

Imperial power and popular politics

*Class, resistance and the state
in India, c. 1850–1950*

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 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

99-2354

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United
Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1998

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12 pt [vN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan.

Imperial power and popular politics: Class, resistance
and the state in India, c. 1850-1950 / Rajnarayan Shamrao Chandavarkar.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 59234 8 (hb). - ISBN 0 521 59692 0 (pb)

1. Capitalism - India - History - 19th century. 2. Capitalism -
India - History - 20th century. 3. Working class - India - History -
19th century. 4. Working class - India - History - 20th century.
5. Social classes - India - History - 19th century. 6. Social classes -
India - History - 20th century. 7. Imperialism - History. I. Title.

HC433.C445 1998

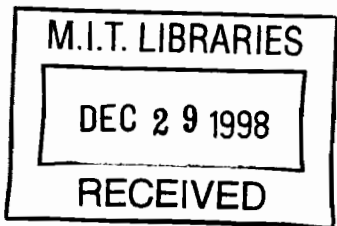
330.12'2'0954 - dc21 97-8911 CIP

ISBN 0 521 59234 8 hardback

ISBN 0 521 59692 0 paperback

For Jennifer

HC433
.c445
1998



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4 Workers' politics and the mill districts in Bombay between the wars

Between the wars, the development of a labour movement in Bombay reflected a growing polarization in social and political relations in the city. This period, which saw an intensification of social conflict, also witnessed changes in the character of industrial action. Until 1914, strikes in the cotton industry were largely confined to particular departments and mills; increasingly, after the war, they were coordinated across the industry as a whole. Rising prices and unprecedented profits which accompanied the post-war boom led to the demand for higher wages supported by two general strikes. In the mid-1920s, as the industry's markets slumped, attempts to cut wages were once again strongly resisted. With a slight improvement in their fortunes in the later 1920s, the millowners introduced 'rationalization' schemes; for the workforce this meant more work, less wages and higher chances of unemployment. Between April 1928 and September 1929, two general strikes crippled the industry for about eleven months, and the extension of these schemes and a further round of wage cuts led to another strike wave in 1933-34. Apart from several one-day closures, eight general strikes occurred in the industry between 1919 and 1940. The impact of this militancy was felt not only in other occupations in Bombay but also in other industrial centres, such as Sholapur and Ahmedabad. As Bombay became the scene of militant working-class action in India, its labour movement, under communist leadership since 1928, acquired an explicitly political direction.

Yet even as strikes were coordinated across several mills, no stable trade union growth occurred until the mid-1920s; subsequently, the unions remained weak, vulnerable and often ineffective. To some contemporaries, this suggested the existence of concealed sources of leadership within the working-class communities;¹ to most, it indicated the

¹ After the 1919 general strike, the Government of Bombay believed that 'while the workers had no accepted leaders' the conduct of the dispute 'appeared to indicate the probability of some controlling organisation'. J. Crerar, Secretary to GOB, to Secretary to GOI, Home, Delhi, 7/15 February 1919, in Bombay Confidential Proceedings, vol. 46, 1919, OIOC. This riddle of leadership bemused the *Bombay Chronicle*, too, in 1924 when it

malign intervention of the political agitator. More recently, our historiographical common sense has been overtaken by such notions as the political immaturity and rural passivity of Bombay's workers. Historians have thus been concerned with the 'survival' of the 'pre-industrial' characteristics of the workforce, rather than their rationality within an industrial context. The traditional loyalties of the working class, in this view, obstructed the development of 'modern' trade unions. These accounts have assumed that the development of labour politics in Bombay can best be understood in the light of existing models of an 'early' factory labour force. In the context of the Bombay textile industry, this remains a problematic assumption. It is not satisfactory either to portray a factory labour force which had been in existence for about half a century by 1918² as if it was in a 'nascent' state of formation, or to analyse its history as if it were in transition towards the product of another historical experience, or indeed to measure its development against some universal paradigm of 'class'.

It is perhaps by focusing too exclusively on the sphere of the workplace, by confining their model of social consciousness to what was reflected by trade union development, that historians have overlooked the extent to which workers were active in the making of their own politics. The dynamic of labour politics in the inter-war years, in one view, was the struggle between politicians, attempting to mobilize labour, and their traditional leaders, the jobbers in the cotton mills.³ The motive force behind labour militancy is thus located outside the realm which workers controlled: their political (and moral) choices, it would appear, were consistently being made by others. In such a view, the history of the working class becomes interchangeable with the history of their leaders, trade unions and political parties. As a result, the impact of labour militancy upon the development of labour politics in Bombay between the wars has been neglected; instead, the emphasis has rested upon the role of the nationalist and communist agitator and the role of the jobber, the agent of labour recruitment and control.

