New Data on Cotton Mill Workers of Bombay

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FOR many years the Bombay City cotton textile industry has been a favourite meadow for academic browsing. The importance of the industry is one factor accounting for this interest. Another is the fact that Bombay University is a degree-granting institution with a great need for topics for M A and Ph D dissertations. Not least in the array of features accounting for academic preoccupation with the industry is the fact that probably no other Indian industry has been as well-served for so long with documentation and statistical material. For this last characteristic we are primarily indebted to the Millowners' Association, Bombay whose annual reports, memoranda to official bodies and miscellaneous publications have been a major source of information.

Once again we are indebted to the Association for an impressive contribution to our knowledge of the Bombay cotton mill industry, this time a study of its labour force. R G Gokhale, Association Labour Officer, has given us the results of a large survey done in May 1955. The service records of some 74,700 operatives in twenty mills have been analyzed, and the results have been presented with a minimum of comment. The survey includes all the permanent operating workforce on all shifts but excludes clerical workers and supervisory personnel above the rank of jobber. More than 33 per cent of the total labour force in the Bombay mills is included, making this by far the largest survey ever conducted in the industry. The twenty mills surveyed are scattered from Kurla to Colaba, and it is fairly safe to agree with Shri Gokhale that the results are applicable to the whole body of workers working in the Bombay cotton mills.

While the results of the survey are presented virtually without comment, Shri Gokhale, has placed them alongside the results of a similar survey conducted by him in 1940. This earlier investigation covered 37,600 operatives in nineteen mills.


— 25 per cent of the total Bombay mill workforce at that time. Although there are some difficulties, the judicious confrontation of the 1955 survey results with those of 1940 makes it possible for us to get a picture of India's largest single group of industrial workers as it has changed over a period of fifteen years. For no other group of workers is such information easily available, and we must be grateful to Shri Gokhale for the service rendered.

Of the total group surveyed in 1955, 7.3 per cent were women operatives who are mainly employed in the winding and reeling departments. The women constituted anywhere from 3.6 to 13.3 per cent of the workforce in the individual mills. In 1940 they constituted 16.2 per cent of the operatives. This 1940 figure somewhat exaggerates the importance of women in the workforce at that time because the survey did not give full representation to second and third shift employees, shifts from which women are statutorily banned. Nevertheless, the decline in the relative importance of women workers between 1940 and 1955 has been substantial, something of the order of 50 per cent. This decline is mainly to be associated with the growing importance of second and third shift working. There also seems to have been a slight absolute decline in the number of women employed, a phenomenon identifiable with the diminishing importance of the winding and reeling sections in the industry. It is likely that this pattern will continue in the future unless women are given opportunities in other departments.

With all due regard for the inevitable inaccuracy of age data, perhaps the most striking feature of the survey is the indication that the average age of the Bombay mill workforce has risen quite sharply between 1940 and 1955. The modal average has risen from 26 - 30 years in 1940 to 31 - 35 years in 1955. In 1940, 45 per cent of the labour force was 30 years or younger but in 1955 only 25 per cent of the operatives were that young. During the same period the proportion of workers aged 46 years or more had increased from 8 to 21 per cent.

The female work group has aged even more rapidly than the male. Even in 1940 the women workers as a group were somewhat older than the men, but by 1955 the difference had become striking. The 1955 modal average age for women was about 40 years, some five to eight years greater than for male workers. Women in the under 31 years age group declined from 39 to 12 per cent of total women workers and in the over 45 years age group the proportion had risen from 11 to 35 per cent.

The increasing age of the workforce is not a surprising phenomenon. It is a characteristic of mature industries everywhere in the world. The more rapid increase in the average age of women operatives is the special result of their declining absolute as well as relative importance in the industry. Since 1940 relatively few new women have been given employment. We have had the natural aging of the existing female workforce largely undiluted by the addition of new, young workers.

The survey also gives us data on length-of-service of workers in the industry in 1955 as compared with 1940. Shri Gokhale adds data based on a Bombay Labour Office sample relating to 1927-28 so that it is possible to view the situation as it has developed over nearly three decades. The table below shows the length-of-service of workers in Bombay cotton mill industry (in per cent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Service</th>
<th>1927-28</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1955</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 yrs or less</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 15 yrs</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 yrs or more</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table gives us the picture of increasing average length-of-service in the industry, a phenomenon becoming most marked in the last decade and a half. This phenomenon is reinforced by the data given for length-of-service in the mill. The data show a remarkable increase in the apparent stability of the workforce. In the fifteen year interval between 1940 and 1955 the number of workers with five years service or less in one mill declined from 36 to 17 per cent; those with six to fifteen years service rose...
from 48 to 58 per cent; and those with sixteen years service or more in one mill increased from 16 to 25 per cent.

There are many weaknesses in the data. Nevertheless, the length-of-service data indicate that the stability of the cotton mill workforce in Bombay will compare favourably with that of the industrial workforce of many industries in Western countries. Whatever the ambition to return to the villages that lurk in the hearts of the workers, the objective facts revealed by length-of-service in industry and mill suggest that the Bombay cotton mill worker is an industrial worker.

