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Changes in conditions of Working Class
in Maharashtra 1942- 1966: an observational
appraisal by:

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INTRODUCTION

Over twenty years ago, the Maharashtra public had some definite and distinct notions about the person referred to as a 'worker'. 'Worker' meant a person who was generally uneducated, not very enthusiastic about his work, unaware of his surroundings, doing mostly manual and mechanical work that required little or no skill, usually resigned to his low earnings but all the time conscious of it and aspiring for higher positions in his department merely because of his seniority and perhaps also because of the skills he picked up on the job. Wages he earned were mostly low, low even in the context of the then prevailing prices. He was therefore wholly dependent on his job, living in slums, in dingy one-room tenements and though he had a desire for personal cleanliness, there were limits which his environments imposed on him and had to remain unclean. Socially he belonged to the lower strata of the community & without any cultural background according to notions of culture then prevailing. He ate poor food, was generally a person unwanted (except for his work) and uncared for (except by union leaders), without any roots in the social structure and without any strong aspirations for his own future or for his dependents. Trade unions had become respectable not so much because of their interest in the working class but because of their potentiality as one of the political pressure groups in the country's march towards independence.

2. These notions about the Maharashtra worker no longer held good. A worker now is a man with definite ambitions and aspirations which as a civilised man he can justly hope for and strive to attain. The younger generation is better educated or can at least read and write in his own mother tongue and even in another language. The worker at present is conscious and assertive of his rights. His political judgement has become mature and so is his assessment of his immediate problems. With adult franchise he feels that he has acquired a valuable right which within limits he can use to his advantage. Cases where a worker resided at places inhabited by workers from his own village or Taluk/District or his own community or generally in more homogeneous and congenial groups were the rule in the past. Now owing to migration of labour to Bombay from different States in search of work and also owing to shortage of accommodation, the workers in Maharashtra bear a truly national and complex character, speaking altogether different languages and eating different types of foods. This has resulted in formation of a more developed, heterogeneous perhaps but certainly a more conscious class of workers whatever be the level at which they have to work for their living.

3. A significant change has taken place in opportunities for employment. Work for this section of labour is available more readily than before. The range of skills has also changed. Large-scale industrial development, new means of transport and communication and improved methods of work have led him acquire new skills suited to current employment opportunities. He knows that if he acquires proficiency in certain technical trades, he can hope to earn and live

better. This is not necessarily due to the arrangements for employment information made by Government but because of the normal response of the working class to the changing employment market. Expansion of trade union activity has made him more class conscious; he knows what his rights and privileges are as a worker though in the process he has earned the criticism that he is not equally aware of his duties. He is conscious of his responsibilities towards his family and dependents; he is keen about his children's education. The facilities provided by the State for the purpose are no doubt the cause of this change; it is also important to recognise that apart from these, there is also the increased ability in the family to look more favourably to education than in the past. The worker is himself literate and reads at least newspapers in his own language, listens to radio programmes, attends cultural programmes, occasionally enjoys seeing cinema shows and avails himself of the many other amenities that the present society offers to him. All this has naturally resulted in broadening his outlook towards life. He is more at ease with the rest of the society now than his predecessor was with his environment twenty-five years back.

4. Another event which seems to have taken place is that because of change in the nature of work in the factory, a change in favour of using more sophisticated machinery, young boys and girls both from the so called 'working class' and 'middle class' families have been sharing the new factory environment. It is quite common to find a spinner's or weaver's son/daughter working in a chemical or pharmaceutical factory side by side with sons/daughters of persons who were in the last generation foreign to mill/factory work except in clerical categories. The intermingling of the persons of the working class and the middle class from their different cultural and educational backgrounds has made its welcome impact on the working classes in the Maharashtra today. The social outlook of the new generation, and through it even of the older people, has undergone a change. The gap between the middle class and the working class has narrowed. Income level at one time was not the only dividing line between working class and the middle class, status consciousness was also there. In both these respects, it would appear that the differences are narrowing down; at least in discussions which we have with the younger group of workers the sharp line that used to be drawn earlier as between classes has now become considerably blurred.

WORKING CLASS AREAS:

5. Formerly the working class resided mainly in certain wards in the Bombay city and around the Textile Mills in Nagpur and on the outskirts of Sholapur City where most of employment opportunities in that city were located. Industries have now sprung up all over Maharashtra, the Greater Bombay Municipal area, the outskirts of Thana, Kandivali, the more distant areas of Poona, and the industrial complex now developing near it; in Nagpur, Sholapur, Nasik and Kolhapur and some other areas of Vidarbha and Marathawade etc. Decentralisation of industries and clearing congestion from the cities being the declared objective of the Maharashtra Government, a number of industrial estates near about Thana, Andheri, Kandivali, Borivali, Badlapur, Lonavala, Poona, Nasik, Vengurla, Ratnagiri, Panvel and in areas

of Vidarbha and Marathawade have sprung up. This process of industrialisation though it has not resulted in shifting of the workers from the concentrated working class localities to the desired extent to places around the new industrial estates, has at least in a limited way accounted for stabilising the rate of influx in larger industrial concentrations in the State. A spurt in industrial activity all over the State, has attracted labour, but at the same time has made the housing shortage more acute. Thus during the last 25 years the working class population could be said to have spread over a larger industrial area and at the same time created problems of civic amenities in the more traditional areas of industrial activity. Workers feel that this concentration is harmful to their interest but by themselves they are unable to meet the situation or help create public opinion which is more liberal to decentralisation.

