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The labour movement in Jamshedpur in early 1930s: Issues of trade union rivalry and personality clashes heightened with feelings of ethnicity, regionalism, workers' interests and emerging national consciousness

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Abstract
The first three decades of the workers' movement in Jamshedpur saw many highs and lows. Each phase had the imprint of one particular ideology, being that of the Congress or the Communists. The period of early 1930s, however, is marked by a general feeling of dismay, disorder and lack of enthusiasm. This allowed the management to make inroads among the workers by establishing a union, Metal Workers Union, that had its support.

Keywords: Jamshedpur labour association, Jamshedpur labour federation, metal workers union, Maneck Homi, V V Giri, S C Bose, Communist leaders

Introduction
As the Tata Iron and Steel Company enters the third decade of the twentieth century it already had experienced three major movements, the last one being led by Maneck Homi, a Parsi lawyer and a former employee of the company, in 1928. In the course of the movement led by him a new trade union body had come into existence. It was named Jamshedpur Labour Federation which consisted mostly of illiterate workers, the Punjabis, Peshawaris, Madrasis, Oriyas and the aboriginals. [1]. The rival organisation, Jamshedpur Labour Association, had mostly the better paid workers who worked as foremen and were mostly literate Bengalis.

Jamshedpur was an industrial town that came up after the establishment of the Tata Iron and Steel Company in 1907. This was a flagship company with many ancillary companies attached to it. They were the Tinplate Company, the Cable Company, the Copper Corporation, the Indian Steel and Wire Products Company, the Tata Foundry and railway workshops. The workforce in Jamshedpur had always been cosmopolitan in nature drawing more skilled workforce from the far corners of the country while a large part of the unskilled workers came from the surrounding tribal region. The Census of India described Sakshi as a town with a population of 5,672 persons employed in the construction of the blast furnaces. In December of that year the first iron was produced and in 1913 the number of workers swelled to 9,507. The steady increase in the labour force continued during the war years and at the time of the 1921 Census their number stood at 23,760 of which 9204 belonged to the skilled category and 14,556 to the unskilled category [2]. The percentage contribution of different regions to the total of the unskilled labour force were Singhbhum-47.07, contiguous Bihar and Orissa districts- 16.47, Central Provinces-27.84, Bengal-1.2, United Provinces-1.64, Madras-2.83, Punjab-0.19 and the other remaining parts of India-0.89 [3]. Thus, one notices a predominance of the local labour in the unskilled category who were mostly the aboriginals of Singhbhum and Chotanagpur - the Hos, the Santhals and the Bhumijs but one is impressed also by their diverse regional background. The Hos were considered to be skilled at straightening rails and various other manual jobs. A good number of khalasis, a

superior type of coolie, came from Orissa and the neighbourhood of Vizagapatanam [4]. However, in the skilled category almost 50 per cent of the labour was sent by the United Provinces (14.22%), Bengal (10.30%), Bombay (7.41%), Madras (6.84%), and the Punjab (4.63%) whereas the total contribution of all the Bihar and Orissa districts was 44.53 per cent and of the Central Provinces 4.76 per cent [5]. The more highly skilled workers and managerial personnel, however, came from seven different European countries, the United States, Canada and Australia [6].

The social and regional background of the workforce was of crucial importance in all the labour movements that took place in Jamshedpur since the first general strike in 1920. The one in 1928 led by Maneck Homi, which happened to be the most prolonged strike in TISCO from May to September 1928, saw the participation of a large number of adivasis many of whom worked as khalasis. The period also saw a more active role being played by S C Bose in the Jamshedpur labour movement. In fact, the terms of settlement arrived at between the management and the workers at the close of the strike were to a large extent influenced by the personal intervention of S C Bose. For the workers the terms were a climb down in two respects: on the policy of reduction and on the issue of strike wages. But the rest of the terms were a definite advance on the Company's previous stand and the workers accepted it, though Homi definitely did not want them to. There was also a realisation that it was difficult to wrest more concessions from the Company. Homi was deliberately excluded from the negotiations and he had every reason to feel dissatisfied. But the editorial of Indian National Herald, 13th September, 1928 made a more balanced appraisal: 'We admit that the workers have not got everything that they were standing out for, but neither has the management. Each side has had to give and take with the result that the long drawn struggle has now ended.'