However, the weakness of trade union organizations did not prevent Bombay's workers from mounting an effective and sustained defence of

commented: 'it is absurd to suppose that the men are lacking in leadership . . . it is clear that there is good sound leadership among them somewhere'. *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 February 1924.

² The first cotton mill was built in 1856, see Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force*, p. 17.

³ R. Newman, 'Labour Organisation in the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1918-1929', unpublished D. Phil. thesis, University of Sussex, 1970; Kooiman, 'Jobbers and the Emergence of Trade Unions'. Morris attributes the growth of labour militancy to 'the role of the middle-class intellectual appearing in his first full-blown opposition to British rule', in *Industrial Labour Force*, p. 180.

their own interests. To understand the development of the perceptions and actions of Bombay's workers, therefore, we need to examine not only the social relationships of the workplace but particularly the context in which workers lived outside it. Since the earliest inquiries into the conditions of factory labour in Bombay, the interconnection between the spheres of workplace and neighbourhood have been frequently mentioned; but its implications for industrial politics have surprisingly remained neglected.

Customarily, the heterogeneity and cultural sectionalism of the working class is identified with the neighbourhood; yet in Bombay it provided an indispensable base for industrial action. Far from being herded peacefully by their jobbers and neighbourhood 'leaders', workers often acted to constrain them. The momentum of industrial action was not merely provided by men of prominence; sometimes it was maintained against them. Without organization and action in the neighbourhood, it is doubtful whether the general strikes could have been sustained. At the same time, the conduct of industrial action in the public arena of the street and the neighbourhood necessarily generalized the disputes of the workplace, at times brought workers into conflict with the state and created an explicitly political dimension for their struggle. While it would be misleading to portray Bombay's workers as a 'revolutionary proletariat' or indeed to play down the important tensions and antagonisms between them, it is in terms of the political culture of the working-class neighbourhoods that the scale of industrial action and the ascendancy of the communities can be explained.

I

From the late nineteenth century, a distinctly working-class district began to emerge in Bombay. Already in the 1850s, an official investigator had noticed the growing social and cultural distance between the mass of the population and 'the educated and more influential classes (whether Native or European) of our community'. 'The principal acquaintance of these [influential] classes with the Native Town', he wrote, 'is generally formed by traversing the Kalbadevee or Girgaum bazaar roads, in going from the country to the Fort, or from the Fort into the country; and of all the densely peopled districts lying *behind* these great thoroughfares, they generally know as little as they do of the interior of Africa.'⁴ The inception of industry added a further dimension to the city's social geography. An overwhelming majority of the common mills came to be situated in the

⁴ H. Coneybear, *Report on the Sanitary State and Requirements of Bombay*, Selections from the records of the Bombay Government, new series, vol. XI, (Bombay, 1855), p. 2.

three wards to the north of the old 'native town'. Increasingly the working classes, fairly evenly dispersed in the native town of the mid-nineteenth century, crowded into this area. By 1925, 90 per cent of the millworkers lived within fifteen minutes' walking distance of their place of work.⁵ To its inhabitants, this area came to be known as Girangaon, literally the mill village. As the labour movement gathered momentum between the wars, Girangaon ceased to be a mere geographical entity; rather it came to represent an active political terrain.

The physical structure of the working-class neighbourhoods imparted a certain public quality to its social life. The landscape of the mill district was dominated by ramshackle, jerry-built chawls packed closely into the land between municipal thoroughfares. A survey conducted in 1921 discovered that 27 per cent of the population in Parel and 33 per cent in Umerkhadi lived in rooms containing six or more persons.⁶ Another investigation conducted in the mid-1930s found over 35 per cent of families of 'untouchable' workers sharing a single room with at least one other family, while over 63 per cent lived in a single room.⁷ 'Every sixth person in the city', it was reported in 1939, 'lives in conditions which are prohibited even by the existing antiquated law'.⁸ The extent of overcrowding brought about by high rents, housing shortages and low wages meant that the inhabitants of the chawl spilled over into the courtyard of the wadi and the street.

The importance of the street did not derive simply from the fact that men lived on it. Street life imparted its momentum to leisure and politics as well; the working classes actively organized on the street. Thus, street entertainers or the more 'organized' tamasha players constituted the working man's theatre. The street corner offered a meeting place. Liquor shops frequently drew their customers and gymnasiums their members from particular neighbourhoods.⁹ Social investigators continue to be bemused that, when asked to give 'an account of their leisure time activities', the vast majority of workers 'could not be specific and

⁵ *Labour Gazette*, 4: 7 (March 1925), 745-7. This survey was based on a sample of 1,349 male and 715 female millhands.

