lot of disparity between the Tramway men and the employees of the Electric Supply Corporation in terms of wages.<sup>72</sup>

The disparity in wages between the Tramway men and Electric Supply Corporation workers as the major cause of discontent and the employees of the latter

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71. Ibid., 8 April 1920.

72. Desabhakten, 2 February 1920. MNNR.

company wanted the management to solve their outstanding problems. Gilbert Slater, however, gives an unsympathetic picture.

"If we got this (concession granted to the Tramway men during their recent strike in January) by a strike of the tramway men, in which we did not take part, should we not get much more by a strike of our own."<sup>73</sup>

The Government noted prevalence of unrest among the employees - as early as May and predicted its culmination in a strike, though "the outside leaders are in this case trying to hold the men back".<sup>74</sup> The Government instituted Labour Board tribunal to avoid a strike among the workers as a strike at the Company would dislocate the business world and cause inconvenience to the public. The demands the workers referred to the Labour Board were given least consideration and the Board itself recommended nothing and drew up <sup>no</sup> distinction between the Tramway men and the electric supply corporation employees. The Swadesamitran pointed out the shortcomings of the Board of Enquiry which had not even "inspected the workshop of the Electric supply corporation before coming to this conclusion and this has caused annoyance to the labourers

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73. G. Slater, South India, p.323.

74. Home Poll Deposit, 17 May 1920, File No.94, July 1920.

who claim that their work is different from and more risky than that of the tramway men".<sup>75</sup>

The employees rejected the award of the Enquiry and struck work,<sup>76</sup> leaving the burning furnaces. The management under Simpson tried to break the strike. He mobilized fifty "coolies at the Power Station, rushed down in a motor lorry... in another half an hour he had a second fifty coolies there, and shortly afterwards he got hold of a lot of demobilised artisans returned from Mesopotamia".<sup>77</sup> The Government had no knowledge of what was done at the corporation to keep the power station working. "Military coolies" were imported into the site and the Government said that "the arrangement was made directly between the corporation and the military authorities and there was no reference to the Government in the matter".<sup>78</sup>

In the face of such steps as employment of military coolies and of a large number of unemployed workers, the strike of the Electric Supply Corporation was bound to collapse. When work was resumed at the electric supply

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75. Swadesamitran, 24 May 1920.

76. Home Dept. Political A, Progs August 1920, nos. 320-1.

77. G. Slater, South India, op. cit., p.323.

78. Home Poll Deposit, 1 July 1920, File No.97, July 1920.

corporation in June, only a few of the strikers were taken back and "the great majority had permanently lost their jobs".<sup>79</sup> The management did not even heed the suggestion of the Labour Commissioner as to the reinstatement of a dismissed employee. After three months, the Navasakti noted, while observing the attitude of the capitalists, the rendering of the strike by the electric workmen ineffective by the help given by the "Military Coolies" to the capitalists.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, lack of support and sympathy from the fellow-workers of the Tramway Company, seemed to have broken the spirit of the strikers. The Government report noted:

the refusal of the Tramway men to come out on a sympathetic strike has been a great blow to the men of the Electric Corporation. The Tramway men were strongly against the strike... went as far as to say that they were almost satisfied with their present conditions.<sup>81</sup>

Thus British capitalists had direct access to the use of "military coolies" and the police and used them to beat down workers' movement. The Government of Madras had

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79. G. Slater, South India, op. cit., p.323.

80. Navasakti, 29 October 1920. MNMR

81. Home Poll Deposit, 17 June 1920, File No.96, July 1920.

remained silent over the whole labour dispute. The case of the electric supply corporation is illustrative of this attitude. Similarly, the Burma Oil Company followed anti-labour policies in matters of dealings with labourers.

The Burma Oil Company employed about 2,000 workers in the installation. All of them were employed on temporary term. Even the men of long service were put on temporary term. They were employed in such hazardous jobs as filling up cans with oil, lifting them and transferring them to different place. The workers suffered from various ailments such as eye strains due to fumes while filling cans.<sup>82</sup>

The Royal Commission on Labour was told by the representatives of the kerosine oil workers union that the workers after a certain number of year's service had lost strength in their legs to stand up because they had to keep on treading on kerosine oil with bare feet.<sup>83</sup>

Being one of the major British concerns in Madras, the Burma oil company linked every major crisis with outsiders' interference. When the workers for the first time struck work demanding better wages and working

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82. Evidence of kerosine oil workers' union to the Royal Commission on Labour in India, vii, pt.II, p.148.

83. Ibid.



conditions in May 1920, the Management found the causes of the strike in the links between the employees and the outsiders. The Government reported: "As usual the management objects to the interference of outsiders".<sup>84</sup> It refused to have any dealing with "outsiders" in negotiations in spite of the fact that the stoppage of supply of kerosine oil and petrol caused trade dislocation.<sup>85</sup> To break the strike and to keep the installations working, the Burma Oil Company imported some Pathans from Bombay and employed them at the installations.<sup>86</sup> The first strike did not last long as the workers returned to work in the second week of May.

Within ten days of their return to work, once again the employees went on strike on 26 May with the same <sup>demands</sup> /as were put forward in the first strike. The management intervened immediately and asked the workers to return to work as their demands would be referred to the Board of arbitration.<sup>87</sup> However, the

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84. Home Poll Deposit, 17 May 1920, File No.94, July 1920.

85. Ibid.

86. Home Poll Deposit, 1 June 1920, file No.95.

87. Ibid.

Government was sceptical of the outcome of the Board of arbitration constituted to look into the problems of the workers because in its view the agitators were active in the oil installations. It said:

there is no indication that a final settlement will be arrived at without further trouble, so long as outside agitators take an active part in the proceedings, the employers will have nothing to do with the men's unions while the men have shown no disposition to cut themselves loose from the agitators.<sup>88</sup>

Even though the demands were referred to the board of arbitration, the workers continued their characteristic technique of harassing the employers in their own way and indulged in "Cacanny" methods. The workers' actions indicated to the Government, that "if the decision (of the board of arbitration) is against them, the men will strike again".<sup>89</sup> As predicted by the Government, the board of arbitration did not recommend any major concessions to the employees; the award was influenced by discussions between the Board & headquarter of the firm at Calcutta. The main concession which the workers demanded, i.e. the

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88. Home Poll ..... Deposit, 17 June 1920, File No. 96, July 1920.

89. Home Poll Deposit, 19 July 1920, File No. 105, July 1920.

institution of provident fund was not granted. Dissatisfied with the award, the workers continued their strike. The company, noticing the possible outbreak of strike, declared lock out, throwing workers out of job, and issued a notice on 31 August which read:

On and from 1st September 1920, we are prepared to employ those of work men only who are willing to work properly on the scale of wages and rice allowance recommended by the court of enquiry. Employees who accept these terms will be permitted to repay the advance given them in June last at the rate of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  days pay each month. Employees who accept the above terms must notify the installation manager on or before 8 A.M. of 1st September 1920. Those who do not accept these terms will be paid off as at 31st August 1920 at wages earned according to the scale recommended by the court of enquiry less the full amount of any advance made.<sup>90</sup>

When the workers asked for a day in which to consider those conditions with which to accept service, the company refused and the lock out continued.<sup>91</sup>

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90. Home Poll. Deposit, 17 September 1920, File No.70, September 1920.

91. Ibid.

The Labour Commissioner himself tried to solve the dispute with regard to the Provident Fund but his agreement was unacceptable to the workers<sup>92</sup>, only when the Governor intervened and interviewed the representatives of the workers and of the companies, the solution was found. The strike and lock out ended on 23 September. Outcome of the interview was that the position of the employees with regard to the provident fund was conceded; reinstatement of all except four of the workers who had been dismissed was agreed to.<sup>93</sup> The company also agreed to the workers demand for grant of war allowances with an increase of 20% wages.<sup>94</sup> The workers returned to work on 24 September accepting the concessions.

The MLU & Strike in Buckingham & Carnatic Mills 1920

After the December 1919 lock out at the B and C Mills which extracted assurances from the workers not to strike in the next 12 months so as to get back their forfeited gratuity fund, the situation at the mills remained disturbed. In March the B and C Mills tried to diffuse the unrest among the workers who demanded

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92. G. Slater, South India, op. cit., p.326.

93. Home Poll Deposit, 4 October 1920, File No.84, December 1920.

94. Swadesami tran, 30 September 1920.

40 per cent for time workers and 60 per cent for piece workers. The Mill authorities announced the concessions which included (1) a rise in pay ranging from 20 per cent for the lowest paid men to 10 per cent for the more highly paid and also in substitution for the existing practice of issuing rice at cheap rates; (2) an addition of three annas for every rupee of the pay of work or less than 25 a month and two annas for every rupee of the pay of men on Rs. 25 as long as prices were excessive; and (3) 5 per cent bonus which would be increased to 10 per cent, "if the men worked quietly for six months."<sup>95</sup> The workers found these benefits less <sup>than</sup> satisfactory.

The raison d'etre of their dissatisfaction with the management was deliberate distinction drawn between the classes of men eligible for their increased rice money.<sup>96</sup> The workers equally expressed dissatisfaction over the implementation of 4 annas allowance taking effect from 15th August onwards. This was the starting point of dispute between them,<sup>97</sup> and the workers

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95. Home Poll Deposit, 5 March 1920, File No. 89, July 1920.

96. Ibid.

97. New India, 27 March 1920.

struck demanding equal wages for men of long service. For the first time, the Governor tried to intervene but he floundered. He supported the management by issuing a statement. The Desabhaktan observed;

That he should have issued this communique without enquiring<sup>of</sup> the mill authorities as well as the operatives and after consulting only the former, betrays his partiality... why should they (authorities of the B and C Mills) have fixed a different date to start the payment of the famine allowance from what was fixed by the committee?... He has levied a penalty on the labourers who have struck on legitimate grounds. It is not known for what offence this penalty is levied. Perhaps His Excellency has been moved to tears by the hardship of the capitalists.<sup>98</sup>

Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar who led the strike this time told the strikers at a meeting held on 24 March that the Government and the Labour Commission were prepared to concede every thing the board of arbitration had recommended. The company, he told the strikers, would reopen the mills only when the workers agreed to the two conditions, viz. (1) that the workers struck work without informing the management in advance, of it, and (2) since the strike affected the production,

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98. Desabhaktan, 24 March 1920. MNMR.

thereby causing loss to the company, the workers should give assurance not to strike in the coming months and accept a reduction of 25% from famine allowance.<sup>99</sup> And he asked the mill hands to stick to this position.