Homi thought otherwise and called frequent mass meetings and staged demonstrations in front of the main gate of the factory to whip up the workers' passions and incited them against the members of the Association. The Association had. Of course, been streamlined and made more credible by the efforts of S C Bose and other Congress leaders. S C Bose was the president of the Executive Committee of the Jamshedpur Labour Association which included in its fold the whole of the local Congress Committee.

Homi, on the other hand, was opposed to Congress politics. There was also a general animus among the members of the Federation against the Bengalis. The General Manager was apprehensive that the rivalry between the two unions might assume communal proportions [7]. Though that was not to be, a tense situation did develop occupying the minds of the workers as well as of the management and the district administration. The supporters of Federation complained of being ill-treated by the foremen, the members of the Association. Homi tried to organise sports on Christmas and the New Year's Day but abandoned them due to some troubles in the crowd. On 21st February, 1929 the series of allegations and counter allegations between the two unions culminated in an attack by a crowd of about three hundred, who were members of the Federation, on the Labour Association office.

Twenty days later the Company decided to recognise the Federation and Homi's objective was realised. The same day V V Giri said that that was 'the best thing that could have happened' and hoped that in future both the Association that controlled the more educated employees and the Federation that had a hold over the coolie class would amalgamate. The Company gave a quarter to Homi and an office to his Federation and he was made a member of different boards set up for dealing with individual disciplinary cases. The Association was fading into insignificance. The Federation had a larger membership, its President sat on the Company's boards of enquiry and maintained a banking account and maintained audited balance sheet. The Federation was also labouring to get the Company abandon its reduction policy, convert loans into lockout wages and secure direct increment for workers.

But in July 1929 differences over accounts grew among the members of the Federation. A letter written by Homi to his friend in Bombay, which was caught by his rival party, disclosed that he was furthering speculative transactions in Tata's shares on the Stock Exchange. The educated believed that the letter was genuine and showed Homi's true colours while the illiterate masses considered it to be forged by Homi's enemies to vilify him.

However, the High Court gave its verdict against Homi and found him guilty of embezzlement. He had misutilised the Federation funds and was sentenced to six years' imprisonment on the charges not only of defalcation but also of intimidating the Company officials and causing riots in Saraikela.

After Homi's departure a complicated phase of labour movement began in Jamshedpur characterised by dissensions, recriminations, management supported hooliganism and incipient communistic trends as well as feeble nationalist yearnings. Though the fundamental issues affecting labour were still hanging in the balance, not one of the unions could actively champion them or rally the workers together. The talks of Bolshevik Revolution evaporated asa soon as the meetings ended and the maidans where the Independence Day was to be celebrated came to be occupied by armed police. Regional factors still provided confusing undercurrents to the movements and the workers' consciousness seemed split into religion, class, region, nation and utopia.

The Sikhs were still the mainstay of the Labour Federation and Mangal Singh, a lieutenant of Homi, decided to get some communist leaders from the Punjab to invigorate the union. Many of the Federation's meetings had previously been torpedoed by the hired goondas of the Company, mainly Pathans. Mangal Singh too sought the help of a Pathan leader from Peshawar, Nadir Khan, in July 1931 to get hold over the Pathan element [8]. On the 19th of June, 1931, Sata Singh and Mulraj Tadal, two communist leaders from the Punjab, arrived in Jamshedpur. The latter, an organiser of the Navjawan Bharat Sabha (Youth League), desired to establish a branch of the Youth League there and received the support of the young Punjabis. The Punjabi officials of the Company, G Sethi, Lala Baijnath, D C Ahuja and P N Mathur, were also suspected to be the wire pullers in getting these communist leaders to Jamshedpur and were believed to be helping Mangal Singh.

One hundred and fifty volunteers of the Youth League were deputed to guard the meeting to be addressed by the communist leaders but the meeting could not take place. The government was alarmed and apprehensive of the situation developing into 'serious Bolshevik labour trouble and possibly assassinations' [9]. The communist leaders left the

place in disgust because they had failed to bring the two warring labour parties together.

