

DOCUMENT

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Below we print the draft of Rajnarayan (Raj) Chandavarkar's chapter for this collection of essays. Due to his untimely death, Raj could not finalize his text. Yet, it is reproduced here as a document because it deals with a crucial, but neglected, problem of modern Indian labour history, the decline of the so-called jobbers (labour contractors). Almost thirty years ago, Dick Kooiman characterized the jobbers in this journal as follows:

In the mid-nineteenth century Indian entrepreneurs started a textile industry, which proved to be a new way to invest capital and to make profit. The management functions in their Bombay mills were filled by Europeans and Indians with an educated, middle-class background. The social and linguistic position of these people prevented their easy communication with the local labour-force of Marathi-speaking peasant origin. Therefore, from the creation of the industry, mill-owners and management cadres delegated the task of labour recruitment to a special class of men, called jobbers.

These jobbers were both a pragmatic bridging of the social gap between mill management and labour, and the result of considerations of convenience as mill-owners were unwilling to invest into a regular system of personnel management. Coming from the rank and file, the jobbers were empowered to engage, to discipline and to dismiss workers and to give what elementary training was required. [...]

The jobber's position as foreman and supervisor enabled him to build up a position of considerable influence. Since he was entrusted with the distribution of eagerly sought employment opportunities labour looked up to him for jobs. The employment relationship may be said to have been set up between the jobbers and the labour-force rather than between the factory-management and labour. In that way every jobber had his own following, numbering about thirty or forty men. [...]

The jobber functioned as a broker between management and labour. He acted as the spokesman for labour and as the protector of their interests, which were partly his own. For the mill managements the jobber formed the only communication channel with the workers, and for information about their labour-force they were almost completely dependent on him.¹

It was the spring of 2005 when Raj, on Sabbatical, was in India working in the Mumbai and Delhi archives, that I spoke to him about contributing a paper to this Supplement on Indian labour history. He regaled me with the stories of his personal experiences of working at the police record room in

1. Dick Kooiman, "Jobbers and the Emergence of Trade Unions in Bombay City", *International Review of Social History*, 22 (1977), pp. 313–328, 313–315.

Mumbai. On a more serious note he talked about his keenness to write a substantial paper dealing exclusively with the institution of jobbers within the larger world of Indian labour history. He believed that while jobbers occupy a very crucial place in the Indian labour historiography, the loss of their position and influence, both with the employers and workers, during the last decade of colonial rule and early years of Independence had eluded any serious discussion. Thus, the idea of writing a paper on this subject for the Supplement crystallized during the course of our discussion.

He kept his promise, despite his huge commitments to research, teaching, and managing the affairs of the Centre of South Asian Studies in Cambridge University, as its Director and, despite missing several deadlines of schedule, he informed us on 10 April that we would be soon receiving his paper for the Supplement. He didn't get time to put in the final touches he would have very much liked to add, given his reputation as a stickler for the minute details of his final products.

Rana P. Behal

The War on the Shopfloor

RAJNARAYAN CHANDAVARKAR

The outbreak of World War II accentuated, and its conduct and immediate aftermath sustained, the mounting pressures on the jobber system and exposed its weaknesses more fully. These pressures upon the jobber emanated from three sources. First, the imperatives of the war economy facilitated the more intensive exploitation of labour. The jobber's traditional task, to reconcile workers to the demands of the mill-owners, became almost impossible to sustain. Indeed, it drew the full wrath of the workers upon the jobber.

Second, the 1940s witnessed deepening tensions and bitter conflicts at the workplace. Attempts to enforce labour discipline under these conditions met with fierce, sometimes violent, resistance. The general strikes of 1940 and 1950, co-ordinated across the industry, revealed the perennial weakness of jobbers, when called upon to operate at a supra-mill level. Conversely, strikes occurred with greater frequency in individual mills in the mid 1940s. These were fractious disputes, often accompanied by violence directed at jobbers as well as supervisors and managers. To some extent, these disputes were fuelled by rivalries within the managerial hierarchy, as various ranks of managers intervened in the jobber's domain and as power balances shifted within the supervisory apparatus of the mills.