On the other hand the Labour board under Paddison was very keen on persuading the workers to go back to work. He used all means to send the workers but failed in his attempts. Here is an example of his attempt in persuading the employees to accept his conditions and to return to work, at a strike meeting which was arranged by Mr. Arundale.

- Mr. Arundale : Do you support the Madras Labour Union?
- Mr. Paddison : No.
- Mr. Arundale : If so, should you not first seek our permission to address the workers?
- Mr. Paddison : Yes.
- Mr. Paddison : I do not address to the Madras Labour Union. I speak to the workers. A few days back some of you came to me and informed about some troubles at the mills. But I told you all to go back to the mills and if any difference existed, must try to solve it among yourselves. If that was difficult to achieve, I would come to solve the dispute. But before I could intervene in the matter, you all struck.

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99. Swadesamitran, 25 March 1920.

- Workers : Somedays ago, we also informed you about the troubles and problems.
- Mr. Paddison : You first go back to work. I will solve the dispute.
- Workers : Muddiathu (NO).<sup>100</sup>

At last the workers agreed to refer the main demands to the board of arbitration. When the workers returned to work, on 26 March, it was decided that 2 anna allowance upto March 15 would be given and after that, 4 anna allowance would be continued.<sup>101</sup> On the same day the workers were advised by Mr. Arundale, not to declare strike "without consulting the leaders of the MLU" in future.<sup>102</sup> However this advice had no impact on the course of events in October and in subsequent months in the mills when the question of selection of foreman arose.

On 1 October 1920 A. Bentley, a weaving master of the Buckingham Mill referred to two acting side jobbers promotion to a place which was due to a senior worker. The affected person met the manager W.E. Bentley and told him about his supersession. But the manager replied that since he (the victimised)

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100. Swadesemitran, 23 March 1920.

101. Ibid., 27 March 1920.

102. Ibid.



had offended him (Bentley) by his petition to the Messers Binny and Company against the appointment of his brother Mr. A. Bentley as weaving master, he would not consider his matter and even if he (the victimised) had worked for 20 years he would not be promoted.<sup>103</sup> This version is given in the statement published in New India in its issue of 27 October 1920. Though the Government had not given these full details the reference to "the intrigues of a European assistant"<sup>104</sup> implicitly support the arguments of the Madras Labour Union.

The post of head of the Weaving Department was given to two acting jobbers, but they refused on the ground of injustice done to their senior, then to two other weaving jobbers, then to three and so on. The dismissals followed. On 14th itself 8 workers were dismissed on their refusal to accept new job. In the following days, many more dismissals were effected for the same reason, viz., refusal to accept the head job. Some other workers were compelled to take leave without pay. Those who were forced to take leave went to Mr. Bentley to obtain permission to rejoin work. On

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103. New India, 27 October 1920.

104. Home Poll. Deposit, 2 November 1920, File No. 26, December 1920.

20th October when he was told by the workers about their problems, he became infuriated and kicked four men and injured them. In spite of such provocation, according to the MLU statement, the workers persisted in their demand. Bentley took up a revolver from his pocket and threatened to shoot them. One of the workers caught hold of his hand whereupon Bentley threw down his revolver and left.<sup>105</sup>

As the situation went out of control, the Buckingham company put up a notice on 21 October declaring the closure of the mill owing to "the assault on the weaving master...and the general turbulent attitude of the weavers".<sup>106</sup> The next day a lockout committee under B.P. Wadia was constituted with nine members.<sup>107</sup> Wadia declared at the workers meeting "you must be prepared for a long lock out of even 6 months. It is now question of whether we want our union to continue or whether we want it to dissolve. We have suffered very long; we...suffer in other way during these lock out days."<sup>108</sup> Every day a meeting was held where workers were exhorted

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105. New India, 27 October 1920.

106. Ibid.

107. Ibid., 22 October 1920.

108. Ibid.

to maintain unity till their demands were conceded.

On 1 November again the Buckingham Mill put up a notice notifying the dismissal of all those employees who were on the roll on 20 October when the affray occurred.<sup>109</sup> The workers insisted on the fulfilment of their demands which included payment for the period of the lock out, reinstatement of the dismissed men, the removal of Mr. Bentley and abandoning the practice of making the gratuity fund depend on good behaviour.<sup>110</sup> The Buckingham mill authorities struck at the root of their solidarity. The company filed a suit against Wadia and the nine other members of the lock out committee for Rs.75,000 damages and for a 'permanent injunction' restraining the MLU from "continuing and giving effect to their alleged conspiracy to maliciously injure the Buckingham mill and restraining them from holding meetings of Mills workmen and procuring them to break their contract."<sup>111</sup> The injunction was passed as there was no trade union act to permit the activities of trade unions in India.

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109. Home Poll Deposit, 14 November 1920, File No.66, December 1920.

110. Ibid.

111. New India, 18 November 1920.

The motive behind the filing of suit against that union is summed up by the Desabhaktan in the following

British capitalists who establish mills in this country and make a mint of money, are trying to deprive the people of even the privileges obtaining commonly in Western countries. At this time when the labourers of the coal mines in England have, by striking work, obtained an additional wage of one rupee per diem over the seven rupees a day they were already getting, the mill owners in this country should endeavour to cut at the root of the fundamental right of the labourers. But here, foreign capitalists and imitating them, the Indian capitalists too, are trying to deprive the labourers of the right of co-operation and striking work and of their liberty generally.<sup>112</sup>

B.P. Wadia appealed to the workers to remain loyal to the union. "If the enemy attacks us," he said, "we shall close our ranks and stand like a wall."<sup>113</sup> But the management tried to break the strike by offering bait of concessions to all departments except the weaving, but failed.<sup>114</sup> The management used other

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112. Desabhaktan, 12 November 1920. MNR.

113. New India, 12 November 1920.

114. Murphy, E., Unions in Conflict: A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres, 1918-39, p.74.

method of breaking the strike by recruiting the workers. It succeeded in recruiting some people from the port and carried them in lorries to the mill sites with police escorts. On 9 December the strike breakers and the police came under attack from workers who pelted stones at the police party.<sup>115</sup> The latter in "self defence" opened fire killing two and injuring many. The Government justified the firing by issuing communique which said the police had to do so in order "to save themselves from annihilation". The Governor put the blame on Wadia and other leaders for this incident. The Governor warned that "If any unfortunate incident should arise owing to a collision between the police in the preservation of their duty and riotous people, then a large share of the responsibility for such incident must rest upon yourself and those who with you claim to contest and represent the interests of the workers in this city."<sup>116</sup>

On the other hand, the whole Madras press condemned the firing. The Hindu wrote:

There was no necessity for emulating the unforgettable exploit of the hero of Jallian-walla. Government apparently rely on the fact that the atmosphere has been disturbed

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115. Navasakti, 12 December 1920. MNMR.

116. New India, 11 December 1920.

ever since the lock out and that these have been sporadic cases of stone throwing. It is absurd on the face of it, however, to pretend that a few instances of stone throwing could be magnified into a 'conspiracy against law and order'...

It feared the tendency of the Government to think of "every slight disturbance which calls for bloodbath or every brick-bat must inevitably be answered by authority". Further it said:

The readiness to fire upon unarmed crowds which the official communique seeks to condone and justify is... one of the most disquieting feature of the industrial situation. The authorities are on the side of the capitalists.<sup>117</sup>

The Kanthirva wrote that "Be the matter big or small, it has been a regular practice with our rulers in India to make use of pistols and thus establish peace in the land".<sup>118</sup> Similar criticisms were expressed by other vernacular newspapers. All the papers expressed doubt about the institution of enquiry into the firing. Even the President of the Madras Corporation, P. Thiyagaraya Chetti did not support a resolution urging the Government

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117. The Hindu, 11 December 1920.

118. Kanthirva, 20 December 1920. MNMR.

to institute an enquiry into the firing for "such a resolution will go to the waste paper basket."<sup>119</sup>

Even after the firing, the management did not change its stand. It reasserted its right in matters of appointments, dismissals and promotions and could not consider taking back those dismissed prior to 20th October 1920. Nearly 3,956 workers signed an memorandum and submitted it to the management demanding reinstatement of all the dismissed.<sup>120</sup> The situation remained unchanged even in January. The Hindu reported the whole labour situation as "murky".

And unless early steps are taken to handle it with just prudence, it promises further to swell the ranks of unemployment. So far as the men are concerned, they are yet prepared to face the impartial tribunal, present their case before it and abide by its verdict. Instead of taking advantage of this reasonable attitude on the part of labour, the employers would appear for the moment to prefer the disastrous policy of drift. There is a strong feeling among labourers and all those who are in the movement that Lord Willingdon Government befriends capital. There is no doubt that various acts of omission and commission lend great support to that view.<sup>121</sup>

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119. Andhrepatrika, 19 January 1921. MNR.

120. New India, 14 December 1920.

121. The Hindu, 24 January 1921.

The "murky" labour situation spread to the Carnatic Mill as well. The workers in the company passed a resolution on 18th criticising the Buckingham mill authorities for "not arriving at a fair settlement... by refusing to admit the men unjustly dismissed and for not acceding to the other fair proposals of their comrades of the Buckingham mills". It warned the Buckingham mill that "they will consider a strike unless the dispute between the lock out men of the Buckingham mill and the employers is not satisfactorily settled before 6 p.m. on Friday, 21st January 1921."<sup>122</sup>

As the labour dispute was not solved before 21st, the workers of the Carnatic Mill met on 22nd, passed a resolution on strike and sent it to the Buckingham mill company.<sup>123</sup> On 23rd January about 5,000 workers of Carnatic mill came out on strike in sympathy of their fellow workers in the Buckingham mill.<sup>124</sup> This dramatic display of unity forced the Mill authorities to pay attention to the labour dispute.