WORKING CLASS FAMILY:

6. The composition of working class family has undergone a significant change. Formerly the joint family system held good. Distant relations, friends and neighbours from their own villages coming to the industrial towns stayed with workers in Bombay even for longer periods. Such spells of stay were utilised for seeking employment or in connection with other work or even for seeing what Bombay could offer by way of diversion from the normal routine in rural and less developed urban areas. Such stays did not constitute a burden on the family. Thus a number of joint families came into existence. Alongwith the husband and wife and the dependants, near and distant relations and even casual acquaintances from the native place, were found staying together in the same tenement and also cooking together, sharing the expenditure incurred on their maintenance in a mutually acceptable and reasonable way. Situation started changing with the introduction of rationing in the 40^s. The joint households seem to be giving way to a more compact and single family system. Also the number of single persons staying together is on the increase. This is due to the fact that young men from villages are attracted towards the urban way of life. When they start receiving hard cash every month they do not like to go back to villages. In their system of values, life in a place like Bombay with all the civic inconveniences but ready cash is better than a comparatively more covered space, perhaps better food and much less of new money in their hands. The attraction of the city life has been indeed compelling. A part of the congestion in cities is also due to the fact that workers now are not tempted to settle in their villages on their retirement. They do not consider it any longer a privilege to return to their ancestral home with the penury they find there. Their life has changed but not so much the life of those who stayed behind; Indeed the difference has become so marked that they are gradually losing touch with their native place. With this development and the consequent growth of nuclear families the pattern of living could be said to have undergone a change. There are far too numerous nuclear families now than they were in the old days. The over-crowding of the existing working class areas is thus both the cause and effect of the factors mentioned above. It is possible however that many more important factors may be at work.

OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN:

7. Not only is there a change in the composition of a working class family, there is also a marked change in the occupational pattern of the earners. This has come into being both as a result of changes in technology, which are admittedly slow in coming according to employers but which, workers say are somewhat fast for them to keep pace with,

and changes in the lines of production. Sex composition of workers has also undergone certain changes. Formerly the female labour force consisted of adult and mostly widowed females. They used to get jobs mainly in Industries where repetitive work was involved; bidi making, building and construction, road works and certain occupations in the textile industry. With the pace of mechanisation now in progress some of these traditional employment avenues are no longer open to women. The cry that 'woman' is losing her place in the employment market is mainly due to the shrinking of these employment opportunities. At the same time workers are conscious that a part of this shrinkage is made up by new opportunities which are coming their way. Now young unmarried girls and also married women take up jobs such as are open to them. The reasons for this are many and varied but the fact remains that whether one goes in a factory or in an office belonging to it or in commercial offices, Government offices etc., there is an added colour in the composition of the working force. Just as there is a diversification in employment in factories in terms of the social strata from which employees come, there is also a diversification though to a smaller degree in the composition of office workers. There is a realisation in workers' families that their daughters/sisters can find employment in a number of industries as assemblers, packers, helpers etc. as much as in the clerical lines and even in what are known as liberal professions, which were once the privilege of the white collar group.

8. The three successive Plans which were aimed at raising the standard of life, improving economic conditions and promoting industrial self-sufficiency, the workers are aware, have changed the whole occupational pattern of the working class. This awareness is coupled with the fact that the progress should have been quicker and that Government policies could have been operated with a view to a more equitable sharing of the benefits that have accrued. The worker has now become more vocal in his criticism of the existing order. And all this he admits is due to the opportunities now available to him to understand the situation and freely comment on it.

9. Large amounts have been spent under the Plans for development of industries. In the public sector many heavy industries with technical and financial help from foreign countries have been established. In the private sector, entrepreneurs have established a number of industries on their own and in some cases with varying degrees of foreign collaboration. Foreign capital has also been invited to establish industries in India. The result has been that in the last twenty years and particularly between 1954 and 1964 the setting up of new industrial units has changed the relative emphasis as between India's traditional industries and new ones. Along with the new industries many ancillary industries have also sprung up. Because of restrictions on foreign exchange and also because of the desire on the part of established industries to be self sufficient, ancillaries have developed for helping the traditional sectors also. The result is that we are manufacturing most of what we require in a variety of our products. This has created the need for higher technical education which has been provided by establishing technical and engineering colleges and schools in all States. To help the worker to acquire the necessary skill and know-how Government have established a number of institutions and introduced technical apprenticeship schemes. The workers' response to all these changes has been what should have been

expected. Talks with the workers reveal that they are not slow in utilising these facilities; they want actually more of them. Some of them, naturally, because of the age group they are in, find themselves in a difficult position in this tempo of change. For them it is a personal problem and personal hardship of unemployment. But by and large workers accept that unemployment has to some extent been arrested and opportunities for employment in a variety of jobs requiring high precision and skill have been created. Formerly the scope for employment was limited to textile mills, railway workshops and a few engineering concerns mostly privately owned and then local bodies like Port Trust, Docks, Municipalities and some public Corporations apart from a different type of employment in shops and establishments. As a result of industrialisation scope for employment has expanded not only in the industries themselves but also in the tertiary sector. Transport is also keeping pace with the faster tempo of life brought about by a series of changes. All this has resulted in the change in the occupational patterns of the working class.