Third, the decade was marked by political volatility. Apart from the increasing number of strikes between 1943 and 1947, the Quit India movement, launched from Bombay, proved the most powerful of the Gandhian agitations and the most ruthlessly suppressed. In 1941 and 1944, the city was wracked by communal riots. When they recurred in 1946–1947, they raged with an unprecedented ferocity. The Royal Indian Naval Mutiny unfolded dramatically in the city in 1946 and attracted widespread support from the working classes. In anticipation of the 1946 elections, and even more extensively with the advent of universal suffrage, political parties strove to form trade unions and to compete for working-class votes. The passage of the Bombay Industrial Relations Act in 1946 stimulated frenetic competition for members between various parties, but most acutely between the new Congress union, the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh, and the communist Girmi Kamgar Union. Jobbers, no less than *dadas* or neighbourhood power-brokers of diverse sorts, necessarily became pivotal figures in the conduct of these rivalries, and especially in the competitive drive of various unions to expand their membership. Each

of these sources of conflict and competition focused upon the jobber and made his intermediary position almost impossible to sustain.

The war rescued the Bombay mills from the slump into which they had entered since the early 1920s and to which they returned at the end of the 1930s, after a brief period of recovery in 1937–1938. The military demand was estimated to amount to about one-quarter of the industry's output in 1940.¹ In addition, by disrupting international trade, the war created new opportunities in both the domestic market and in some third markets, deprived of Japanese and Lancashire imports. The Bombay mills quickly found that the attempt to supply military needs and to make the most of these new potential markets placed their productive capacity under severe strain. The Bombay mill-owners who had, for the most part, been reluctant to invest in machinery during the slump of the 1920s and 1930s, now found it difficult to increase output, let alone improve productivity.

Mill-owners and managers responded to the severe structural constraints that they faced in increasing production by driving their workers hard. In this objective, the jobber was their blunt instrument. Irrespective of the widely acknowledged weaknesses of the jobber system to prevent or break strikes when they were coordinated across the industry as a whole, mill-owners had continued to place their faith in their instrument of labour control at the level of the individual mill. Yet it was precisely at the workplace that the pressure on the jobbers now mounted.

As the mills now sought to take advantage of the new market opportunities during World War II, they tried to set and meet high production targets on the basis of deteriorating machinery, scarce supplies, and inferior and expensive raw materials. Machinery supplies could no longer be imported on a substantial scale. Old machinery had to be pressed into service more intensively and deployed with a mixture of improvisation, strategic running repairs, and optimism. In other words, mill-owners and managers were forced to rely upon the skills and ingenuity of the jobbers and supervisors, at a time when their position was scarcely secure and their relationship with each other highly conflictual. Managers exerted considerable pressure on jobbers to repair and maintain machinery under increasingly adverse conditions. Shortages of equipment and deteriorating plant continued to plague the industry for most of the decade. Some mills reported in 1946 that they had to run their spindles at lower speeds in the hope of ensuring that they would last longer. The lack of bobbins, and sometimes a shortage of cards, forced mills to spin finer counts of yarn, or else leave their frames idle while consequent interruptions in the supply of yarn to the looms reduced the output of cloth and created excess capacity.²

1. V.B. Kulkarni.

2. *Interim Report by the Industrial Conditions Enquiry Committee on the Cotton Textile Industry in Bombay City and Bombay Suburban District* (Bombay, 1948), p. 31.

In 1940, the price of raw cotton quickly soared. Necessarily, the quality of cotton mixings declined and from 1943, they deteriorated steadily.³ Dyestuffs and bleaching powder quickly became scarce. As the quality of materials declined, they required more skilful treatment, even manipulation, in the preparatory processes. Problems at these early stages of production were magnified, often in the form of broken threads on the ring frames or damaged cloth on the looms. Rising prices, like the poor quality of materials, provided a further incentive for the mill-owners to manipulate cotton mixings, the quality of yarn and the varieties of cloth.