Shri Gokhale in his "Introduction" promised us only statistics, and he keeps to his spartan vow of eschewing analogies. Yet one is tempted to enquire into the factors accounting for the increase in average length-of-service shown in the statistics. Without going into the historical details, it is my opinion that the instability of the cotton mill workforce prior to 1930 has been greatly overstated. My own investigations suggest that even before the first World War a substantial proportion of the workers were permanently attached to the industry. Instability was as much a function of movement among mills in the city as it was the result of movement between city and village. This constant parade of workers among mills must be attributed to the traditional system of labour organisation maintained by the employers. The badal system, instability of employment patterns, arbitrary discharges, and the gross inequality of wage rates and earnings among the Bombay mills induced a high labour turnover in the pre-World War II era. The sharp increase in average length-of-service in the mills between 1940 and 1955 especially is undoubtedly proof of this point. The increased age of the workforce and its greater stability seems to have occurred as a consequence of the stabilization and improvement of employment practices in the industry after 1934.

The passage of the industrial relations legislation of 1934, 1937 and 1947, the introduction of the annual bonus, the gratuity, provident fund, state insurance and the decasualization scheme have all quite obviously contributed to the reduction of labour turnover. If this interpretation is correct, it suggests that the problem of creating a committed labour force in newly developing societies has been and is more a matter of social policy than of worker psychology.

The data on workforce place-of-origin confirms already established judgments. In 1955 45 per cent of the workforce originated in the Konkan districts, 30 per cent in the Deccan and 18 per cent in Uttar Pradesh. The pattern has not changed substantially since 1940. There has been a six point decline in the proportion of workers from the Konkan and a 4 per cent increase in workers from Uttar Pradesh. The statistics are broken down for us by mill department so that it is possible to have a rather general impression of which workers from certain regions tend to be concentrated in certain activities.

There is serious weakness in the place-of-origin data. In both the 1940 and 1955 surveys Shri Gokhale collected his data only for very large regions Konkan, Deccan, U P, etc. While this may have been the easy way, the value of the data for analytical purposes is reduced considerably. Cast in this fashion, it is impossible to calculate the distance of migration, nor is it possible to tell what proportion of the workforce has been born in Bombay City.

The survey produced data on languages spoken by the workforce which is consistent with the place-of-origin data. The overwhelming proportion (70 per cent) claimed Marathi as their mother tongue in 1955 and another 17 per cent spoke Hindi. Nearly 7 per cent spoke Telugu, a rather substantial increase over the 2 per cent Telugu-speaking group in 1940.

The data on religion similarly provides no surprises. 95 per cent are Hindus. Muslims, have declined from 4.5 to 29 per cent of the total workforce, probably as a result of Partition. Jains, Christians and Parsis, noticeable elements of the Bombay population, constitute insignificant fractions of the total workforce. In fact, only four of the 74,600 workers surveyed were Jains! Although we are aware that Jains have constituted an essentially trading community, this virtually unanymous non-participation in the cotton mill labour force indicates that sociologists and anthropologists would find an interesting field of investigation here.

Literacy has risen among mill workers during the past decade and a half from 29.7 to 42.5 per cent. Shri Gokhale attributes much of this increase to the adult literacy classes conducted by the Association member mills. If a foreigner's impressions are of any value, there also seems to be a greater incentive to learn. By comparison with five years ago, I have been struck by the number of workers I have seen in the mill areas sitting on the pavements teaching others to read. Given official determination to establish universal literacy in India, scholars could usefully study the factors which have accounted for the very sharp increase in literacy rates. The rise in literacy is, of course, much more pronounced among males. Literacy among women is still shockingly low. In some areas the rate has risen from 29 to 59 per cent in the fifteen year period.

In addition to the data already discussed, Shri Gokhale has given us a batch of miscellaneous information. There are data on 260 workers living in mill-owned chawls and some pages of miscellaneous statistics which would be more helpful if sources and methods of computation had been provided.

There is no question that Shri Gokhale's volume will become a basic source of information for students of the industry. The test of a good piece of work is that the reader is left asking for more of the same. Shri Gokhale has not given us as many correlations as would be useful. Various aspects of information about the workforce could have been correlated in greater detail so that a more complete picture would be available. Although this would increase the burdens of tabulation, it would make future surveys more useful.

There are some weaknesses in the survey. Unlike the 1940 investigation, the 1955 survey excludes any information on caste. It is probable that this has been done as a contribution to the national objective of minimizing castesm in the society. A similar situation has been occurring in the United States where distinctions between Negroes and Whites are increasingly ignored in the records. But what is politically desirable may be academically unfortunate. It becomes increasingly difficult for scholars to
analyze the dynamics of social change.

However, even the caste information in the 1940 survey was not very accurate confusing as it did castes and regional classifications. Given the complexity of the problem of classifying caste, it may be that such work can only be done through samples built up by trained anthropologists who are familiar with the detailed working of the caste system.

Another weakness of the survey is the classification of the workforce by department rather than by occupation. As a result, it is impossible to tell anything about the changing skill patterns in the industry. We can only hope that in the future Shri Gokhale will provide us data on the basis of occupational classification as well as departmental division.

There is one rather careless handling of age and length-of-service statistics. For example, the first category is labelled "below 20 years" and the next category is entitled "More than 20 years". Into what category have the workers aged twenty years been placed? They don't logically fall in the "below 20" category or in the "more than 20" category. Probably Shri Gokhale intended the categories to read "20 years and below" and "21 to 25 years", but the error is more than terminological. The questionnaires sent to the mill Labour Officers had this error of classification and it is anybody's guess as to how these people interpreted the matter.

In conclusion I would like to say that Shri Gokhale's restraint in matters of analysis while admirable is not desirable. As Labour Officer of the Millowner's Association for over twenty years, he probably knows more about the career of the workforce during that period than almost any other person. We would be indebted to him if he would give us the fruits of his experience and thinking about the statistical data in his next volume.

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