EDUCATION:

10. The working classes of forties held the educated and education with some awe, the former because they belonged to class which was considered socially superior and the latter because it was something which they could not afford. Earning a living was more important than providing self education and educating children. And yet the more ambitious among them did avail themselves of the then existing facilities. The working class family of today is aware that learning is essential for better earning. The education of children is no longer neglected; nor are opportunities offered by various agencies for self education allowed to go waste. Each one has an effect on the other. The parent of today in the working class area does not want to appear as if he is lagging behind at least in his enthusiasm to understand his environments better. He does not want his son/daughter to go through the drudgery which was his lot and within the limit of his resources, or even at the cost/straining himself /of and the family a bit, wants to give him/her a good start. Young boys and girls who were formerly forced to look after the babies and do sundry odd and domestic work while the parents were away for work, are now sent to school. A collective effort to engage an elderly lady on payment to look after children who are not of school going age is not uncommon. Compulsory primary education has also contributed significantly to the spread of education among the working class. As stated earlier the employment opportunities have changed their character; they require a different type of worker now; the parent worker who aspires to get his son/daughter settled has to get his child better educated. Formerly all that a father desired was to get a job for his son in the factory where he himself worked and in many cases the employer obliged. Worker also had a sense of relief when this end was achieved and this happened not only in factory employment but also in white collar situations in commercial firms and even in public employment. Today he wants his children to be more educated and placed in a better position in life by taking advantage of existing educational facilities. As a result, in a working class family a father may be an unskilled worker or a manual labourer in a factory but his son is found working as a clerk in some office. Cases where children in working class families have taken to liberal professions or have become engineers, architects and entered avenues which were the preserve of the white collar groups are not wanting.

11. Adult education classes have also created among older workers an urge to read and write. A female worker is not lagging behind; she is also taking advantage of literacy classes. Workers' education classes are helping them to acquire special skills and to be better

workmen. Education has generated a stimulus among the workers, although the progress in this regard is rather slow. Training in handicrafts is also provided at welfare centres started by Government and some social working institutions. What at one time were looked upon as mere show pieces and were treated as such by workers are now fulfilling the need of the day. The workmen are taking advantage of all these facilities and are also helping the family by earning a small out of pocket income. Welfare organisations, Government Organisation, the employers, trade union leaders and social workers are all trying in their own way to educate the illiterate workers, though the last category viz. Social Workers is diminishing in importance fast. Nursery schools are being opened in working class areas. Not only are these very much in demand, getting admissions to these schools is getting difficult. The result is evident in the younger generation.

12. All this requires to be interpreted with a fair element of caution. Workers complain that a considerable amount of their time and energy is wasted in conforming to restrictions which are imposed on them, as indeed on the rest of the society because of shortages developing in the economy. In areas which are more amenable to social discipline workers have to spend hours in long queues to get the necessities of life. They realise that this is a hardship common to all except the more fortunate but the time spent, according to them is a waste of nation's work potential. This realisation itself is of some consequence to a developing country. Equally distressing is the feeling they have that disparities between them and the employing class are widening. They are conscious of the familiar argument that distribution of wealth of the employing class would in effect amount to distribution of distress but feel that there must be a way out of the difficulties which such inequalities create and it is for Government to find it out. The argument that there are certain sections of workers who are less fortunate than they are does not appeal to them for obvious reasons. In many cases their immediate difficulties obsess them so much that any discussion leads only to anger against society and at times anger against the discussant who is looked upon as an agent of the society.

CONSUMPTION PATTERN:

(a) FOOD

13. Food and language are considered to be difficult in undergoing a change. Food habits of the working class specially in Bombay have undergone a distinct change. This change is mainly due to rationing; high prices/scarcity of some articles of food also accounts for the current habits of consumption like ghee, mutton etc. Formerly workers belonging to certain areas were accustomed to the type of food grown and eaten in that area only. For example, workers in Kojkan were used to eat mainly rice. Fish was also common but workers complain that it is getting more expensive now. As a result of rationing and the intermixing of workers from different States and communities, their food habits have undergone a change though persons habitually consuming some cereals in better supply do not have to accept a change. For example, formerly working class children used to prefer snacks, such as a Chivada, Shev, Bhajia or Gathies and Batatawada, Wada. The South Indian influence, and this is not restricted