At a private meeting on 26 January, a compromise settlement was reached between Sir Clement Simpson,

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122. New India, 21 January 1921; Home Poll Deposit, 24 January 1921, File No.41, April 1921.

123. New India, 22 January 1921.

124. Ibid., 21 January 1921.



Messers, Symonds, Wadia, Thakurdas and Annie Besant. By the agreement, Messers Binny and Company had agreed to withdraw the case against Wadia and nine other members and reduce the number of dismissals from 200 to 13. According to the accord, the employees admitted the right of the company to appoint, promote and dismiss them at their discretion. The company as a matter of principle, recognised the right of the employees to combine in a union, which was however to consist only of mill employees.<sup>125</sup> The accord was a major set back to the labour movement among the mill hands, as it curbed the activities of the 'outsiders' among them.

When the workers returned to work on 27th January there was hardly any <sup>resistance</sup> manifest among the workers, as they were hard pressed and were prepared to accept any fair accord.<sup>126</sup> The attitude of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills shows the management's intense dislike for any sort of workers' solidarity and unity represented by the MLU. The objective of the management that 'outsiders' should have no liaison with the workers was achieved through pressure put on the leaders and the workers. On this question the mill hands had to compromise with the managements which used its coercive force to cow down workers' movement.

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125. Home Poll Deposit, 2 February 1921, File No.42, April 1921.

126. For desperate conditions of the workers' readiness to accept any award, see The Hindu, 24 January 1921.

In situation of adverse economic conditions immediately following the World War I, the disorganised, heterogeneous working class felt an acute need for a union to give vent to their grievances. The formation of the Madras Labour Union was the response to this acute necessity. The role of the members of the intelligentsia that is, the trade union leaders who included, inter alia, the teachers and vakils by profession, was significant. They helped orient and direct the Madras Labour Union which became <sup>the</sup> first formally constituted Union and subsequently became a forerunner of the similar trade unions among the working class in Madras city. Their specific role as the leaders of the working class was bound up with their general role as nationalists, i.e. Home Rulers, in beginning. But their dual role, as the Home Rulers and as the leaders of the working class created a suspicion in the minds of the European class of capitalists who were strong in Madras during this period. Threatened by a spate of strikes in their establishments, the European capitalists suspected the hand of these "outsiders" behind those strikes. The intention of the European capitalists was to separate the outside leadership from the working class and thus

weaken the working class movement. The logic of all these efforts meant to defeat the working class culminated in the institution of a court injunction by the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills against the leadership and the strike committee members of the Madras Labour Union. The policy of the bureaucracy favoured the interests of "white capital". It acquiesced in the various steps and methods adopted by the European capitalists against the working class, connived at the use of police force against the workers and sided, on various occasions, with the capitalists. The colonial state exercised coercion as the last resort not only in political domain, but in labour world as well where the exercise of such coercion was essential to protect against labour problems the interests of "white capital" with which the colonial state identified itself in this period.

CHAPTER IV  
LEADERSHIP AND CHARACTERISTICS  
OF TRADE UNIONISM

The term "outsider's interference" is an euphemism for nationalist or leftist politicians involvement in the life of the working class. The term "outsider" came into use in the very early stages of the organised labour movement in India in the post-war period. "The secret police reports", writes Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "in the early 1920's often blamed the outsiders for labour unrest".<sup>1</sup> The Director of Central Intelligence reported in 1920 that a remarkable feature of the strikes of 1919-20 was "the alacrity with which politicians and outsiders, who have absolutely no connection with or concern with the industry affected, rush to the scene of any reported difficulties between employer and employed. They offer their valuable services as mediators, intermediaries or men's leaders."<sup>2</sup>

This pejorative tone of the Government of India, as well as of the capitalists who came to use it frequently against the "outsiders" (that is those who were

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1. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "The Outsiders: A Historical Note" in Ashok Mitra (ed.) Essays in honour of Samar Sen (Calcutta, 1985), p.91.
  2. Home Dept. (Poll), February 1920. File No.75, Report of Director of Central Intelligence, 16 February 1920. Quoted in S. Bhattacharya, ibid., p.92.

not from within the ranks of the labourers) was understandable in the colonial context since the outsider was an intruder into capital and labour relations.

It has been pointed out that:

the virtual absence of literate workers... disadvantaged the colonial working class. A culturally bilingual intelligentsia conducted political organisations, including those of the working class, in a way that was beyond the reach of members of the working class... Further the Indian labour movement unlike the Europeans, did not have the advantage of a long and slow maturation; this rapid development did not allow for the nursing of a leadership from the ranks.<sup>3</sup>

This explanation fits into the structure of the working class of Madras where there was a virtual absence of literate workers; bilingual leadership (an exception was B.P. Wadia<sup>who</sup> knew only English and delivered speeches at political and labour meetings in English) conducted labour meetings; and the first formal trade union was started without outsider leadership in the confused atmosphere of political and labour unrest primarily as a means to obtain concessions from the employers.

The role of the outsiders and the working class ideology and their movement were structured in a particular

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3. Ibid., pp. 97-98.

way by the situation in which they emerged. The Government of Madras in a fortnightly report said that -

in the opinion of the Government...without the assistance and provocation of the political agitator no large measure of industrial unrest would have occurred. There seems to be evidence that those industrial enterprises which are financed by European capital or managed by Europeans have been especially marked out for attention. No attempt seems to have been made to approach the agricultural labourer whose condition in many parts of the Presidency is more degraded and possesses less promise of improvement than that of the industrial labourer. For these reasons the Governor in Council considers that while economic conditions are naturally a contributing cause of the unrest, the effective and existing cause of strikes has in this case been political agitation.<sup>4</sup>

A deliberate attempt was made by the European capitalists to thwart the attempts of the outsiders to bring the workers into union so as to protect their interests. Thus the "outsider" which was conjured up in the mind as a "political agent" was a construct of the Europeans and the Government whose interests were threatened by labour unrest in Madras during this period.

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4. Home Dept. (Poll). A. March Progs 12 Feb. 1919, Nos. 242-249.

In colonial Madras, the British capitalists not only characterized labour unrest and strikes as fanned by 'outsiders' but also attributed difficulty in arriving at a settlement of the labour dispute to 'interference of outsiders' in negotiations. At first the objection to outsiders interference was confined to outsider's efforts to unionise workers and to politicize them. In this regard, the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills is a classic example. It objected not only to unionisation of workers but also resorted to victimisation of workers who were members of the Madras Labour Union. The political tone of the Madras Labour Union is indicated in the following words of B.P. Wadia:

the teaching given at our meetings tends to make the labourers independent and self respecting and enables them to give up their old ways of slavishly putting up with everything including ill-treatment.<sup>5</sup>

However it was not merely against politicization of workers or the education of workers for their self-reliance and self-respect that the management of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills opposed. The reasons for the management's opposition are far deeper and lie in the interests of the capitalists.

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5. Home Poll. Dept. (Deposit), File No.29, Progs, Madras Papers relating to the strike at Messers Binny's Mills in Madras. B.P. Wadia's statement published in the Pioneer, 16 December 1918.

This is clear from the reactions of the British capitalists to the phenomenon of labour unrest in 1918 and in subsequent years. The telegrams sent by the representative bodies of the British capitalists, the Madras Chamber of Commerce and the Madras Trades Association, to the Government of India, urging it to intervene and frame suitable policies to meet the labour crisis in Madras reflect the anxiety of the capitalists to protect their interests from labour unrest.<sup>6</sup> They demanded urgent measures to tackle the labour crisis as it had threatened to dislocate the normal business.<sup>7</sup>

Labour unrest grew in intensity and caused alarm to "white capital" in Madras. On 8 June 1920 the meeting of the British capitalists held in Madras discussed the labour unrest<sup>8</sup> and sent a memorandum to the Government of India. The memorandum requested the Government to see that (1) legislation was introduced to prevent lightening strikes of workers in public utility services, such as railways, electric light, tramways, kerosine oil and

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6. Home Dept. Poll. A. Progs March 1919, nos. 242-9.  
A telegram from the Madras Chamber of Commerce dated 11 December 1918 to the Government of India. Appended. Unrest in Madras due to the alleged activities of Home Rule Politicians.

7. For further details and civil servants attitude to unrest, see Chapter II, in particular civil servants attitude towards unions.

8. Home Dept. Poll. (Deposit), 17 June 1920, File no. 96, July 1920.



petrol companies, and (2) a commission be appointed to enquire into the condition of labour, including registration of unions and "the true causes of unrest to find remedies, if possible, for the present state of disturbed labour situation."<sup>9</sup>

A ban on strikes in the essential services was advocated because it was only in these services that "white capital" dominated. The Tramways, the electric corporation, Burma Oil Company and other essential factories were owned by British capitalists who faced strikes in their companies frequently. The strikes were carried out by Tramway workers, one in 1919 and another in 1920; both were for economic reasons. A shortlived strike was conducted by the electric supply corporation in 1920 for wage increases. Three strikes in succession were declared by the Burma Oil Company employees in 1920, which forced the British capitalists to concede workers' demands. These strikes threatened the security of their capital.

These strikes received sympathy and support from the nationalists who readily came forward to take up leadership of the workers. Nationalist politicians' vigorous support of the strikes and criticism of the policies of the British companies faced employer's

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9. Home Dept. Poll. (Deposit), 1 July 1920, File No. 97.

opposition to 'outsiders'. B.P. Wadia, for example said at one of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills hands' strike: "Be united. Whether you are ill-treated by the British capitalist or Indian capitalist, you must oppose all sorts of ill treatment. Protect your self-respect".<sup>10</sup> At every strike meeting he urged the workers to remain united and oppose British capitalists till their demands were conceded. It was this encouragement and exhortation to workers that was dubbed as 'outsider's intervention'. The speeches delivered at the strike meetings had a tinge of anti-British feeling which appealed to the workers. A. Ranga-swami Ayyangar, though himself not a labour leader, said at the Tramway workers meeting that:

The tramway company is dominated by the British men. They are less disposed in favour of the interests of the labourer and since they are white men, they cannot show any consideration to their problems.<sup>11</sup>

Harisharvathama Rao, who was a nationalist and one of the prominent labour union leaders among the low wage earners, observed that the British capitalists had exploited India and Indian labour. They were still bent on draining the country and were not prepared to grant even wages for decent living.<sup>12</sup> Thiru. Vi. Ka more vocal and radical,

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10. Swadesamitran, 13 December 1918.