⁶ J. Sandilands, 'The Health of the Bombay Workers', *Labour Gazette*, 1:2 (October 1921), 14-16.

⁷ G. R. Pradhan, 'The Untouchable Workers of Bombay City,' unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Bombay, 1936.

⁸ *Report of the Rent Enquiry Committee*, vol. I (Bombay, 1939), p. 9. The committee noted pertinently that the minimum space required by the Bombay Jail Manual for a prisoner was double that which was stipulated as permissible under the Bombay Municipal Act of 1888. It also reported that 256,379 people lived in rooms occupied by six or more persons and 15,490 lived in rooms with at least twenty others, see pp. 7-9.

⁹ For a description of the social life of the mill districts in this period, see Parvatibai Bhor, *Eka Rannaraginichi Hakikat*, as told to Padmakar Chitale (Bombay, 1977).

said that they pass time roaming, which they consider a mode of relaxation'.¹⁰

The pleaders' offices, which proliferated along the streets of the mill district during the 1910s, were focal points of organization in industrial and political action; some also became important centres of social activity. 'There is a constant stream of millhands to these offices', noted the police commissioner in 1914, 'which in the evening especially become a regular "rendez-vous"'. Here the millhand gets in touch with the Brahmans or Marathas, who read the vernacular newspapers to them, and not infrequently incite them to go on strike.¹¹ With the 'professionalization' of trade unionism in the 1920s, the methods of recruitment and publicity continued to be reminiscent of the modes of the street entertainer. S. H. Jhabvala, admittedly one of the most 'professional' publicists of labour's cause, and an official of nearly twenty unions in 1929, thus described his own recruiting drive:

I would stand at the end of the street when the factories were whistled off and would cry 'Ye who are fallen and miserable, come ye here and I shall help you out of the slough of distress'. A few letters were scribbled on behalf of the distressed individuals, posted by me to their employers and God helps those who help themselves, strange enough a couple of them were solved, and the poor illiterate flocks thought that I was a good instrument for the redress of their evil lot . . . Often I ventured to take a yellow-robed saint with me who attracted a larger crowd. Mr Ginwalla managed to pay him eight annas per day, because he rolled in wealth and had no issue. He [the saint] sang Mahratta songs and I afterwards gave a dose of unionism . . . The result was that in a short time flocks of people, man [sic], women and children anxiously waited for me to hear some of their grievances and to get them solved.¹²

In its contrasting political style, the communist Girmi Kamgar Union sustained the political momentum of the working-class neighbourhoods by holding regular processions and public meetings – at times, these were an almost daily occurrence. Their public commemorations of notable events in the socialist tradition – from the birth of Marx to the death of Parashuram Jadhav, a worker killed in police firing during the 1928 strike in Bombay – were sometimes well attended, and at all times contributed to the pageantry of political activity.

Although these forms of social behaviour can be identified with the neighbourhood, they cannot be considered in isolation from the context of work. The separation of workplace and neighbourhood was more

¹⁰ K. Patel, *Rural Labour in Industrial Bombay* (Bombay, 1963), p. 150.

¹¹ General Department, Order no. 3253/62-Conf; 15 May 1917, in *Bombay Confidential Proceedings* (1917), vol. 25, p. 15, OIOC.

¹² *Proceedings of the MCC*, statement by S. H. Jhabvala, vol. II, non-communist series, pp. 786–7. The fact that the Bible – as Jhabvala told the Meerut court – was 'one of my daily readings' perhaps explains his prose style.

evident in the cotton textile industry than, for instance, in the smaller artisanal workshops;¹³ yet in the textile industry as well these two social spheres were inextricably connected. Nowhere is this to be seen more clearly than in the role of the jobber, who straddled the boundaries between workplace and neighbourhood. Usually promoted from the shopfloor, the jobber was delegated vast powers over the workforce. So as to enable him to discipline labour effectively, management allowed him considerable discretion in the employment and dismissal of workers – the ultimate weapons of labour control. In return, the millowners expected their jobbers to keep production going: in other words, to maintain an adequate supply of labour, to resolve disputes between workers and to ensure industrial peace. The execution of these functions was complicated by the fact that the day-to-day demand for labour varied, partly because of absenteeism and partly in response to market fluctuations, which determined the counts of yarn to be spun or the type of cloth to be woven and thereby governed the amount of labour required by management. Each mill employed a sizeable proportion of its workers on a casual, daily basis. Across the industry as a whole, this was estimated at 28 per cent of the average daily employment.¹⁴ So every jobber had to maintain connections with potential badli or 'substitute' labourers to meet fluctuations in the daily demand for labour.