Conflicts over damaged cloth, resulting in fines and lost earnings, or the slowing down of production because of supply failures, had been a recurrent theme in the history of the mills. Attempts to expand output or speed it up ordinarily intensified these conflicts. The manipulation of machine settings and speeds, deteriorating and poorly maintained machinery, sudden changes in the quality and character of cotton mixings or the quality of yarn, or the composition of output sometimes resulted in damaged cloth and a loss of earnings for line jobbers and weavers and thus necessarily provoked bitter disputes between them.⁴ In particular, it was reported in 1946, workers objected vociferously to “the constant infliction of fines” by jobbers, supervisory staff and managers.⁵

At the same time, new varieties of cloth called for adjustments in their methods, materials, and machine settings. Workers had to adapt to new production schedules and new types of cloth. The government of Bombay suspended the provisions of the Trade Disputes Act that required mill-owners to give adequate notice before changes were effected in the conditions of production and composition of output. Changes in the composition of output usually meant that the labour needs of a mill would vary from day to day, perhaps even in the course of a day. Workers might have to be laid off or hired in larger numbers at short notice. The jobber was now called upon to fulfil his original task of ensuring a regular supply of skilled and experienced labour in the face of fluctuating demand. Yet his own influence in the neighbourhood and, as a consequence, also in the workplace had been pared down.

These daily conflicts of the workplace, which had always characterized

3. *Interim Report by the Industrial Conditions Enquiry Committee*

4. Opportunities to manipulate materials and output increased under the Standard Cloth Scheme, which imposed on mills quotas of output for military demand. Its purpose was to ensure that a supply of cheap cloth for domestic consumption was maintained. Mills could boost their profits within the Standard Cloth Scheme by using cheaper mixings of cotton and making imperceptible reductions in the counts of yarn and density of cloth. Increased output under the Standard Cloth Scheme enabled them to place a larger volume of cloth on the unregulated market.

5. K. B. Wassodew, “Report of the Court of Inquiry in the Trade Dispute between the Textile Mills and its employees regarding the dismissal of certain workers”, *Labour Gazette*, 26:2 (October 1946), p. 111.

the industry, were now engaged with increasing acrimony and they were played out in the context of declining real wages for the workers and rising profits for the mills.⁶ Moreover, while the power and authority of the jobber had been diminishing, the mill-workers had been increasingly assertive and had built up a considerable momentum of industrial action in the preceding two decades. Thus in 1946, adjudicating on a dispute in Textile Mills, Justice Wassodew noted: "It seems that the workers with a growing consciousness of their rights [...] resented abusive language, personal violence and the like from their superior officers, including jobbers."⁷

Significantly, the general strike, that was launched in March 1940, by millworkers seeking a "dearness allowance to match the rising cost of living",⁸ had been characterized by a higher degree of violence against jobbers, head jobbers, and mill supervisors than any of the previous eight general strikes since 1919. Of course, some jobbers, recognizing the need to secure their own future within the supervisory structure of the mills, played an active part in taking blacklegs across the picket lines, often in closed vans and with police escorts, and in some cases, especially in Bhoiwada and in the Kohinoor Mills, they were reported to have held workers in the mills overnight, so that they could keep the mill running on the following day. Similarly, the final stages of the strikes was marked by "stray assaults practised by the bullies", sometimes used by the police as a euphemism for *dadas*, against strike-breakers, jobbers, and mill supervisory or technical staff.⁹

Rivalries and divisions between workers also developed ferocious antagonisms and could culminate in violence between jobbers and against them. But they also reflected the weakening of the jobbers' position and the intensifying conflicts on the shopfloor, both within the managerial hierarchy and between jobbers and workers. That violence against jobbers and supervisors were given greater prominence in police and press reports in 1940 suggests a growing anxiety among mill-owners and officials about the jobbers' failing grip, the breakdown of discipline in the mills and indeed, more widely, the threat to the social order in the neighbourhoods of Girangaon.

Strikes and *hartals* in the mills continued in the early 1940s. The Quit India movement led to the closure of numerous mills until the agitation was suppressed. The Gandhian *satyagraha* did not transcend the divisions

6. According to the Government of Bombay's Labour Office, the "working class cost of living index", based on 1933-1934, had risen from 105 in 1939 to 279 in 1947 for all items, while for food alone, the price index rose steadily from 252 in 1943, a year of famine, to 344 in 1947; *Labour Gazette*, 27:11 (July 1948), pp. 1397, 1400-1401.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