to Maharashtra alone, has brought in snacks such as Idly and Dosa in many working class families and unlike the older days, bread and biscuits are bought in practically every working class home. This is due to the convenience of these snacks but more so perhaps due to the sophistication it gives to the consumer in imitating the habits of the more well to-do. Owing to the distance from their homes specially in Bombay, many workers prefer to take food in subsidised canteens, because of the cost, and occasionally in restaurants. This is due to the fact that the food served is hot and clean. That neither the canteens nor restaurants can serve food according to individual tastes is known. Restrictions have affected the variety they can provide is also known. The fact that these institutions have thrived shows that though accustomed to a certain type of food workers have become less fastidious about what they eat. This is particularly so in families where the housewife is also an earning member of the family. In other industrial centres excluding Bombay food habits have not undergone so much change. Tea is the most popular beverage. The expenditure on non-vegetarian food has not decreased in spite of the prevailing high prices for it. High prices have been counter-balanced by consuming less quantity. On the whole, however, these changes have not produced on them effects which could be considered as detrimental to their efficiency. A possible conclusion may be that what is lost in the changed diet is made up by mechanical improvement in the methods of work but such conclusion would require much more objective assessment than such impressionistic observations can permit.

(b) FUEL:

14. Formerly firewood and cowdung cakes were the main items of fuel. In Bombay, especially, the workers are now taking to kerosene oil, charcoal and pressure stoves. This has added to cleanliness in a working class tenement. Perhaps as an item of aspiration one can notice that in the toys which a worker's family buys on festive occasions, either in wood, clay or sugar in some cases, Burshane Cylinders in miniature are on display in the same manner as cycles used to be in days gone by.

(c) CLOTHING:

15. Perhaps the most visible change one notices, and this is the only change which everyone can notice, among the working class is the change in dress. This is something which can be particularly marked. Formerly male workers used to wear dhoti of rough texture, a kurta, a black or white cap or even a turban. Juniors in the family - boys - wore only kurtas. The girls were dressed in long skirts (Parkars) and polkas, while the adult females wore nine-yard coloured cotton saris cholis made out of khan - both handloom products common in that area. All this has gone out of fashion now. The adult male workers now prefer to wear khaki shorts or terrylene long trousers, cotton or half shirts or bush shirts made from terrylene. This is their working dress. Even in homes probably dhotis have given way to a more comfortable wear - the striped pyjama or a striped short according to the nature of the season. Woollens are unnecessary in any case in Bombay but sweaters are common in Poona, Sholapur and Nagpur when they are required and occasionally woollen trousers. Young women have adopted modern styles in their dress. Emphasis is more on fine cloth and nylons. Printed voiles or cotton sarees are favoured by them. They are now using readymade bodices and polkas made out of printed chitz. School girls wear skirts and blouses or frocks. School boys are seen in half shirts of cotton or terrylene bush shirts or blue drill half pants. A superior variety of cloth is more favoured.

Printed cloth both in cotton and terrylene is becoming more popular. Ladies now favour fancy designs. It is now difficult to spot out a worker or his wife and workers' boys or girls, though in the past such distinction was always possible to make. Readymade clothing is more in use. This is because to make clothes to order costs more apart from the well known whims of tailors both in terms of what they consider as current fashions and their sense of punctuality towards their customers. The Nehru Shirt and salwar is replaced by bushshirts, bushcoats and pants. The recent Chinese and Pakistan aggression brought war to our door steps and the Indian soldier endeared himself to the hearts of the nation. This has in turn been reflected in the change in items of clothing used by the workers-not an uncommon phenomenon in any country. They like to dress up their children in army uniforms and forage caps. Film stars are, of course, the standard to follow in terms of clothing and hair styles, hair cuts and so on. Within limits they have a universal appeal to the young and old alike. The tendency to favour mill cloth is more noticeable among the younger generation. Preference of the working class in this respect can easily be seen if we take a good look in the cloth shops located in the working class areas.

(d) PERSONAL EFFECTS:

16. Qualitative change in the taste and liking of the working class is more noticeable in the items used as personal effects. Young earners in the family after contributing to the family expenditure have some cash left over for personal expenses, which they spend on buying a wrist watch, a fountain pen, a ball pen, goggles, shoes and chappals etc. and none of these, except perhaps the last item could be considered to be in use in the days gone by. Transistors and, in many working class homes, radios worked on electricity are not uncommon. Cycles are invariably the mode of conveyance of the young. A change in the toilet accessories and cosmetics used by the workers is also noticeable. Formerly coconut oil was the only hair oil used. Now perfumed hair oils, vaseline and pomade jellies are used for toilet purposes. The use of face creams and toilet powders are on the increase. All these items do cost some money to the worker but neither he nor his wife would like to lag behind particularly if the family is a multi-earner family. The fact that some items can be for use at home and not necessarily to keep pace with the neighbour also does not deter him from buying it. This means that he does not merely imitate; he has a genuine desire to use modern facilities within his means. Previously the working classes did not use a washing soap. Now it is universally used. They are now seen using toilet soap for bath though the all purpose sunlight and lifebuoy soap are very commonly used. Masheri used for cleaning teeth is out of fashion. Its place is now taken by tooth powder and in some cases tooth brush and paste. Young girls now use face powders and other cosmetics. Artificial ornaments are very popular in the working class. Old crude wooden toys are no longer in demand and are therefore not on the market either. Boys now prefer toys as motors, scooters, trains, trucks, aeroplanes of various designs in cheap metal or in plastics; girls are not behind either in their preferences for something new. The ceremonial gifts given to the bridegroom now include a variety of fancy articles which were formerly looked down upon or rather were considered out of reach by workers. Workers have a more frequent shave. Formerly this operation could be only at a road side saloon or on the road itself where a barber

may have set up his crude establishment. A worker now has his own razor which makes him look after his personal cleanliness in this area more frequently than in the past. Though the use of soap has been more common and the labour saving nylon and terrylene have come to stay, laundry expenses have gone up considerably. This would indicate that whatever little washing a worker's family used to do at home is now done in a laundry; workers family can now afford this item of expenditure.