On the other hand, the Labour Association, which included a large number of members of the Jamshedpur Congress Committee established in May 1921, decided in response to the Congress call to celebrate the Independence Day on the 26th of January 1930. All the associations and clubs in Jamshedpur were approached and their cooperation was sought. In a display of regional and religious undercurrent to nationalist aspirations the Sikhs, after a meeting in the Gurudwara, thought it desirable to show their patriotism. The national tricolour was unfurled at the G town maidan amidst shouts of Inqualab Zindabad. This annual display of nationalist sentiments continued with lukewarm enthusiasm. Though every year the local administration took precautions and made some arrests no serious clash ever took place.

As the Federation had been inviting communist elements to enthuse the union, the Association was in close touch with S C Bose, Mukundlal Sarkar, S B Kar and others. S C Bose was trying to get the leaders of various communities to Jamshedpur. On the 20th of September he attended a meeting of the workers with a view of preparing them for a strike, but the Sikhs and Pathans had a definite anti-strike and anti-Bose feeling. Before any speech could be made a large number of hooligans broke up the meeting. The following day the administration promulgated orders banning public meetings. Though resolutions were still being passed for the boycott of foreign clothes and for the establishment of a 'socialist and republican' government in India and there were attempts to unfurl the national flag year after year, the Association ceased to play a major role in labour matters for some time to come.

The Company considered it to be an opportune moment to form a new labour organisation that would be more amenable to its dictates. The new union came to be known as Metal Workers Union. V V Giri and W V R Naidu were the guiding force behind it [10]. But even after a year there were only a little over a thousand members of this union and most of them were Madrasis [11]. It was never expected that it would ever be able to make any significant headway. Naidu was widely considered as the 'jackal' of the Company.

In January 1933 the Federation provided the platform for outside communist leaders to address the labourers of Jamshedpur. The meeting on 22nd January began with shouts of 'Lal Jhande ki Jai', Lal Palton ki Jai' and 'Mazdur aur Kisan dal ki Jai'. The leaders lamented that they saw no organisation and unity among the workers of Jamshedpur as it was in 1928 and but for this division in their ranks their leader Homi would have been set free by 'the Company' and no hired goonda would have dared to harm them. While Genda Singh condemned his co-religionists, the Sikhs, for having played the part of Company paid goondas which, he said,was against the teachings of Guru Gobind Singh, Mangal Singh, addressing the Pathans, said that no religious book taught them to indulge in rowdyism. There were definite attacks on the Congress politics which were held responsible for the passage of the Trade Disputes Act which was opposed to the interests of the labour. The redemption of labour, they opined, did not lie in attaining Swaraj but by rallying the labourers under the red flag [12]. There were numerous references to the great achievements made by the labourers of Russia and China.

Soon differences in the Federation surfaced. Mangal Singh and P P Patnaik soon found themselves struggling for leadership of 'the defunct Labour Federation' while the interests of labour suffered. Mangal Singh still liked to rely on outside support to activate the labourers. Pamphlets published by Calcutta communists, 'Marx-panthi' and 'Marx-badi', found their way to Jamshedpur through Mangal Singh. Jawala Singh and Teja Singh of the Sikh Desh Bhagat Paribar Sahayak Committee, Amritsar, were also introduced into Jamshedpur by Mangal Singh who came to collect money for the relief of the political sufferers in Punjab. The labour problem was still hanging fire while Patnaik and Mangal Singh crossed swords. Once Somnath Lahiri remarked in a workers' meeting that the audience were like dead bodies. Little did he realise that being fed on false promises they had become stoic towards these birds of passage.

The departure of Maneck Homi from the labour scene, therefore, led to an uneventful phase of the labour movement in Jamshedpur where parties of different ideological hues jostled with each other to grab workers' attention. Among them were expectedly the earlier ones, like the Jamshedpur Labour Association having the Congress support, while the Federation tried to enthuse the workers with help from the Communist leaders from Punjab. Neither, however, could get much success in their efforts. That allowed the Company a space to launch a union that had their support, the Metal Workers Union, being fashioned under the guidance of veteran trade union activists, V V Giri and W V R Naidu.

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