11. Ibid., 17 March 1919.

12. Ibid., 16 June 1920.

said at strike meetings that British employees were denying even fair deal to labourers. They were showing utter disregard of the interests of workers. The Government, he said, was indifferent to the condition of the workers.<sup>13</sup>

At strike meetings the leaders demanded the Government's intervention to solve the labour disputes between labour and capital. They blamed the Government for prolonging strikes and capitalists' anti-labour policies. In this regard, the speeches of Thiru. Vi. Ka and B.P. Wadia were inspiring to the workers.<sup>14</sup>

In view of such anti-capital and anti-Government speeches the managements which faced strikes felt that the reasons for continued strikes and troubles were to be found in the leadership of 'outsiders' rather than in the factories. It was the leaders than the workers, the managements considered, that obstructed normal course of relationship between employees and employers and blocked negotiations between them. The Government reports endorsed this view.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Ibid., 13 March 1919.

14. For details of inspiring speeches of B.P. Wadia, Thiru. Vi. Ka during the October 1920 strike of the Buckingham, see the New India's October and November issues in particular from October 21 onwards.

15. See Chapter II.

On the one hand the workers refused to accept any of the concessions with conditions imposed by the managements. They demanded full acceptance of their demands by the companies, demands such as reinstatement of dismissed workers and restoration of gratuity fund etc. And insisting on their fulfilment of demands, they turned to outside leadership and had shown no disposition "to cut themselves loose from agitators".<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the managements had no use for the 'outside' leadership and refused to meet the demands till the workers had returned to work.

It was in times of strikes that the cry was raised against 'outside' leadership. It took on different forms. First it manifested in the form of refusal on the part of the management to have negotiation with 'outsiders'. Subsequently, it manifested in the shape of dismissals of employees who were associated with the unions led by the outside leadership. As these two courses had not brought about desired results, the management tried to curb the activities of the unions themselves. In this connection, the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills is illustrative. It filed a suit against the Madras Labour Union and the lock out Committee members, who included B.P. Wadia, J. enarthan, Natesa Mudaliar, Varadrajulu Naieker,

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16. Home Poll (Deposit), 17 June 1920, File No. 96, July 1920.

Thiru-vi-Kalyana Sundara Mudaliar, Syed Jalal Khan, Natesa Naicker, Namasivaham Pillai and two others,<sup>17</sup> for Rs.75000 damages, which represents the losses of the managements faced during strikes.

Workers looked to nationalist leaders primarily for two reasons: First, they were incapable of achieving their concessions without co-operation and active support of the 'outsiders'. They sought certain politicians' support because the workers expected that the politicians, being anti-Government, could represent their demands boldly to the management; Secondly, fear of victimisation gripped the workers, whether they were Government employees or private factory labourers. For instance, the police employees were unable to form union and feared to come out with decision in favour of union. They were so fearful of victimization that the flag of the police union was held up by the coolies at the Railway station with no policemen nearby.<sup>18</sup> This was the condition of the workers in general in Madras. That was why the employees needed leadership from outside to represent their demands. N.M. Joshi, taking the case of police men's union, defended outsiders' support and help in the representation of workers

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17. New India, 18 Nov. 1920.

18. Home Poll Deposit, 19 August 1920, File No.111, August 1920.

problems. He said:

As soon as the police union was started in Madras, associations seem to have been formed in some places in the Salem district with police officials at their head. We do not know how far these associations will prove beneficial. Will any police Inspector as the head of the police union boldly represent to his superiors the grievances of the subordinates. If outsiders are connected with the associations, they will try to ventilate the grievances of the members to recognise their own rights. It is only the outsiders that are fit to open their eyes.<sup>19</sup>

Thus 'outsider' is a blanket word with so many meanings subsumed under it. The economic interests of the capitalists conjured up 'outsider' controversy to protect their own interests threatened by labour unrest in Madras. The controversy over 'outsiders' interference and leadership remained unresolved even by the Labour Board constituted during Lord Willingdon's regime.

#### Inefficiency of the Labour Board:

In 1920 the Government of India set up a Labour Board. This was perhaps an attempt to circumvent outsiders and to provide a forum for labour dispute resolution.

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19. Swadesamitran, 3 May 1920, MNMR.

It was safety valve through which the discontent of labourers could be controlled. Mrs. Besant herself was in favour of some mediating/<sup>body</sup>to decide on cases affecting labour and capital relations. B.P. Wadia advocated a permanent institution which would bring about normal relations between capital and labour as early as 1919.<sup>20</sup> The Government itself felt the need to institute a Labour Board in the wake of a rash of strikes. So a Labour Board was set up under Mr. Paddison to deal with issues arising out of industrial conflicts.<sup>21</sup>

However, the Labour Board was saddled with many responsibilities. The Welfare of the Depressed Classes and the question of labour were combined in the same board. As far as labour questions were concerned, the Labour Board was authorised to deal with (1) factory labour, (2) labour questions including those of the organisation of labour, of recognition or registration of labour union, and (3) settlement of labour disputes.<sup>22</sup> But the Government of India noted, on the proposal to appoint Mr. Paddison as special officer in charge of the Labour Board, that

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20. Swadesamitran, 24 March 1919.

21. When the tramway workers were on strike in January and in the first week of February 1920, the Governor Willingdon intervened and told the strikers that he would institute a Labour Board under Paddison to look after workers' problems. Desabhaktan, 2 Feb. 1920.

22. Home Deptt. Pub. A. Nos. 320-321, 20 June 1920, August 1920.

The Home Department are no longer the Department concerned with the work of this special officer. From being an officer deputed to examine the position of aboriginal and depressed classes, he is developing into a Commissioner of Labour and is to deal with such important matters as factory labour, the wage census, emigration and labour disputes.<sup>23</sup>

Ab initio, the Labour Board was faced with many problems. Since its constitution, it solved only six cases of disputes with success and it tried to solve dispute at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills through the institution of a board of arbitration whose award averted strike for the time being in the Mills.<sup>24</sup> He unsuccessfully tried to solve the labour disputes at the Burma Oil Company and the electric corporation, the two important British capital lo ked concerns.

He faced a difficult task in convincing his own people. G. Slater writes:

In dealing with the staff of the standard oil company (who had "the sturdy individualism of the American tradition"), Paddison had to bring into play all his resources. He invited the staff to dine with him in Madras club. he wined them liberally and did not let them

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23. Ibid.

24. G. Slater, South India, its political and Economic Problems, p.326.



go till in the small hours of the morning he had got them to consent to his terms.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of this unusual feat, he could not satisfy the employees of the oil companies and Governor Willingdon had to intervene. In most of the labour disputes the Labour Commissioner was arbitrary and his awards went abegging. The Desabhaktan commented on the award of the Labour Board, for the electric supply employees:

We thought the labour commissioner was appointed for the benefit of the labourers. But we now infer that he is there only to protect the interests of the capitalists.<sup>26</sup>

The crisis of October 1920 strike of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill hands showed the hollowness of the Labour Board under Mr. Moir who, unlike Mr. Paddison, failed to attempt a solution to the labour disputes. He became quite unpopular in labour world and became identified with the white capitalists. The Desabhaktan commented on his inefficient functioning as the Commissioner of Labour: "It is ridiculous that one who does not know and cannot fully associate with the children of the soil, is the labour commissioner".<sup>27</sup> The New India editorially

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25. Ibid.

26. Desabhaktan, 29 March 1920. MNNR.

27. Ibid., 17 January 1921. MNNR.

commented by way of comparison:

Mr. Paddison was regarded by the labourers at least as their friend and sympathetic to their cause. We regret to say that Mr. Moir is not held in so favourable a light.<sup>28</sup>

The objective of the constitution of the Labour Board was not achieved; Labour and capital conflicts would be amicably solved. It did not attempt the touchy question of union recognition.<sup>29</sup> The Board had inherent defects and could not overcome these. The Government recognised that the employers and employees were unprepared to support the Board and feared there was a considerable danger of the whole scheme falling through.<sup>30</sup> The workers entirely opposed the appointment of Justice Kumaraswami Sastri to the Board and the Government had to drop the proposal.<sup>31</sup>

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28. New India, 24 January 1921.

29. The Desabhaktan as early as February 1920, doubted the authority of the Labour Board to decide on unions and made incisive comments in this regard. For further details, see the Desabhaktan, 2 February 1920.

30. Home Poll (Deposit), 19 August 1920, File No.111, August.

31. Home Poll. (Deposit), 2 September 1920, File No.112, August 1920.

Unionism:

Major issues of labour conflicts were left unresolved by the Labour Board. The questions such as union recognition and union activities continued to pester the capitalists. As a result there was a slow and speedy growth of trade unionism was strongly embedded in the minds of the workers. Gandhi was seized of the workers' state of mind during their struggle in 1919. The tramway workers' interview with Gandhi proves this:

"Gandhi: For how many days will you continue to remain on strike?

A worker: For 10 to 15 days.

Gandhi: If the dispute is not solved within these days, how many more days you will be able to prolong strike?

A worker: Further ten days more."<sup>32</sup>

Then he addressed the workers tactfully:

Whether your demands are reasonable or not, I cannot say now. If your demands are genuine and not solved through negotiations, strike is the only weapon... However, there should not be any room for a show of vengeance against capitalists or against those who support the management.<sup>33</sup>

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32. Swadesamitran, 21 April 1919.

33. Ibid.

And ended his speech with the words,<sup>34</sup> "God Bless you all!" On the whole Gandhi steered clear of labour questions in Madras, though his comments, more or less as a spectator rather than as a participant, tended to interpret his gospel of non-violence in a manner that militated against class struggle.