(e) MEDICINES:

17 The health of the working class family does not seem to have improved much, in spite of the advancement of medical science. The impression one forms while moving in a working class area is that it is the same undernourished worker who tells his woes. This indeed is due to a number of reasons, such as high cost of living, relatively less income, overcrowding, mental and physical worries and tendency to spend more on items of luxury than on better nutritious food, of course within the limits of availability and so on. But this is not the whole story; there is a definite improvement in the outlook of a worker so far as his health is concerned. Formerly superstition played a very important part and medicines were purchased from quacks. While superstition and beliefs have not entirely disappeared from a worker's life today, they are definitely on the decrease. The Employees' State Insurance Scheme may be decried on other grounds but owing to the E.S.I. Scheme, workers now go to the panel doctor or where the Scheme doctors are available for medical help. Injections are more in demand; they no longer tolerate ordinary mixture and feel cheated if injections are denied. Since workers have to contribute part of their income to the E.S.I. Scheme, they now feel that for every sickness, even a minor one, they should approach the panel doctor or even private consultants for medical treatment; and on many occasions a junior doctor alone does not satisfy, presence of a senior is demanded. Hospitalisation is no longer dreaded; in fact there is a greater clamour for hospital beds under E.S.I. sponsorship. Part of this may be due to the medical facilities available through the Government, Municipal charitable hospitals and those run under the aegis of the E.S.I. Scheme. & part is due to his desire to get the best out for the contribution made. Cases are not wanting when doctors are told to prescribe a specific trade name known through advertisement or through a neighbour irrespective of the analysis of the complaint by the doctor. There is yet a respect for the doctor's word but a worker likes to argue his case for a specific medicine and on occasions is sullen if it is not prescribed. Whether this is due to the power of advertisement or due to some wrong notions about return for his contribution, it is difficult to say.

18. In the old days the birth of a child was considered to be a gift from God, and therefore whatever the difficulties the family had in feeding and bringing up the children, these were gladly borne as unavoidable or as the will of the Almighty. It was a very common belief that a child upto the age of five belonged to God. If it survived, it was a gift from God to the family; if it did not, God was believed to be angry with the way the child was brought up. This outlook has now completely changed. Family planning is no longer shunned. Though it is not discussed openly, workers in general do not seem averse to the family planning scheme. Different methods used are, however, not much appreciated by them for various reasons. Gradually they are realizing the desirability of the scheme and results, though slow, will be marked in the near future. It is important therefore that considerable educative work is needed not on the message of family planning but on the propriety of methods used/suggested for use and

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previously; a charpoi was the most that one could notice. Now a cot, a bench or a chair and even an improvised table is not an unusual sight. A few pieces of other furniture are also noticeable. In some cases cots can hide a fair amount of poverty and perhaps are looked upon as a mezzanine for additional sleeping space. Young workers decorate their room by using curtains whereas in the days gone by gunny cloth was used as a partition. As ladies are attending welfare centres and sewing classes, embroidered articles, such as, pillow covers, bazar bags are making their appearance. The windows are decorated with curtains prepared out of glass beads or embroidered cloth. Towels are used for tugging up small babies while going out and also for bath and bath itself is not as uncommon as it used to be in the past. Former decorations inside the house were pictures of gods nailed on the wall. Now photographs or pictures properly framed are in evidence. Leaders like Dr. Ambedkar (specially in the tenements occupied by the Scheduled Castes and Navbuddhas), Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri etc. have endeared themselves to the working class. Recently photoframes with pictures of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and President Kennedy have also made their appearance. Tagore is another familiar face. All these changes in taste are according to the composition of the family. In the younger age groups God in pictures is at discount but that does not mean that a younger worker is less religious minded. His way of respecting God is different. Calenders with good scenery and especially with photographs of famous film stars could also be seen in the worker's tenements. A photograph especially of some youngster in the family, taken in a pose and hairstyle of a favourite cinema artist is quite common in many working class tenements. Thus within the limits imposed by his purse and also with due regard to what he must eat, a worker is trying to keep pace with changing fashions. In many cases he does not succeed but it could not be said that he has resigned himself to his fate. He understands that his life is an uphill climb all the way; he also understands that he can make it easier or more difficult according to the responsibilities he has to carry. He knows that the answer is to limit these commitments but whether he succeeds in this task is another question. It should be hoped that as his desire to make a success of his life gets stronger he will devise ways for seeking that success.