8. GOB, Home (Special) File 550 (23) C (2) of 1940, pp. 76-77, MSA.

9. GOB, Home (Special) File 550 (23) C (1) of 1940, MSA.

between the mill-workers that had been so clearly expressed during the general strike of 1940. Indeed, it opened up differences between the mill-owners, who were divided in their response to the nationalist agitation. Although the communist leaders of the Girni Kamgar Union stood aloof from the Quit India campaign, workers participated in the *satyagraha* on a sufficient scale to pose an awkward challenge to the Left. Once the Quit India movement was quickly repressed, with the communist leadership encouraged by the People's War to adopt a conciliatory stance, the frequency of strikes in the mills declined. Managers, supervisors, and jobbers found it easier once more to thwart industrial action at the level of the workplace. On the other hand, workers found it more difficult to coordinate action across the industry. In addition to the quotidian sanctions of the workplace, any decision to strike would now first have to fulfil the conditions and comply with the procedures stipulated in the trade disputes legislation and it would inevitably encounter the repressive reactions of not only the mill-owners but also the state, now fortified by the Defence of India Rules.

From 1945, however, strikes became more frequent and then in 1946 and 1947, their number rose steeply.¹⁰ These strikes occurred at the level of the individual mills and departments. Some were driven by inflation; others were provoked by disputes over discipline and dismissals. The reorganization of work, sometimes real, and sometimes anticipated, also provoked industrial conflict. At the end of the war, the mill-owners anticipated the introduction of standardization and rationalization schemes. In the late 1920s and 1930s, the introduction of rationalization and standardization schemes had been pressed upon them by the colonial state as an alternative to the introduction of tariffs. Faced with severe foreign and domestic competition in a period of declining demand, the mill-owners had been unwilling to carry the risk of investment in the reorganization of their industry. They had proceeded cautiously, implementing changes in uneven and piecemeal fashion. In the 1920s and 1930s, rationalization had amounted to little more than the reduction of wages, the retrenchment of labour, and increased workloads.¹¹ Nonetheless, the introduction of rationalization schemes inevitably had an effect on wage differentials and increased the variations in production conditions between mills. As a result, mills competed for labour and wage differentials provoked strikes.

It had been apparent from the earliest days of the industry that the standardization of wages would remove a significant and avoidable cause of labour unrest.¹² However, the Mill-owners' Association had found it impossible to impose a standard wage list on their members in the 1930s.

10. *Labour Gazette*, 27:11 (July 1948), p. 1491.

11. Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, ch. 8.

12. *Report of the Industrial Disputes Committee* (Bombay, 1922). Also CK 1890s.

Not only did individual mills resist any meddling in their mechanisms of labour discipline and control, but they were also fully aware that a standard list might force them to raise their wages in particular occupations. In the slump of the 1930s, they remained averse to this outcome. In seeking to postpone the implementation of a standardization scheme in the late 1930s, the Mill-owners' Association had observed that it would be easier to secure the acceptance of its members in a period of buoyant demand, swelling profits, and rising wages.¹³ In the mid 1940s, the Mill-owners' Association recognized that the drift towards a minimum wage for workers paid according to time, the effects of changes in piece-rates as a result of conciliation proceedings and the adoption of a uniform scale for the payment of a dearness allowance had tended in the preceding few years to iron out some variations in earnings between mills had been.¹⁴ It might now be easier to devise a standard list acceptable to their members.

At the same time, with the disruption of international trade and the destruction of Japan, the Bombay mills, in the aftermath of World War II, encountered less fierce foreign competition and experienced more favourable conditions both in their domestic and their export markets. In a period in which they anticipated rising profits, the mill-owners regarded the task of a more comprehensive programme of "rationalization" with more enthusiasm. In the late 1920s and 1930s, the mill-owners had already recognized that rationalization could enable them to reduce the status of the weavers and break the resistance of their most recalcitrant workers. During World War II, their productive capacity had severely limited their ability to make the most of expanding opportunities. "The first duty of the prudent mill-owner", their Chairman intoned at their annual general meeting in 1941, "is to ensure that provision is made for the renewal and renovation of productive equipment".¹⁵ On the eve of Independence and in its aftermath, the mill-owners welcomed the Congress doctrine that industrial production was vital to the task of nation building and that strikes were a blow aimed at the Indian people as a whole. Simultaneously, in 1946, the Millowners' Association decided to introduce a standardization scheme, rather similar in structure to the one they had presented to the Textile Labour Inquiry Committee in 1939.¹⁶ The Industrial Court's arbitration award, following the Girni Kamgar

13. Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, ch. 8.

14. S.R. Deshpande, *Report on an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour in the Cotton Mill Industry in India*, *The Labour Investigation Committee, Government of India* (Simla, 1946), p. 13; *Annual Report of the BMOA*, 1945.