It is notable that religious beliefs and customs which form part of Hindu society influenced the workers and these went hand in hand with the spread of trade unionism. This was to some extent perpetuated by the speeches of nationalist leaders who preached stories about exploits of Srikrishna Pragalatha, and Harichandra at the strike meetings.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes the reports of the newspapers are unintentionally ironical: "the Tramway workers, the Swadesamitran reported, were "reciting pajans everyday at meetings, and are unable to find any means of livelihood."<sup>36</sup>

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34. Gandhi's address in English was rendered into Tamil by C. Rajagopalachari who was with him in connection with the impending satyagraha movement against the Rowlatt Bill. See Raj Mohan Gandhi, The Rajaji Story, vol.1 (Bombay, 1978), p.69.

35. See Dandapani Pillai's speeches at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill hands strike meetings in the Swadesamitran, 9 December 1918.

36. Swadesamitran, 29 March 1919.

There were many unions formed in Madras on the lines of the Madras Labour Union. These were the Printers union, Electric Corporation Union, the Addison Company Union, the Burma Oil Company Employees Union and so on. These were all formed in 1919 itself. The employees employed in these concerns were highly politicized. The Government asserted that "the trade union movement spread, but chiefly among employees of white capital, e.g., the Tramway, electricity workers, oil companies and the aluminium works."<sup>37</sup> The most notable of all these unions is the spread of the idea of unions among the lowest classes of the workers. There were municipal employees union, the sweepers union, the hotel employees union and rickshaw wallas union and so on. Harisharvathama Rao helped employees in these occupations to form unions for themselves and some of these unions he headed.

In this period the trade union movement was identical with strike movements. These unions were formed just after or before the outbreak of the strikes and came to stay even after the demands of the workers were conceded, though these unions were subjected to severe

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37. Home Poll. Part I, File No. 931/1921. Incendarism at the Panchama Mills in Madras and report of assault by caste strikers on the police and fire brigade.

harassment. Basically these unions were the outcome of the workers need to protect their interests. But in course of time these came to be influenced by the political movement. The conjunction of the political and labour movements sharpened the workers antagonism towards the British capitalists.

In consequence the capitalists tended to link the labour movement with the political development and make an all out efforts to crush the Trade Union movement with the help of the Police. The Desabhaktan noted the tendency of the capitalists to browbeat the strikes and commented:

Strikes occur often on account of the capitalists opposing the labourers, and every time there is a strike, the capitalists seek the aid of the police, which they have... The capitalists accomplish their object with the strength of the police and the poor labourers who strike, fail to obtain justice.<sup>38</sup>

The pro-establishment press, in particular, the Madras Mail, voiced the opinion of the British capitalists on labour unrest and recommended the "strong committee to enquire into the causes of the trouble."<sup>39</sup> The

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38. Desabhaktan, 16 June 1920. MNR.

39. The Madras Mail's report was quoted by the Swadesamitran and the latter criticized the version. See Swadesamitran, 15 June 1920.

Swadesamitran commented that "the European capitalists, whose main object is to drain the resources of India, being afraid of the legitimate demands of the labourers for increased wages and other comforts, are trying to crush the labour associations altogether."<sup>40</sup>

The Indian native press suspected the possibility of the Government enacting a law in the direction of crushing the labour movement, ignoring the interests of the country and of the labourers and giving prominence only to the convenience of the European capitalists.<sup>41</sup> In spite of the anti-labour policies, the pace of the labour movement continued to grow. The press gave strong support to the workers and their unions and stressed their relevance in modern times. The New India in a news column said:

The Indian labour has been exploited too long. He is enslaved and he must be taught to break his fetters. Conditions which prevail today, if continued, will breed a revolution of war; trade union and similar work will bring about a revolution of peace.<sup>42</sup>

Above all the speeches of the nationalist leaders spread among the workers the radical ideas and spirit

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40. Swadesamitran, 15 June 1920.

41. Ibid.

42. New India, 18 November 1920.

of self-reliance. B.P. Wadia addressing the huge meeting of the workers on the Marina said, "Workers have strong confidence in themselves. There is no need for the outsider to lead them, for they are capable of leading themselves."<sup>43</sup> Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar addressing the mammoth meeting of about 10,000 workers at the Conference of the Madras Workers declared:

If capitalists try to crush the working class and the labour movement, we must use our strength to the maximum extent in retaliation.<sup>44</sup>

And the address receiving the instantaneous applause from the audience.<sup>45</sup> The addresses of B.P. Wadia and Thiru. Vi. Ka at the time of the strike of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill hands are the best testimony of radical tone of the political leaders who were in the labour movement.

The pro-establishment press put down every labour unrest to the manoeuvres of the politicians. The Wednesday Review considered the labour unions as "the real source of mischief. They are dominated by men whose business in life is to embarrass the authorities

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43. Swadesamitran, 15 April 1919.

44. Ibid., 16 June 1920.

45. Ibid.



as much as possible and bring the administration into contempt."<sup>46</sup> The causes of labour unrest were seldom recognized and these were considered to have been caused by the 'mischievous propaganda'. The expression of their (workers) resentment through unions was slighted. The same paper wrote:

The frequent strikes are by no means a sign that the labourers are an organized body and they are fighting for what they believe to be their rights. These are on the other hand outcome of a mischievous propaganda organized by political agitators who have nothing else to do.<sup>47</sup>

Even some of the native called strikes "evils". For example, the Andhra Patrika wrote that

Such strikes that of the Bombay Mill workers are only the evils which are following in the wake of the industrial methods of the West, copied out blindly.<sup>48</sup>

The spread of Bolshevism was considered as causing the labour trouble.<sup>49</sup> The Government exaggerately reported that C. Rajagopalachari was "trying to form secret societies amongst the members of the various labour unions". The Government further noted that one such

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46. The Wednesday Review, no. 23, 1920, MNNR.

47. Ibid., no. 25, 1920. MNNR.

48. Andhra Patrika, 23 January 1920.

49. Ibid.

containing 21 members had been formed in connection with the Tramway Union and meetings were held of which one Sree Vamula, the Secretary of the Union (whose name appears only once in the Government reports) had "extolled Bolshevism as the only cure for the existing poverty and distress. Bolshevik propoganda... will in time spread amongst the labourers all over India. When the time comes, perhaps in about two years, every labourer must be prepared to make any sacrifice in the cause of an open-revolt."<sup>50</sup> And in another fortnightly report the Government spoke of C. Rajagopalachari as "an ardent pro-Bolshevist, his idea being to attain the revolution he desires to see by fostering labour unrest." In this programme he was stated to have been assisted by a certain Sukhiri Narayan Iyer, a young barrister, who recently returned from Ireland where he associated with Sinu Feiners. The Government reported that "these individuals are being watched by the Madras police" for their activities in Madras.<sup>51</sup> There was no more reference to C. Rajagopalachari as a pro-Bolshvist in the Government

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50. Weekly report for the fortnightly ending 3 April 1920. Home Poll Deptt. File No.73, April 1920.

51. Weekly Report for the week ending 20 March 1920. Home Poll Deposit, File No.19, April 1920. But C. Rajagopalechari's speech at the first Madras Labour Conference, dispells any impression of his being a pro-Bolshevist. He said: "If Bolshevism were not to enter this land, laws should be so framed as to adequately represent the interests of labour". The Hindu, 23 May 1920, cited in Rajmohan Gandhi, op. cit., p.82.

reports. These exaggerated reports of the spread of 'Bolshevism' are the reflection of the fear the Government had shown towards the spread of the Trade Union movement.

In spite of the fact that the labour movement received full support from the political leaders from the beginning, the labour movement was riven by fear of the Government suppression and divisions among the labour union leaders. As early as November 1918, Mrs. Besant opposed the suggestion that workers should be given political education and politics and labour should be linked together on the ground that "the association (MLU) would run a risk of being nipped in the bud by the Government."<sup>52</sup> However, the ideology of the Home Rule Movement held sway over the labourer upto 1919. From 1920 onwards with the spread of the nationalist movement divisions within the Labour Movement surfaced.

V.O. Chidambaram Pillai with a mandate from the Congress founded the South Indian Railways Employees Union in February 1920 in collaboration with S. Kasturi Ranga Ayyangar.<sup>53</sup> With the foundation of that union,

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52. Extract from the fortnightly report of the Government of Madras, dated 1 November 1918. Home Poll Deposit, Political A, Progs March 1919, nos. 242-9.

53. Swadesamitran, 17 February 1921; Home Poll Deposit, 19 August 1920, File No. 111, August 1920.

differences between the old labour union leaders and the newly emerging leaders came to the fore. The older group which included Thiru. Vi. Ka and others in the New India camp opposed linking of labour with politics. Thiru. Vi. Ka seemed to have told that the Congress refused to support labour in time of strikes and crisis and came to labour only to seek support for itself.<sup>54</sup>

But for such occasional lapse into factionalism permanent divisions in the labour movement did not occur. There was continuous support from the Congress to the strikes and the labour movement. Thiru. Vi. Ka maintained strong ideological attachment towards the Indian National Congress. Thiru. Vi. Ka's opposition to linking labour with politics was a cautious step to avoid major confrontation with the Government. The labour movement was still in an infant stage.

The Swadesamitran noted that "though the number of labourers is larger in Bombay, Calcutta and other places, they are not so organised in these presidencies as they are here."<sup>55</sup> In spite of this assertion, the working class of Madras were still poorly organized. There was no coordination between the various unions.

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54. Swadesamitran, 13 February 1920.

55. Swadesamitran, 23 February 1920.

In other words, in the language of E.J. Hobsbawm the 'General Labour Unions' were absent in Madras.<sup>56</sup>

### Industrial Violence

With the spread of trade unions also spread a sense of hatred and violence among the working class against the capitalists. Engels wrote that unions contribute "to nourish the bitter hatred of the workers against the property holding class... From them proceed... with or without the connivance of the leading members, in times of unusual excitement, individual actions which can be explained only by hatred wrought to the pitch of despair, by a wild passion overwhelming all restraints."<sup>57</sup> This is true of the working class of Madras during this period of industrial unrest.

The Government reports characterized individual acts or collective acts of violence as "affray", "assault", "storming", "incendarisms" etc. These were the outcome of the deeply harboured hatred against employers blacklegs or those maintaining "law and order" and collaborators with the capitalists.

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56. E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men, p.179.