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES:

21. Formerly Dashavtars, religious dramas, tamashas (folk plays) and bhajan were workers' chief sources of entertainment. Now there is more of self help in his effort. They stage latest social dramas, they direct these themselves and act in them and in all these tasks they do succeed. Drama groups are now more common in these localities. Some workers have even written plays in their mothertongue; their manner of communication either by acting or language has improved. Women workers take keen interest in all cultural activities. Tamashas and Bhajans are still popular. But their language has undergone a change for the better. Tamashas which were at one time tabooed as appealing to different instincts have acquired a better polish sobriety and decency. Workers like to listen to radio programmes and music. They perform dramas on festive occasions, such as, Satyanarayan Puja, Ganapati Puja, Dasara Sammelan, Holi Puja etc. There is however not the same enthusiasm shown for functions organised by other religious groups. This is an aspect which has suffered neglect by persons who are guiding the destinies of working class. This change in attitude has taken place even prior to the period covered by this note. Cultural and social functions which are completely divorced from religious element perhaps have shown better chances of success for getting different communities together for a more complete life. Marriages and

christening are celebrated with some pomp and the Northern Indian habit of playing gramophone records on loud speakers is getting common on such occasions. Welfare activities conducted by Government and other organisations are well attended. At these welfare centres, organised games, recreation programmes, newspapers, and reading rooms are provided and workers take part and show interest in them. Another interesting feature indicating growing awareness of a worker of the happenings about him is his participation in the seminars, lectures etc. and elocution competitions conducted by the welfare centres. Such programmes draw large crowds. Physical cultural activities like wrestling competitions, competitions in inexpensive outdoor Indian games are getting common. There is greater inter community participation in such programmes.

TRADE UNION ACTIVITIES:

22. Formerly by and large the textile workers were the only labour organised in the industrial centres of Maharashtra State outside Bombay. In Bombay city, apart from textiles there were strong unions in transport, Ports and Docks, Railways and in the Municipal Corporation. Sugar industry was being organised and engineering workers also. During the period under review, trade unions have been formed in a variety of other employments right from the highest paid employees like the Pilots of I.A.C. and Air India to the boys who do the miscellaneous jobs in hospitals and small hotels. Today therefore the working class in the State whether it is in different industries or in transport or in clerical employment or elsewhere and even in Government offices is having an organised existence vis-a-vis his employer. The trade union organisation has enveloped the entire industrial field not covered some twenty-five years ago. Workers have grown more conscious of their rights. Whether this has been due to labour laws, especially legislation regarding industrial relations or is the effect of other factors like Independence, attitude of Government etc. does not concern us. But it has helped generate a sense of equity in the workers. Employer now cannot hire or fire workers according to his whim and arbitrary exercise of his power and workers are conscious of this. Whether this has undermined discipline is again an area of debate which we do not want to enter. Legalisation regarding trade unions and enactment of various legislations aims at protecting labour and bringing about social justice. In underdeveloped countries where unemployment is rampant, workers are generally exploited by being paid wages below subsistence wages. The Minimum Wages Act aims at preventing this exploitation. As a result of the trade union Act and various labour laws, workers are seen asserting their rights, constitutionally granted to them. But having once organised themselves or agreed to organise themselves in a union whether they take continued interest in it is another matter. Their participation in union activities and everything connected with the union, except in case of certain unions, still seems to be marginal. They find it difficult to attend union meetings except when they are oppressed by particular problems. Some workers consider that their responsibility ends once they agree to join and pay union dues. Union leaders' interest in them is likewise. Apart from the period when some points are to be agitated on behalf of workers there is no live and continuous contact. Visits by trade union organisers to places where workers stay are also infrequent. Some environmental problems which they could tackle as a group suffer because of lack of guidance. Workers have now become politically conscious and

whenever approached for collecting statistical data they will ask the investigator a number of questions and put cross question before giving a reply. This does not mean that he gives a deliberately incorrect reply but he is certainly more inquisitive and more cautious in making his statements. But this is the picture one forms of workers who have enjoyed fruits of organisation. There is still, even in an industrially better placed state, a large mass of unorganised labour. Workers, especially in unorganised industries, farm labour, contract labour and even labour employed in petty shops and commercial establishments are yet to come together in order to see what they can secure by standing together. It is our impression that barring the slow effect of what happens in the organised sector the conditions of workers are far from satisfactory.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

23. The most important development that has taken place during 1942-1967 in the life of India's toiling masses is that their country has become Independent. It gave to itself a Constitution which declares it to be a sovereign and democratic republic, pledged to the creation of a welfare state and a socialist pattern of society. The Republic is pledged to improve and raise the living standards of the masses and has guaranteed constitutional rights, for example, right to social justice, right to work and to organise, to equality of opportunities etc. The period also witnessed, to safeguard and protect the interests of workers, the amendment of existing legislation and enactment of new pieces of legislation: these are the Industrial Disputes Act, the B.I.R. Act, Minimum Wages Act, the Employees' Provident Fund Act, E.S.I. Act, Trade Union's Act, the Payment of Bonus Act and so on. These are special legislations (aimed at creating social security and facilitating social justice). The minima laid down by legislation have been interpreted by the courts and tribunals as capable of improvement where the capacity of the unit to pay benefits higher than the minima is established. This itself has raised a series of debates which in many cases have gone in favour of workers. While certain organs of public opinion have criticised this trend there seems to be an element of acceptance that worker is on his way to getting his due. The legislation has at the same time introduced some litigious attitudes which workers themselves have not been able to appreciate. As ordinary civil courts are not suitable to try cases under these Acts, industrial courts have been established. The Supreme Court in various cases has clearly laid down the definition of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled work, starvation, fair and living wages. The programme for betterment of conditions of industrial workers has been planned and pushed through the three successive Five Year Plans. With all these, the worker still has a feeling that in the general progress of the economy he has not been receiving an adequate share. When he is pointed out the various statutory entitlements he asks with an air of resignation 'Is it being implemented?'. And this is one matter on which he is more keen. He recognises that implementation will improve if he himself is well organised but till such time he feels himself ready to tackle his employer he expects some help from Government. Unemplo