15. *Annual Report of the BMOA*, 1940, p. iii.

16. "Proceedings of the Industrial Court", *Labour Gazette*, 26:10 (June 1947), p. 781. The scheme did, however, incorporate some minor revisions.

Union's rejection of the scheme, ensured that the standardized wage list was put into effect from 1 January 1947.¹⁷

In anticipation of a standard wage list and changes in working conditions associated with "rationalization", mill-owners and managers reported that workers had begun in 1946 to slow down production. In addition, rates of absenteeism rose steadily, reaching by 1946–1947 twice the level of 1937–1938.¹⁸ By slowing down production, workers calculated that piece rates would have to be fixed at a low level of output. Once the standardized rates came into effect, the weaver, for instance, could expect to increase his earnings by working normally. Similarly, workers hoped that going slow would provide some defence against rationalization schemes being pegged at levels that enabled the retrenchment of labour and demanded considerably increased workloads.¹⁹

The attempt by workers to slow down production coincided with the efforts of the mill-owners to increase production to take full advantage of their buoyant markets. Managers, supervisors and jobbers now sought to extract higher levels of production. Workers were driven harder under the threat of disciplinary sanctions.²⁰ Inevitably, the tensions and conflicts that marked labour relations were not only focused upon, but also heightened at, the point of production. They were concentrated upon the increasingly fractious relationship between jobbers and workers. By 1946–1947, mill-owners made demands on the jobbers that the latter could now barely deliver. Jobbers could no longer, under these conditions, reconcile workers to the demands of the mill management without alienating them and they had less space in which to represent, let alone, remedy the workers' grievances. The Industrial Conditions Enquiry Committee observed that "the driving force of discipline and supervision" could no longer contain the widespread "insubordination and indiscipline" of the workers.²¹ In other words, the jobber system was no longer able to maintain discipline at the point of production.

As the jobber's position weakened at the level of the individual mill by the mid 1940s, it was further compromised by the political volatility and in particular, the deepening rivalries and antagonisms manifested in workers' politics. Of course, there was nothing new or surprising about rivalries and factionalism that marked the politics of labour in Bombay. However, these rivalries quickened and expanded after the collapse of the general strike of 1934 and they intensified during the Congress ministry between 1937 and 1939. In the late 1930s, the city's Congress revived its efforts to establish a political base within the mill districts, largely under the direction of the

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 770–787.

18. *Interim Report of the Industrial Conditions Committee*, p. 31.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 19; *Labour Gazette*, 26:2 (August 1947), pp. 977–978.

20. *Interim Report of the Industrial Conditions Enquiry Committee*, p. 19.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

S.K. Patil, and his “right-hand man”, Keshav dada Borkar, and formed the Rashtriya Girni Kamgar Sangh. At the same time, Ambedkar’s Independent Labour Party and, with far more modest success, the Royists and the Congress Socialists and sundry other aspirants to lead labour formed trade unions, attempted to recruit members and tried to draw workers away from their rivals. The recriminations that followed the 1940 general strike developed the differences between trade unions and their leaders into bitter conflicts and antagonisms.

In the 1940s, the apparent decline of the communists in the mill districts of Bombay provided an impetus to the conduct of these rivalries. In the 1920s and 1930s, the communist leadership of the Girni Kamgar Union had appealed to the working classes by its stance of unremitting opposition to the mill-owners and the state. In the 1940s, now waging the People’s War, they adopted a resolutely conciliatory posture. By contrast, the Congress in Bombay, which had shown little sympathy for or interest in the concerns of the working classes, now appeared far more consistently hostile to the state than the communists did.²² In the early 1940s, as the communists found their support among the working classes waning, the Congress sensed an opportunity to establish a firm presence in Girangaon.