57. F. Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844, pp.219-20.

The first case of assault was against an unpopular weaving master, a European, in December 1918. The workers in the Weaving Department threw shuttles at him. The Buckingham Mill authorities blamed the Madras Labour Union for such acts of "assault" on European personnel and for harbouring those involved in the assault. But the MLU denied the charge. Though the MLU denied the involvement of its members in such acts, the fact that the act was carried out "without the connivance of the leading members" is proved by the case of assault which the management used as an excuse to punish the whole workforce by issuing a lockout notice.<sup>58</sup>

In the European Mills the workers were badly treated and were subjected to various sorts of punishments. For example, when the workers of the Buckingham Mill went up to Mr. Bentely, the manager of the weaving section, for help in the form of job or wages, he, according to the MLU news bulletin, assaulted the workers and took up a revolver, threatening to shoot. A worker, however, caught hold of his hand and snatched the revolver from him.<sup>59</sup> The management this time as well as in December 1918 issued notice closing the mills, describing the

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58. For details of Wadia's statement on the lockout and other charges, see the Swadesamitran, 13 December 1918.

59. New India, 27 October 1920.

encounter between Mr. Bentley and the workers, as the "affray".<sup>60</sup> The act of the European in showing the revolver was based on his racial arrogance, the "affray" which followed was the result of the workers' hatred against racial arrogance and exploitation.

Industrial violence manifested itself as well in the form of collective action and assault against those who were collaborators with the British capitalists against the workers' interests. The blacklegs and the personnel of the companies were the target of individual or collective attack. For instance, when the Burma Oil Company employees were on strike and picketing the installations, some Pathans were brought from Bombay to keep running the oil installations. But fearing the defeat of their strike, the strikers attempted to block the entry of the Pathans into the installations. Often there were altercations between the Pathans and the strikers. The police had to intervene and disperse the mob. Altercations and intervention of the police were the daily occurrence of the installations. This reached a climax on 17 May 1920. On that day the altercations between the Pathans and the "local coolies" resulted in a riot". The police had to intervene and resort to firing to quell the riot. One Pathan was

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60. Home Poll (Deposit), 2 November 1920, File No.66, December 1920.

killed and many others were injured.<sup>61</sup>

In September 1920, there were clashes again but this time, between the strikers and the police. The police had faced "some difficulty in maintaining order and in keeping within the bounds of the law the daily processions organised by the men, but they displayed a commendable amount of tact and forbearance".<sup>62</sup> However, their tact and forbearance could not prevent them from coming into clash with "a mob which was storming the installation". The police were struck by stones and the officers and others were injured.<sup>63</sup> In the early morning of the same day, the Assistant of the Burma Oil Company was attacked, stabbed when he was going to the installations. The police had found it difficult to identify the persons involved in the assault, and the Government report stated that the assaulters "were pickets engaged in preventing workmen from approaching the installation."<sup>64</sup>

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- 61. Home Poll (Deposit), June 1920, file No.95, June 1920.
  - 62. Home Poll (Deposit), 17 September 1920, File No.70, September 1920.
  - 63. Telegram, 14.9.1920, Government of Madras to the Government of India, Home Dept. Police, Part B, No.244, September 1920.
  - 64. Home Poll Deposit, 1 June 1920, File No.95, June 1920.



Any opportunity could be used to show vengeance against the blacklegs, mostly Pathans. Thus on one occasion three Pathans were mistaken by fishermen for kidnappers of children and were attacked. They were rescued only after receiving injuries.<sup>65</sup> These acts of individual assaults, some times collective assaults, were prevalent in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. These acts were against those who were acting against the interests of the working class. Thus when the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills hands were on strike, the strikers showed their disregard for any sort of discipline. For instance, on 2 July 1921 the Anglo-Indian foreman of the Buckingham Mills was attacked by a mob of 40 Mohammedans and Hindu workers near the mill sites, being pulled down from the cycle. He was severely wounded in the body, sustained a knife cut in the head and was left unconscious.<sup>66</sup> He could not identify his assailants. No one gave him assistance and he himself had made his way to the police station.

Similarly on 3 July 1921 the Muhammadian driver of the manager of the mills was assaulted. He was chased by his own community members from the manager's

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65. Ibid.

66. Home Poll, Part I, File No.93/1/1921, Incendarism at the Panchama Mills in Madras.

compound to his varandah where his three toes were cut off and his fingers were injured. "A police officer discovered him walking in a dazed condition."<sup>67</sup>

In times of unusual excitement and despair, the workers released their accumulated frustration in acts which often brought the police to the scene. The workers turned their anger against the police as well, as they were identified as the protectors of the blacklegs and thus directly connected with the interests of the Managements.

The use of police force to break the strikes was common in Madras during this period. The first successful attempt was made to break the strike of the electric supply workers. But the same could not be repeated in other establishments when the workers were united and determined to put up a strong resistance to the police and others. In this respect the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills hands proved to be strong opponents of the police and went to the extent of facing the police face to face in the streets during day light and in the darkness.

The first face to face confrontation between the strikers of the Buckingham Mill and the police was on 9 December 1920, when the workers were picketing the mill,

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67. Ibid.

the police along with the coolies from the harbour port arrived in a lorry. Seeing the arrival of the blacklegs and the police, the workers on both sides of the Barracks road near the mill site hurled stones at the police and the blacklegs who were forced to remain in the vehicle as it overheated and stopped. The workers surrounded the police and increasingly pelted stones at them. "In self defence" without any warning or use of lathicharge prior to firing the police opened fire killing two and injuring many workers.<sup>68</sup> The firing could not deter the workers determination to continue their struggle against the arbitrary management of British capitalists. In 1921 the major clash between the police and the strikers were the common sight in the Perambur Barracks neighbourhood. This time, the workers, equipped with modern instruments fought with the police. A few instances can be cited.

When the police party of the Vellore regiment was being conveyed in a motor bus to the scene of disturbance (fights between the strikers and strike breakers) at about 10.30 on 1st July, a fire shot fired from the dark hit one of the constables of the police party in the neck. On 2nd July when the police party was engaged in the combing operation in the disturbed area, two

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68. For details of firing, see the Swadesamitran, 10, 11 and 12 December 1920.

shots were fired from the dark, one shot hitting the constable in the stomach and the other one injuring the leg of another constable. The person hit in the stomach subsequently died at hospital.<sup>69</sup>

When the police party went to the help of the Adi-Dravidas, they were assaulted on 29th and 30th June 1921. They had to use bayonet charges to disburse the attacking mob.<sup>70</sup> Attacks on the police continued in the month of October side by side with attacks on the strike breakers. Country made bombs were thrown at the workers going from the mills for mid day meal. On 6 October several bombs were hurled at the police who opened fire, killing one and injuring eight workers.<sup>71</sup>

These acts of incendiarisms are not the importation of the rural culture into the industrial area, as a recent writer asserts.<sup>72</sup> Firing and incendiarisms were the outcome of the city workers' "collective bargaining by riot".<sup>73</sup> Violent activities of the workers were directed against the managements and those who were collaborators, police included. Violence was a form

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69. Home Poll Part I, no.93/1/1921, Incendarism.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Arnold David, "Industrial Violence in Colonial" in Comparative Studies in Society and History, vol.22, no.2, April 1980, pp.234-55.

73. E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men, p.7.

of protest against the employment of blacklegs, against exploiting and unresponsive British capitalists and all others who were against the interest of the working class. Industrial violence was the offshot of the Industrial atmosphere and exploitation in the Madras city.

## Section II

### COMMUNITY AND CLASS RELATIONS

It is contended that due to traditional society and its peculiar social division into Varnas, the workers drawn from the rural parts of the country could not break away with their habits and beliefs at factory gates. They were unable to break bounds of caste and community and to acquire the form of a class. The formation of a 'class' is thwarted by primordial loyalties and parochial interests of the community.

E.D. Murphy who studied the early history of the Madras Labourers employed in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills from 1918 to 1921 ~~was~~ supports the view that "during periods of great economic and political tension ascriptive differences may surface and contribute to disunity" among the workers.<sup>74</sup> However he himself

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74. E.D. Murphy, "Class and Community in India: The Madras Labour Union, 1918-21", in IESHR, vol.14, no.3, 1977, p.320.

states in another place that "caste and community by no means necessarily inhibits the development of class consciousness in India".<sup>75</sup> Murphy argued that the Madras work force had all the attributes of a working class.

Perhaps Murphy is mistaken in attributing to the Madras workers "class consciousness". It is true that the Madras workforce were capable of forming the Madras Labour Union for realization of their demands. This was a species of trade union consciousness, distinct from a consciousness of "class for itself".

The Management of the B and C Mills tried to curb the activities of the MLU and strongly objected to the "outsiders" being the office-bearers of the union.<sup>76</sup> The authoritarian attitude towards the MLU and its members hardly changed the course of labour capital relations. The strikes declared by the workers of the two mills forced the management to concede certain demands. But the October 1920 strike of the Buckingham

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75. Ibid., p.321.

76. Oral evidence of Mr. Bentley, the manager of the Buckingham Mill, in Royal Commission on Labour in India, Evidence, vol.7, part 2, p.176.

mill hands proved more destructive. The outcome was that the Madras Labour Union was banned and outside leadership prohibited.

Upto this period (4 January 1921) there were no cases of communal strife or violence. All the workers, irrespective of their caste and community stood by strike calls and remained united till their demands had been conceded. The management recruited blacklegs outside the work force in earlier times and tried to break the solidarity of the workers. The situation in June 1921 however changed and the same kind of unity and solidarity was not witnessed among the Madras work-force.

After the banning of the MLU by a court injunction, membership declined as the membership entailed the payment of subscriptions.<sup>77</sup> And inspite of the severance of connection by B.P. Wadia with the MLU, the union was still dominated by outside leadership.<sup>78</sup> T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, Singaravelu Chettiar, E.L. Iyer, Jallial Khan and Chakkari Chettiar got attached to the union and gave limited support to it. However, the

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77. Home Poll (Deposit), 1 March 1921, File No.43, April 1921, A.L. Knapp to S.A. O'Donnel.