24. Unemployment has decreased as compared to pre-1942 conditions when it existed on a scale which was being felt. An interesting side light of this is that working class families which had never felt the need of outside assistance for the normal chores of the house are now seeking such help and paying for it. This was at one time looked upon as a typical middle class approach to what may be called household work. It is not claimed that this is common but its prevalence in units

with more than one earning member is not unusual. Working together in the same factories or factories in the same neighbourhood, eating food which has the same basic ingredients (due to rationing), earning nearly the same wages because of narrowing of differentials as a result of large dearness allowance, travelling in the same conveyance have helped in narrowing down the social gap between the white collared and the blue collared groups. Equally significant is the fact that the rigours of untouchability which had been diminishing for some time immediately prior to 1942 have now been disappearing faster. Various labour laws have also helped to increase their social consciousness.

25. On the whole, except in terms of housing facilities, the working class today seems better off, both economically and socially, than what it was years ago. Still a few facts stand out. In spite of the fact that the workers now get better wages, the resultant change in the consumption pattern and the health of the worker does not show signs of improvement. They do not spend what they earn on wholesome and nutritious food such as could be purchased in the market and are inclined to spend more on what to others appear as luxuries than on necessities. There is no planning or prudence in their spending. But this is nothing new in the evolution of human affairs. The luxuries of yesterday do become the necessities of today. For a long time this law had a differential application. If now it becomes evident in working class this is what should be expected. And with all this one does not hear complaints about indebtedness. This is partly due to the pressure on him for remittances to villages has somewhat gone down, agriculture itself being now more prosperous than before, and partly at least to the fact that worker is now wanting to live within his means.

26. But this also is not the whole story. The working class of today is a mixed bag. With some prudent workers one also finds a fair mixture of those to whom prudence will always be remote. Many of such workers would like to live from day to day or month to month. Visiting cinema houses, gambling, drinking are not uncommon among them. To them short spells of lay off retrenchment or even illness do cause a major upset in the budget. Indebtedness is quite common for such workers; a substantial portion of their wages is spent in paying off the loan and its high interest. Generally, however, the Pathan money lender is not as affluent as he used to be at one time.

27. Housing conditions especially in Bombay, are still deplorable. Slums continue to exist. Overcrowding is very common and sanitary conditions are deplorable. A young worker today has no quiet corner of his own where he can rest a little after a day's work. He cannot hope to spend his leisure comfortably. He is, therefore, tempted to seek escapades outside the narrow confines of his room or rather the small portion of it which he can for some hours of the day call his own. This has definitely had an impact on the work in the factory and on his general behaviour in factory environment as also on his attitudes towards his neighbours. As regards the health of the family, in spite of all efforts in every direction there does not seem to be much improvement. Whether this means some reorientation in the work of the E.S.I. Corporation i.e. looking to the preventive aspects, is a matter which requires consideration. There is indeed the risk that stay in slums and inadequate attention to preventive

side of disease may, if allowed to continue, lower the productive efficiency of the workers.

28. A remarkable change, however, appears to be in the level of aspirations and hopes a worker has about the future in general. He is definitely trying to achieve a higher standard of living, and he hopes to improve the conditions of his family when prices recede though he accepts that price recession is a fond hope. A worker is definitely better off culturally and intellectually. He is at present struggling to achieve his aspirations in spite of high prices, overcrowding, insanitary conditions and ill health. He is now determined to fight against all these odds and to establish himself in the society as a respectable citizen. He hopes to achieve this in the light of the social justice promised to him by the Constitution and with the faith which he has in organised existence. He recognises that this has to be a long march and in this task he will need the sympathies of the rest of the public with him, as much as he will have to rely on his own organised collective strength and legal protection.

29. It is interesting at this stage to understand the views of workers towards certain criticism which is made about their attitudes to work, responses to organisation and the like. These views need not be considered as representative of all workers as indeed the impressions recorded earlier on. But to the extent they are expressed by some who have not been deliberately chosen for seeking response, some significance could be attached to them. It is in this context that the following observations have to be viewed. The coverage of the points is deliberately selective.

ABSENTEEISM:

30. Workers assert that much is made about their staying away from work. Very often the reasons given for such absenteeism by many who do not have first hand knowledge are: (a) better earnings of workers; (b) the introduction of E.S.I. Scheme; (c) their bonds with their native place and (d) unattractive nature of the work place. In (d) the critics certainly are on the side of workers. However, the latter feel that the causes (a), (b) and (c) could have been analysed further before coming to snap conclusions.