In 1945, they had every reason to do so. Building a significant following in the mill districts might pay dividends both in the elections that were imminent and, in the longer run, as independence and universal suffrage beckoned. Seeking to capitalize on its gains during the 1940s, the Congress founded its own union textile workers’ union, the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS), in 1945. Immediately, the RMMS began to compete with the Girni Kamgar Union for members and subscriptions. In this task, the RMMS was sometimes blessed with the active support or, at least, with the benevolence and encouragement of some mill-owners and mill managers. To compete for working-class support with other better established rivals in the mill districts, the RMMS and its protagonists had to enter into the political networks of the working-class neighbourhoods, based upon jobbers and mill supervisors, landlords and grain dealers, *dadas* and moneylenders. In competing for alliances within the political networks of Girangaon, the Congress had a major, and increasingly significant, advantage in their proximity to power and their access to patronage. The city’s Congress could almost immediately measure the efficacy of their strategies with some satisfaction. In the 1946 elections, M.Y. Nurie, the Congress candidate for the Bombay City and Suburban Districts Textile Unions very nearly defeated Dange, the doyen of the Girni Kamgar Union and once the dominant political leader in Girangaon.²³

Soon after accepting office in 1946, the Congress Government swiftly

22. GOB, Home (Special), File 1110 (6) – A (1) of 1942, MSA.

23. *Labour Gazette*, 25:7 (March 1946), p. 489; P.D. Kulkarni.

introduced and passed the Bombay Industrial Relations Act. Its immediate effect was to bring the ferocious and often violent rivalries between trade unions into the workplace. When the previous Congress Ministry had introduced the Bombay Trades Disputes Bill in 1938, it had hoped to undermine the communist Mill Mazdoor Union and to blunt its threat to the Textile Labour Association in Ahmedabad. In 1946, they were seeking to entrench the position of the RMMS in Bombay. Indeed, the new legislation in 1946 sought to establish a single union within the industry. The government explained that its aim, in introducing the Act, was “to supply a very real impetus for the growth of sound organizations of industrial and other workers” and “to ensure that [...] efficient production is not hampered by thoughtless and needless stoppages of work”.²⁴

By the provisions of the Trade Disputes Act of 1938, to be deemed “representative”, a trade union had to claim one-quarter of the industry’s workforce for its membership. With the exception of the Girni Kamgar Union in 1928–1929, no union had ever achieved this strength. The Bombay Industrial Relations Act of 1946 introduced a new category of “approved” unions. These unions could secure “representative” status by enrolling as their members only 15 per cent of the workforce. To qualify, trade unions had to renounce the option to strike until all other means of resolution had been exhausted and they had to undertake not to initiate action, unless it was sanctioned by a majority vote by secret ballot. The implementation of this procedure would ensure that when workers began to organize a strike, their employers would have sufficient time to dismiss them or, alternatively, to break their organization. In effect, this provision meant that trade unions would have to renounce strikes in return for “approved” status. Conversely, the Registrar of Trade Unions could deny “approval” if he was “satisfied that it is not being conducted bona fide in the interests of its members, but to their prejudice”.²⁵ Since the communists had long been characterized by the mill-owners, officials, and propertied elites as acting against the workers’ “real” interests, it was not unrealistic to expect that this discretionary power would be deployed against the red-flag unions.

An “approved” union was allowed access to the workplace. It could collect dues from workers on wage payment day. It could deploy

24. *Labour Gazette*, 25:9 (1946), pp. 670–671. The mill-owners had long shared this objective, but they did not welcome the measure. They suspected that it was simply an attempt to fabricate a place for the RMMS in the industry. In their interpretation, the Congress was simply attempting to usurp the position that communists had occupied in the industry. In 1947, on the eve of Independence, the mill-owners were extremely reluctant to surrender their freedom to “manage” their labour force to the Congress Raj; Chairman’s Speech, Annual General Meeting, 15 May 1947, *Annual Report of the BMOA*, 1946, pp. iii–iv.

25. These sweeping powers were contained in clause 23(vi) of the Bombay Industrial Relations Act, 1946. The text of the Act was published in the *Labour Gazette*, 26:9, (May 1947), pp. 681–713.

conciliation procedures on behalf of the workers. It also acquired the exclusive right to negotiate on behalf of the workforce and to represent it in conciliation and arbitration proceedings.²⁶ While the 1938 legislation had established a Court of Industrial Arbitration, it had made the agreement of both parties to the dispute a precondition for the institution of arbitration proceedings. During the war, in 1941, however, the Act had been amended to make arbitration compulsory. In effect, the 1946 Act defined yet more closely the limits within trade unions could act by stipulating that only “approved” unions would be allowed to represent the workers in arbitration proceedings. By requiring the single “approved” and “registered” industry to invoke the conciliation and arbitration procedures before embarking on a strike, extending the sanctions that the employers and state could command against strikers and tightening measures to exclude the Girni Kamgar Union from the industry, the new act considerably raised the impediments to the organization of general strikes. No legislation could have been more specifically designed to undermine and destroy the Girni Kamgar Union, or indeed any seemingly recalcitrant union.