It was, therefore, integral to the jobber's managerial functions that he should acquire and maintain connections outside the workplace. To recruit and discipline workers 'with success', recorded the *Gazetteer*, the jobber is 'bound to have a following of men and boys who usually live in the same neighbourhood and often in the same chawl as himself'.¹⁵ Burnett Hurst, in his study of the condition of wage-earners in Bombay in the 1920s, observed that the jobber 'endeavours to acquire an influence over his friends and acquaintances who live in the same or neighbouring chawls. He lends them money, advises them on family affairs and arbitrates in disputes. When labour is required, he uses the influence so gained and is generally successful in procuring hands'.¹⁶ Later evidence, however, suggests that this picture of close neighbourhood control must

¹³ For the organization of the handloom-weaving workshops in the city see R. E. Enthoven, *The Cotton Fabrics of the Bombay Presidency* (Bombay, 1897). The separation of workplace and neighbourhood in the mill district also had its physical aspect. The mill compounds resembled fortresses in the mill district, protected by high walls, iron gates and sentries equipped with lathis.

¹⁴ Labour Office, Bombay, *General Wage Census, Part I; the Perennial Factories: Report on the Wages, Hours of Work, and Conditions of Industry in the Textile Industries (Cotton, Silk, Wool and Hosiery) in the Bombay Presidency (including Sind), May 1934* (Bombay, 1937), p. 20.

¹⁵ *Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, compiled by S. M. Edwardes, 3 vols. (Bombay, 1909), vol. I, p. 493.

¹⁶ A. R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay: A Study in the Economic Conditions of the Wage-Earning Classes in Bombay* (London, 1925), pp. 46–7.

be modified. Jobbers did not always live in the same chawls as their workers, and workers from a single mill did not usually live together.¹⁷ There can be little doubt, however, that the jobber's power within the workplace rested upon his connections outside, and that at least some jobbers actively invested in the development of a following and a network of power and influence. What Ambalal Sarabhai said of the jobber in Ahmedabad could equally apply to Bombay: 'He becomes a jobber if he has friends and relatives in important positions in the mills and is also a favourite of the head of the department; the chances of his becoming a jobber entirely on his own merit are very few.'¹⁸

Not all jobbers sought to build these connections; but few could ignore them altogether. They attempted to establish themselves at influential points within the material structure of the neighbourhood. Frequently, they acted as rent collectors, sub-lessors and occasionally even as landlords. They sometimes helped to organize the *khanavalis* or boarding houses which catered specially for groups of single workers. They also lent money on their own account and more often guaranteed loans. Indeed, loans guaranteed by a jobber could be obtained at discounted rates of interest.¹⁹ They sometimes ran liquor shops and gymnasiums, and were often active in the organization of religious ceremonies and festivals. Their authority at the workplace and the influence they acquired outside made them valuable members of chawl committees and caste panchayats as well as useful allies for politicians at various levels. These high-flying connections, deriving from their position at work, in turn enhanced their value within the neighbourhood. This range of activities did not, however, simply establish the jobber as a provider. His services to the community as well as his disciplinary function at the workplace placed him in a situation of potential conflict with the workers.

For the millowners, in turn, the jobber's connections outside the workplace increased his value as an agent of discipline. These connections were usually based on the caste, kinship and village ties of the jobber. Recruitment through the jobber ensured that the cultural diversity of the workers was brought into the workplace; consequently, the jobber served as an impressive bulwark against combination and provided

¹⁷ BDEC, oral evidence, Dhaku Janu Lad, pp. 103-5; Mathura Kuber, p. 499, Daji Sakharam, p. 507 and several others in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III B of 1938, MSA. Such evidence should modify the widely accepted picture of the jobber's awesome *personal* control, which has tended to neglect the institutional basis of his power.

¹⁸ *RCLI, Evidence, Bombay Presidency (including Sind), 1929-31* (London, 1931), vol. I, pt I, pt i, written evidence, Seth Ambalal Sarabhai, Ahmedabad Manufacturing and Calico Printing Co. Ltd, p. 277.