78. Home Poll, Part I, File No.93/1/1921, Incendarism at the Panchama Mills.

structure of the union remained weak as it was unable to play an open and active role in the mobilization of the labourers, being banned by the Madras High Court. In spite of that, the workers believed in the strength of the union. The Government alleged that the great mass of the work people had an exaggerated view with regard to the potentialities of trade union and that the workers attributed every success achieved with regard to the increase in wages to the strength of their organisation.<sup>79</sup>

Absenteeism increased<sup>80</sup> and sectional strikes occurred in April and May 1921, the cause of those strikes being economic grievances. The Government reported that the continued speeches of the aforementioned leaders had turned chiefly upon the contrast between the position and pay of the European staff as compared with the Indian hands and the difference between the profit rate (selling price of the cloth produced minus cost price of material) and wages to the work people.<sup>81</sup> The management tried to bring under control the workers by imposing the War regulations.<sup>82</sup> These new regulations provoked the employees of the carding room in the

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79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. E.D. Murphy, Unions in Conflict: A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres, 1918-1939, p.76.



Carnatic mill to stop work. The management acted swiftly by locking out the mill. Not only was the 6 month bonus of the carding room employees forfeited, the whole work force's bonus was seized.<sup>83</sup>

On 3 June 1921 the Buckingham workers met, demanded repeal of the orders forfeiting the 6 month bonus of all the employees and passed a resolution that if the management did not respond before 4 June 1921, they would go on a strike in sympathy with the Carnatic employees.<sup>84</sup>

The union decision was not backed by all the workers, for a few days earlier, i.e. on 29 May 1921, the Adi-Dravida workers decided not to join strike. The Adi-Dravida community workers maintained a separate identity as distinct from other community workers in the Mills, and their identity was subtly used and reinforced by the support of the Government and the Management.<sup>85</sup> As the Buckingham Management did not respond to the union resolution, the employees of the Buckingham mill went on a sympathetic strike on 20th June.<sup>86</sup> The strike was not total, for one section of the workers,

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83. Swadesamitran, 6 June 1921.

84. Ibid.

85. Swadesamitran, 9 July 1921.

86. Ibid., 20 June 1921.

the Adi-Dravidas, kept away from the strike. The refusal of the Adi-Dravida workers was the outcome of the deliberate efforts made by the Labour Board and the leaders of the Adi-Dravida community. But Murphy writes that the Adi-Dravidas had taken the decision among themselves "although they had invited some Adi-Dravida politicians and government officials to come to their meetings to write letters to the union and to plan their tactics."<sup>87</sup>

In fact the initiative came from the authorities, anxious to win over the Adi-Dravidas. On the day between the strike i.e. 19 June, an Assistant Labour Commissioner visited the Adi-Dravida quarters in the Puliyanthops cheris, collected the workers and advised them that "they must break to pieces the strike of the workers."<sup>88</sup> The Adi-Dravidas were advised to break away en bloc from the rest of the workers by their leaders, M.C. Raja, Mudurai Pillai and Desikannanda Swami. These leaders in turn took this step with the approval of the labour commissioner T.E. Moir who was also the Protector of the Depressed Classes and his assistant.<sup>89</sup> M.C. Raja,

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87. E.D. Murphy, Unions in Conflict, p.77.

88. Swadesamitran, 20 June 1921.

89. Home Poll, Part I, File No. 93/1/1921, Incendarism at the Panchama Mills.

the nominated representative of the Depressed classes in the Madras Legislative Assembly, who was present at the meeting of 19th admitted later in the Assembly that "the Adi-Dravida leaders advised their men to go to work. I suppose there is no harm in it."<sup>90</sup>

The object of the Adi-Dravida leaders' advice to their community members was supposedly economic. During the previous strike, for three and a half months beginning in October 1920, "the men of my community", M.C. Raja said, "suffered considerably and they had to part with the little jewels they had and even with their clothes."<sup>91</sup> He further said that his men had no means of livelihood except working in the mills and that they could not afford to join the strike since they had suffered considerably during the last strike whatever the little property they had was placed in the hands of the Marwaris.<sup>92</sup> Thus the involvement of the communal leaders in the labour unrest was a part of their generally professed advocacy of the interests of the depressed communities to which the workers belonged. In other words, the

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90. M.C. Raja, The Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Governor of Madras (hereinafter referred to MLCP), vol.3, p.1013.

91. M.C. Raja, MLCP, vol.3, 1931, p.1012.

92. Ibid.

outside political currents penetrated into the working class, infusing in these a sectional outlook. The insecurity of the Adi-Dravidas, form of their past sufferings, their poverty and the specificities of their social position were used by the Labour Board to keep the Adi-Dravida workers away from their fellow workers.

Murphy disregards the fact that in this first serious manifestation of communal disharmony among the Madras Labour force, the workers had probably not taken their anti-strike decision on their own, the advice and pressure of the Labour Board, and <sup>that</sup> the communal leaders played a crucial role.<sup>93</sup> Communal disharmony was created by the deliberate efforts of the Labour Board which encouraged the workers to stay on work, defying the majority decision.<sup>94</sup> Efforts were made to give police protection to the Adi-Dravidas on the way to and return from work places.<sup>95</sup>

As violence and acts of incendiarism and assaults on Adi-Dravidas by the workers on strike increased, these tended to strengthen Adi-Dravida workers' loyalty to their community. The Adi-Dravidas to protect themselves

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93. — E.D. Murphy, Unions in Conflict, p.78.

94. Swadesamitran, 9 July 1921.

95. Ibid., 2 July 1921.

against assaults, came armed with crudely fashioned knives and weapons. The situation became more communal, as the fight between the strike-breakers and strikers turned to be a communal fight between the "Adi-Dravida strike breakers" and the "Dravida-Strikers".<sup>96</sup> Instead of taking responsibility to solve the labour dispute which erupted into a communal flare up, the Lord Willingdon reproached the leaders of the MLU for acts of violence and warned them that should such acts not cease immediately, they would be removed from the city.<sup>97</sup> He even went to the extent of saying that "the workers must abide by the conditions the capitalists frame".<sup>98</sup>

Initially the leaders of the MLU did not like the suggestion of strike. For instance, when the employees of the Carding room in the Carnatic Mill struck work suddenly, Thiru. Vi. Ka advised them to go back to work, even if the management had forfeited the 6 month bonus of the carding room employees.<sup>99</sup> But when the management took a drastic step to penalize all the workers in the Carnatic Mill, the leaders found

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96. These words were used in the Editorial of the Swadesamitran, dated 2 July 1921. For details of origin of communal violence, see the same issue.

97. Swadesamitran, 7 July 1921.

98. Ibid., 9 July 1921.

99. Ibid., 5 July 1921.

no option but to resort to strike weapon.<sup>100</sup> This drew the sympathy of the Buckingham mill hands who struck on 20 June in sympathy.

An important factor in promoting the Adi-Dravida communal outlook was the dual role of Mr. Paddison. The Government constituted in 1919 the Depressed Classes Board under Mr. Paddison and in 1920 the Labour Board was created. Both were placed under Paddison. The Depressed Classes Board which was mainly to look after the interests of the Depressed Classes including the Backwards and the Labour Board which was meant to solve the labour disputes promised some benefits to the Adi-Dravida workers.<sup>101</sup> In 1920 M.C. Raja and Paddison visited the slums of Madras and enquired about their residents, leaving them an impression of welfare schemes for them.<sup>102</sup> The Labour Board under T.E. Moir, Paddison's successor, leaned towards the Adi-Dravidas. The combination of the Labour Board and the Depressed classes Board in one office created more problems and prejudiced the interests of the workers. The Government report itself recognised

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100. Swadesamitran, 5 July 1921.

101. For details of welfare schemes introduced for the benefit of the Depressed Classes, see Home Deptt. Public, A. Progs, Nos. 320-21, August 1920.

102. Swadesamitran, 19 April 1920.

that "it was certainly unfortunate that the offices were  
in  
combined/one person."<sup>103</sup>

As the political groups in Madras were divided on communal/caste lines,<sup>104</sup> the workers themselves tended towards one or another group which seemed to promise benefits to them. Though sectional politics was not noticed among the working class prior to 1921 its manifestation was obvious in 1921, when the Adi-Dravidas were supported by their community leader, M.C. Raja while the non-labour union leaders such as P. Thiyagaraja Chetti and Thanigachalam Chetti espoused the cause of the caste Hindus, particularly, the Naidus and Mudaliars and referred to them as the main victims of the police firing and so on. Class interests of members of every community were advanced through the language of community and caste. As Sumit Sarkar said with regard to caste and class combination -

the crucial problem lies in the combination in varying proportions of the two contradictory aspects in the caste class relationship. Caste has often had a congruence with class sufficiently strong to enable the

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103. Home Poll. Part I, File No. 93/1/1921, Incendiarism at the Panchama Mills.

104. For details of fights between communal groups for benefits, see Politics and Social Conflicts in South India, Irschick, E.F., chs. III and IV.

articulation of genuine socio-economic demands through the language and forms of caste. But this is combined with an asymmetry in detail which tends to blur class lines and foster various forms of sectional or 'false' consciousness.<sup>105</sup>

This view was to some extent true of the experience of the Adi-Dravida community in the period under study. The Adi-Dravidas articulated their socio-economic demands through the language of community with class interests, by desisting from the strike action. Their leaders themselves were complacent in the knowledge that the raj was more beneficial to the Adi-Dravidas.<sup>106</sup>

A sense of separate identity and community consciousness was noticed even as early as January 1921, when the

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105. Sumit Sarkar, Popular Movements and 'Middle Class' Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a 'History from Below', p.27.

Lack of class unity and solidarity as alleged to be characteristic of the Madras working class due to persistence of primordial loyalties like caste and community feelings is also common among white working class. Racialism persists between the white man workers and the black men in the U.S.A. Even in modern times "the minority white working class in South Africa is maintained on a major scale out of the surplus value extracted from the mass of the black working class" and "remains complacent in the knowledge that the present system (the racist regime) is looking after it." See, for further details, Robert Davis, "The white working class in South Africa" in New Left Review, Nov-Dec 1973, pp.38-56.