As soon as the Bombay Industrial Relations Act was passed, trades unions scrambled to recruit members, establish agents in various mill departments, and claim “representative” status. Fierce competition to enrol members led to considerable turmoil and violence in the mills in the late 1940s.²⁷ Strikes occurred often as a consequence of the attempt by rival groups of workers, *dadas*, trade unions, and political parties tried to claim, or manoeuvred to develop, a following in the workplace.²⁸ The advent of independence, and, with it, the prospect of universal adult franchise, provided an incentive for political parties to create their own unions as means of gathering workers’ votes and mobilizing support during elections. As unions proliferated, the competition for members and for a foothold in the industry and in Girangaon only intensified.

In 1949, the RMMS was officially granted representative status on the basis of the membership list it claimed. No ballot was held to establish the preferences of the workers. The fact that the RMMS could collect its dues at the pay desk was a convenience for the union. That it was allowed access to the workplace and to seek redress for the daily problems of the workers proved a major advantage. As Bhai Bhonsle, later the General Secretary of the RMMS recalled,²⁹ workers “felt that all they have to do is give twelve rupees a year to these people and we have our problems solved; so what is

26. See M.D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1965), pp. 185–194.

27. *Interim Report of the Industrial Conditions Enquiry Committee*, p. 18.

28. M.P. Gandhi (ed.), *The Cotton Textile Industry Annual, 1946–47* (Calcutta, 1947/8), p. 32.

29. N. Adarkar and M. Menon, *100 Years, 100 Voices: The Millworkers of Mumbai: A Vanishing History* (Calcutta, forthcoming), pp. [ch. 2, p. 45].

the loss in doing this? Textile workers always know where their interests lie.” The representative status of the RMMS was challenged almost immediately and was repeatedly called into question over the following decades. Certainly, the general strike of 1950, called by the Girni Kamgar Union and the socialist Mill Mazdoor Sabha and sustained for over two months, cast grave doubt on the “representative” character of the RMMS.

The daily social relations of the workplace in the late 1940s were marked by an apparently high incidence of violence. In addition, strikes that related directly to the jobber occurred more regularly. In some cases, workers demanded the dismissal of the jobber, head jobber, or supervisory staff; in others, they demanded their reinstatement. In several cases, they merely protested against the treatment meted out by mill officials and jobbers. Underlying the proliferation of strikes was the mill-owners’ concern that their reforms had sufficiently weakened the jobber’s position that he could no longer maintain discipline at the level of the individual mill.

Measures taken in the 1930s to check the jobber’s power had limited his control over casual labour and weakened his position within the social organization of the neighbourhood. It had also tended to create opportunities for managers, supervisors, and departmental heads to intervene in the recruitment, supervision and control of the workers. Managers, spinning and weaving masters, and timekeepers had sometimes attempted to enter into the social and commercial networks of the neighbourhood. They sought, acquired and profited from a stake in its patronage networks. As they were drawn into a wider and more competitive social nexus, so they impinged more substantially upon the jobber’s domain.

While the tensions and conflicts of the workplace intensified, they were played out along a very wide front in the neighbourhoods. During the war, managerial demands upon the jobber increased both to drive workers harder and to reconcile them to falling real wages. By the mid 1940s, therefore, the jobbers found themselves beleaguered on every front. Their authority at the workplace as mill officials intervened more freely in their domain. Their influence with the workers declined as the patronage they once commanded was circumscribed, while tensions and conflict in the workplace deepened. Their place in the neighbourhood was subjected to severe competition both by political parties and trade union organizations, on the one hand, and, as their influence within the workplace was undermined, by commercial and social rivals in the neighbourhood.

Squeezed between managerial imperatives and workers’ resistance, jobbers were left with a narrowing freedom of manoeuvre. Like many others in a similarly intermediary position, their options were either to align themselves with the managers or to lead the resistance of the workers. By moving in the latter direction, they might hope to retain some influence

with the workers in their connection, but it incurred an increased risk of dismissal. In addition, if they attempted to act as the workers' champions, they would find themselves in competition with a wider array of political parties and trade-union leaders, power-brokers and neighbourhood bosses, even as their base within the workplace continued to weaken. On the other hand, if they aligned themselves with the mill management, they would quickly sacrifice their influence with the workers and lose such leverage as they commanded with the managers. Consequently, they were often either sucked into a lowly position within the managerial hierarchy or driven out of the mill.