31. (a) When it is said that absenteeism is because of better earnings, the implication is that the worker does not desire to improve his earnings. This is really not true particularly when his aspirations are mounting and he knows that to secure these he has to earn more. The other implication is that relatively his home is more attractive than his place of work. In view of the housing conditions discussed earlier, for a large section of workers this may not be true. But for those for whom it is true the criticism against the up keep of the work place by employers who engage them could be more damaging than is accepted in (d) above. In any case according to workers this cause of absenteeism has more limited application.

32. (b) Absenteeism on account of E.S.I. is again another misconception. Firstly because an able-bodied worker would not like to use benefits of the E.S.I. which are certainly less attractive than the wage he earns for his work. The difference between his earnings and the sickness benefits that he secures in many cases is sufficient to make him go to work because a worker's family invariably operates on a small margin. There are cases, however, and this is accepted by workers that when bonus is distributed or he secures similar

*The worker feels that the work and the place of work are loathsome because there is a lack of sense of belonging. This sense has not been created in him.

lump sum payments, there is a desire on his part to avail of the E.S.I. advantage also if his doctors are satisfied that he could be given the benefit of doubt. But the other important aspect which should be considered under this head is illness in the family. In many cases taking his dependent to a doctor or attending on the dependent in other ways does mean absence from work. The manner in which workers are forced to live in insanitary conditions is one of the reasons for this stage of affairs. And though it is absenteeism because of sickness this supplementary circumstance should not be ignored in assessing the real nature of his absence from work.

33. (c) The theory about the bonds with the native place is now well-nigh exploded: (i) because a new generation of workers has come up which has no such bonds at all; and (ii) some benefits which the employer gives or is made to give are dependent on a worker putting in a specified number of days at the work place. And in money terms these benefits are not such as can be wantonly. It does happen particularly in a place like Bombay which attracts labour from all parts of the country that workers going out to their homes after a year or two do not find it possible to report right on time; maybe because of domestic difficulties but also because of finding their way as they schedule in crowded railway trains.

34. There is also another aspect in an ever-growing city like Bombay which causes absenteeism. As congestion in intracity increases, the traffic itself, to some extent, gets slowed. This means that for reaching the work place day after day a worker has to leave his house earlier. And even if he does so there is no guarantee that he would reach the place of work in time. With stricter observance by some employers of the time by which a worker has to report and the penalties for delay, detention anywhere on the way creates apprehension in a worker that he may not reach the place in time. Cases do occur when they have to go back home after reaching the factory gate. Thus absenteeism, according to workers, is a complex of many factors. But the one which is often pointed out to them about disinclination to work because they are relatively affluent is certainly incorrect.

PRODUCTIVITY

35. Productivity is another point on which they get worked up. Basically they feel that by and large workers are still unsophisticated, except in large impersonal habitations like Bombay. But workers everywhere do want to give the employer his moneys' worth. This does not mean that when relations between them and the employers are strained situations do not arise where labour is withheld. It happens also that in many cases, where complaints about low productivity are made, the machinery in units in such that it would mean considerable strain to improve productivity. They do not appreciate either the comparisons made about their work and that of their counterparts in other countries. Given the equipment which workers in other countries use, the working and living conditions and humane treatment, they can improve productivity. In many cases the supervisory staff is not as keen on production as the manager is, in others the staff which issues stores and equipment is not imbued with the same zeal and the blame for all this is rested on operatives. Workers claim is that if there is productivity consciousness in the unit throughout, they are rarely found wanting in doing their bit.

OUTSIDE LEADERSHIP:

36. The worker's views on his attachment to the union are also of some interest. He definitely accepts that unions have done him a service. He also accepts that there is greater consciousness among his colleagues about the benefits which union can give. He is not averse to well intentioned outsiders running his union and framing policies for him. He admits that his interest in union meetings is not what it should be, but when matters which affect him are discussed in the union he certainly makes it a point to be on spot. While outsiders help him to understand the working class problems better because of their wider contacts, it is not true that he is all the time guided by outsiders. In the older generation of workers, however, this was true and perhaps true even today. But now workers seem to know what they want and will choose a leadership which can be reasonably expected to meet the workers' aspirations. With many willing persons on the scene to help them, they do a bit of choosing but this is not because of any political colour of the persons in the field. It is the ability to plead their case which is more important and such ability they judge from past performance. While it was true in the earlier part of the period covered that workers did what their leaders wanted, it is now the leaders' turn in many cases to fall in line.

37. There is a gradual awareness among workers that they can, if they so wish, differ in politics from their leader. They may like one person as an effective bargainer on their behalf but may not like his political persuasion. With the right given to them of secret-ballot for political elections they can show loyalties to different groups of persons for different purposes and in each case workers do weigh in their mind what is in their best interest. On the current controversy whether a union should be chosen by secret-ballot or by a verification of membership they do not hold strong views. All they want is an effective leader; whether the leader is an outsider or an insider is also not their concern.

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