106. Swadesamitran, 2 July 1921.



Buckingham mill hands strike was dragging on. Division within the workforce on communal lines for the advance of their own interests through the use of community idiom featured the unity of the workers. The British Labour Party leader Wedgwood considered this communal division among the workers as opposed to the interests of the working class. He appealed at one of the meetings in Madras that -

I beg my Adi-Dravida brothers employed in the factories not to be pushed into forming a union to please the employers but stick to one union and not allow themselves to be used against their brothers.<sup>107</sup>

The appeal went unheeded. A sense of community consciousness among the Adi-Dravidas helped them to exercise "their rights to give or withhold their labour as they thought best in their own interests."<sup>108</sup> Combined with a sense of community consciousness, was a belief that 'the SUDRAS the fourth caste comprising labour' would win power.<sup>109</sup>

Sumit Sarkar quotes Dipesh Chakrabarty as recently emphasising the importance of 'community consciousness'

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107. New India, 12 January 1921.

108. M.C. Raja, MLCP, vol.3, 1921, p.1012.

109. A statement of J.H. Thomas, one of the foremost labour leaders associated with the Mudura Mill Union, given in Tamilnadu, 3 October 1920. MNMR.

as distinct from a unified and clear recognition of class among jute mill workers in Calcutta in the 1890s. Muslim workers demanded holidays for Id or Muharram, Hindus for Rathajatra and there were occasional fratricidal riots over issues like cow slaughter.<sup>110</sup> An analogous 'community consciousness' possessed the Adi-Dravidas and prodded them to act more as an autonomous fraction of their class for their own interests.

The lack of literacy and of previous experiences in matters of organisation among the immature working class in Madras drew into labour the political leaders in the nationalist movement. Fear of reprisal by the European capitalists on account of labour organizations reinforced their dependence on the outsiders. But the specific role of the outsider as the organiser of labour was hampered by the cohesive class of capitalists who raised a systematic outcry against the outsiders' intervention in labour affairs. The outcry was a camouflage of the interests that were threatened. The acute economic situations combined with the Home rule and later the mass anti-colonial movement sparked off a strike wave

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110. Dipesh Chakraborty, "Communal Riots and Labour, Bengal Jute mill hands in the 1890's (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Occasional Paper No.11, 1976), quoted in Sumit Sarkar's Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in Late Colonial India, p.26.

among the workers who realised the necessity of forming unions for their economic interests. This was reflected in the spate of separate unions for menial workers, hotel employees, rickshaw pullers and others, apart from those employed in various industrial units.

But these trade unions were considered as "the real source of mischief" and were deliberately identified with the political movement. The lines between the economic interests of the workers and those of the anti-colonial movement were never sharply drawn by the European capitalists who mixed up the two deliberately to weaken the workers resistance to the dominance of "white capital". The Government and the labour Board themselves were guided by the dubious laissez-faire and pro-capital policies which strengthened the European capitalists to step up their technique of delay, victimization and other methods under the pretext of outsider interference in labour issues.

Intransigence and delay in the settlement of labour disputes drove the workers out of frustration to indulge in what are called "riots", "affray", "incendarism" and so on. Violence against the blacklegs and the police or some of the management personnel reflect a kind of consciousness of the immature working class that the use of blacklegging and police force was a threat to

the solidarity and economic interests of the working class. Despite this unusual consciousness among the working class, the experience of the 1920 strike of the Buckingham Mill hands created a chasm between the workers themselves. That strike proved incidental to the unity of the workers. One section of the workers was struck by the fear of repetition of past experiences such as victimisation, sufferings and so on which accompanied the strike of 1920. It also brought in the communal leaders who were hitherto least interested in workers problems. The management and the labour Board with the active cooperation of the community leaders used cleverly the division within the class to wean one section from the rest of the workers. Cast ist politics which hitherto characterised the political groups like the Justice Party in Madras penetrated into labour, and politics of labour were communalised for the sectional interest of the Adi-Dravidas. Thus the intrusion of the communal politics through the involvement of communal leaders and the subsequent polarisation of the working class on communal lines were the direct manifestation of the deliberate efforts of the management, the labour Board, and the communal leaders.

by the fear of victimisation or loss of jobs which accompanied any individual efforts of the workers in leading union activities. In 1918-20 the acute economic situation remained at the back of the workers' mind. Thus the formation of the Madras Labour Union was the product of the initial efforts of the workers and later the encouragement of the political leaders in particular, the Home Rulers.

The Madras Labour Union, though mainly confined to textile workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, brought all categories of workers employed in various industrial units, under its fold, for the workers in various employment realized the importance of union for themselves. It has been argued by some labour historians that no strong organisation of the Indian working class emerged in the colonial period because, they argue, the Indian Unions were industrial, that is, they attempted to recruit their members from all categories of workers irrespective of occupation.<sup>1</sup> In other words, explanations for the absence of strong unions are given in terms of lack of craft based unions of British or American models. However, the much acclaimed strength of the craft unions is still a subject of dispute and debate. It is doubtful

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1. Morris D. Morris, The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India, pp.196-7; E.D. Murphy, Unions in Conflict, p.84.

if these so-called craft based unions in any way contributed to the growth of the working class movement even in those countries.<sup>2</sup> And even among the craft unions, it has been succinctly pointed out by Maurice Dobb that -

capacity for enduring organisation or long sighted policies remained undeveloped. The horizon of interest was apt to be the trade and even the locality of other than the class.<sup>3</sup>

As the unionism spread and progressed among the Madras workers, the hostility of the European employers increased. The union for the workers combined with the demand for wage increases and strikes was directed mainly against European capital which, of course, predominated in the colonial city of Madras. The way the strikes were conducted or the purpose of these strikes in this period was determined by the relation of labour to "white capital" in the predominantly European dominated establishments.

The primary cause of the strikes was economic and the workers demanded wage increases. But the European capitalists, being large employers of labour, linked every strike to the manoeuvres of the politicians who were considered to be at the bottom of every strike action. The

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2. John Foster, "The Declassing of Language", a review of Garth Steadman Jones's, Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982, in New Left Review, no.150, March-April 1985.

3. Maurice Dobb, Studies in the Development of Capitalism, p.266.

causes of the strikes, the low level of wages and high cost of living, were overshadowed in European perception by pre-occupation with outsiders' interference. The European capitalists insisted on the workers breaking away from the "outside" politicians as a precondition to any solution of the labour dispute. The workers, we have seen, refused to dissociate themselves from the outsiders as a rule. This pre-occupation of employers with "outsiders' interference" led to prolonged strikes, delayed solutions to the workers problems and brought immense hardship on the workers.

The European capitalists' hostility to the politicians taking the role of labour union leaders grew and was strengthened as a consequence of the rash of strikes in their establishments which seemed to threaten their interests and profits earned during the war period. The frequency and intensity of the strikes and the tenacity with which those strikes were waged and conducted over wage increase convinced the capitalists that leadership of the working class was politically motivated. By raising the cry against the outsiders' interference in the labour dispute, the capitalists attempted to divert the workers of outsiders' leadership. The root cause of conflict, the refusal of the capitalists to raise wages was thus camouflaged under objection to outsiders'

interference in labour matters.

The European capitalists' hostility was strengthened and reinforced by a policy of discriminating interventionism pursued by the Government of Madras. The capitalists' vindictive policies such as victimization of workers for their involvement in the union activities found favour with the Government officials. They acquiesced in every act that the management practised. The readiness with which the Government of Madras conceded the demands of the capitalists showed that the protection of interests of "white capital" was a prime concern of the Government.

The Government's bias became obvious when a belatedly constituted Labour Board attempted to arbitrate labour-capital disputes. The modus operandi of the Labour Board was circuitous and circumspect, but eventually its arbitration awards favoured the interests of European capital. Like the capitalists' obsession with the outsiders' interference, the overriding concern of the Labour Board was the separation of labourers from the outsiders.

The Labour Board acquiesced in the recruitment of black legs by the capitalists and even collaborated with them in breaking the solidarity of the workers by using one community of workers against another group. The strike of 1921 in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills



exposed the intrigues of the Labour Board which led to the dividing of the workers on communal lines. As we have seen, the Government of Madras Lord Willingdon threatened the labour leaders with dire consequences and threatened to remove them to a different place from the city if they were not able to control the workers. The policy of laissez-faire, the prime tenets of which was considered to be maintenance of "law and order" was not merely confined to that end alone, but was extended to protect and sometimes foster the interests of European capital at the cost of the interests of native labour.

The policy pursued by the Government strengthened the capitalists hostility to any sort of union activity. The Europeans, having tried but failed in their various methods to combat the workers' strikes used, as a last resort, another tack that is, filing of a suit in the High court against the labour leaders. The institution of the suit against the ten members of the strike committee en bloc was the last yet the most powerful weapon the management used against the workers and the leaders. Though the Court injunction obtained through the suit severed the links the workers had with the outsider leaders, it had no permanent impact on the workers.

The European managements persisted in their out-cry against the intrusion of politics into labour despite the fact that Home Rulers such as Annie Besant, B.P. Wadia

and nationalist leaders like Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundra  
 Mudaliar underlined the separation of labour/<sup>issues</sup> from politics.  
 At the same time this experience brought together the  
 Government and "white Capital".

As we have seen, the prolonged strikes and failure of negotiations to resolve the labour capital conflict led to increase in militancy of the workers. The workers frustrated in their attempts and made desperate by the management's policies resorted to violent activities resulting in riots. Their militant mood was seen at times in the 'hit and run battles' with the police and the black-legs. Nevertheless, their activities were crippled by the repressive machinery of the colonial state. The lack of employment in the city or the presence of a large number of the unemployed restricted their mobility and this gave a leverage to the management.

The policies followed by the managements and the Government of Madras affected the working class movement in another way. Increasing reliance on the political leaders weakened working class self-activity. The major fall out of such political reliance was the penetration into labour of communal politics through the intervention of communal leaders. It created in the long run division within the working class and led to the emergence of

communal groups within the workforce. This was strengthened by the support given by the communal leaders to the workers and was reinforced by the management's discriminatory policy and the Government's role as the protector of a particular community. This sort of communal politics in labour created a schism within the class leading to communal tension between the workers themselves.

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