During the ferocious conflicts of the workplace that occurred in the late 1940s, jobbers became either the objects of attack by workers who sensed an opportunity to get even, or, alternatively, they became engaged in a bitter contest for precedence and influence with the serried ranks of supervisors, "masters", and managers. Ten years earlier, while the mill-owners recognized that the jobber system was no longer an reliable instrument for preventing or breaking strikes coordinated across several mills, they valued its efficacy in maintaining discipline within the individual mill. By 1946, the jobber's position within the mill was beginning to appear untenable.

As the jobber's power declined, mill-owners saw less reason to defend their now apparently obsolete instrument of labour discipline. Indeed, during the volatile and panic-stricken years of the mid 1940s, it was far from clear that the jobber was capable of maintaining discipline at work. In fact, the jobber's presence in the workplace may have contributed to its collapse. On the other hand, as the mill-owners reclaimed their "right to manage" from the jobbers, it seemed as if the serried ranks of mill officials could not adequately handle its complex demands either. Increasingly, however, policy and legislation protected the mill-owners' position. The Bombay Industrial Relations Act now placed severe restrictions on the expression of workers' militancy. Following the Industrial Court's ruling, the standardized wage list had been put into effect. Individual mill-owners were now less averse to rationalization than they had been in the 1930s. As a result, the Millowners' Association could hope that some limits would be placed on the range of differences in the production conditions of their member mills. The Congress government could be relied upon to protect Indian industry in the domestic market, from foreign competition, if not from the increasingly subsidized hand-loom sector. The mill-owners found themselves by the end of the decade in a favourable political and economic climate for revamping their methods of labour recruitment and control.

In 1949, the Bombay government introduced a "de-casualization scheme" to regulate more closely the hiring of casual labour. Ostensibly, the state's objectives in intervening the industry's labour relations was "to

eliminate bribery, corruption and favouritism in the recruitment of textile workers”, to improve efficiency by “reducing labour turnover”, to minimize the “waiting period” of unemployed textile workers between jobs and to establish a system of training for *badlis* to ensure “a steady supply of efficient workers”.

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The “de-casualization scheme” replaced the jobber’s role in supplying *badlis* with an employment exchange and established rules by which it would operate. The scheme attempted to create a pool of casual labour that was attached to the industry and to ensure transparency in their hiring. In effect, it signalled the end of direct recruitment to the Bombay mills. In the 1930s, the mill-owners had argued that a central employment exchange would be impractical, largely because jobbers preferred to know the workers they hired. Now that a concerted attempt was being made to take recruitment out of the jobber’s hands, the old arguments became redundant. In the textile industry’s centenary volume, an anonymous writer declared triumphantly in 1951 that “crude and corrupt methods have now thoroughly been discredited”.³⁰

However, the celebrations were premature. By the mid-1950s, it was reported, nearly three-quarters of the casual workers in the mills had been hired through the employment exchange.³¹ The employment exchanges could not offer the flexibility that the business methods of the industry had always demanded. The jobber’s skill lay in expanding and contracting the supply of casual labour according to short-term fluctuations in demand. The employment exchanges simply could not cope with periodic labour shortages, created for instance, when workers returned to their villages to help with the harvest or for the marriage season in April and May. Nor could they cope with the expansion of labour needs created, for instance, by the re-opening of a mill or the adoption of an extra shift by one or more mills. In these circumstances, mills resorted to direct recruitment, inevitably subverting the order of seniority or even the occupational categories so crucial to the procedures of the employment exchange. In matters of recruitment, if not of discipline, the jobber’s functions had to be periodically revived, even if they were no longer performed by him alone or by the methods he had traditionally adopted.

30. Anon., [M.P. Gandhi?], “Labour in the Cotton Textile Industry”, in M.P. Gandhi (ed.), *Indian Cotton Textile Industry, 1851–1950: 1st Centenary Volume* (Bombay, 1951).

31. R.C. James, “Labour Mobility, Unemployment and Economic Change: An Indian Case”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 67:6 (1959), p. 549.