¹⁹ Proceedings of the Bombay Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-31, File 12 c, Replies to the questionnaire . . . submitted by the Currimbhoy Ebrahim Workmen's Institute, MSA.

a useful mechanism for strike-breaking. Significantly, it was when working-class militancy began to complicate the jobber's task of disciplining labour that the millowners grew concerned about the efficiency of his role in production and in the mid-1930s took steps to modify their methods of recruitment.

Workplace and neighbourhood were brought into relation with each other not only by the methods of labour recruitment but also by the uncertain conditions of employment. Periods of unemployment and chronic underemployment were commonly experienced by many millworkers, and even the 'permanent' jobs, which were held in high esteem, offered little security. Not surprisingly, workers organized outside the workplace to hedge against their narrow and fluctuating margins of survival. These informal welfare systems, or arrangements for mutual assistance, were based on their immediate social connections. Not only did migration occur within these connections of caste, kin and village, but workers also relied upon them to find work and housing, and turned to them in periods of distress. For instance, groups of single male workers, often from the same village, would rent a room together. As residents left, their friends and relatives who had moved to the city were also given a share.²⁰ This practice has inspired thought about its anthropological significance: the re-creation of villages within the city or the recourse to traditional ways of life. However, it probably bears a simpler explanation: that this was an obvious response to housing shortages and high rents.

In 1936, one social investigator noted 'the fact that distant relations, with a view to finding a job in Bombay, come and live with their relatives here'. But he also suggested the double-sidedness of this dependency when he reported that workers 'find it very difficult to pay the rent . . . and therefore . . . they keep sub-tenants . . . People cannot generally afford to have one room per family'.²¹ Such arrangements fulfilled a reciprocal need: newly-arrived migrants had a place to stay and contacts through which to find work; the more established residents were able to meet their living costs, renew their rural ties, fulfil family obligations and even extend their sphere of influence in the city. The importance of these social arrangements was reflected by the fact that, as far as housing was concerned, 'the neighbourhood of persons of one's own circle is sought'.²² It is the political consequences of these interconnections between workplace and neighbourhood that the rest of this essay will explore.

²⁰ See Patel, *Rural Labour in Industrial Bombay*, p. 72. The most noted example of such organization was the 'clubs' established among the Goanese in Bombay. They were financed by subscription and operated as a welfare system, giving preference to the unemployed among them, see *RCLI, Evidence*, vol. I, part i, The Bombay Seamen's Union, p. 293. ²¹ Pradhan, 'The Untouchable Workers', pp. 7-12.

²² *Report of the Rent Enquiry Committee*, vol. I, p. 20.

II

If the social patterns of the neighbourhood cannot be abstracted from their material context, nor can they be portrayed as if they were devoid of political conflict. Not only in devising strategies for living but also in industrial and political action, workers had to act across the boundaries of workplace and neighbourhood. As spheres of social action, workplace and neighbourhood are frequently assumed to exert opposite pressures on the development of workers' perceptions and actions. At the workplace, it is said, economic factors assert their primacy in the conflict between capital and labour and the lines of class antagonism are clearly drawn. The social patterns of the neighbourhood, on the other hand, are cast in the image of villages transplanted to the city: here, workers appear to be the prisoners of their traditional loyalties. Yet time and again the urban neighbourhoods belied this image and the mill district became a militant and, at times, even an insurrectionary centre.

The image of the urban neighbourhood as composed of villages ruled by their headmen derived its plausibility from the informal welfare systems operating in Bombay. Undoubtedly, these welfare systems created opportunities for some people to establish themselves as patrons and providers. But it would be misleading to portray their power as if it ran in a single direction. A closer examination of these relationships between neighbourhood 'leaders' and their 'followers' suggests the limits of political command and indicates the social basis for collective action.

The jobber, the dada or neighbourhood boss, the grain dealer, the landlord, the moneylender, each acquired an impressive degree of influence in the course of their daily commerce. Yet few neighbourhood patrons were able to escape the constraints imposed upon them by the social and political demands of their clients. Their continued command of resources depended on their ability to fulfil the moral and material expectations of the neighbourhood. For instance, if the jobber's position at the workplace was based, as we have seen, on his influence within the political and economic structure of the neighbourhood, he was also constrained by this interdependence. Since his strength derived from the social and commercial ties he established with his workers, he had to remain receptive to their needs and responsive to their demands. It was when his patronage was extended to the wider organization of credit, housing and recreation that it was exposed to greater competition from rival jobbers as well as other neighbourhood patrons. Landlords, moneylenders, brothel-keepers and grain dealers no less than workers could choose between jobbers. The interdependence of his position within the workplace and the neighbourhood meant that a jobber had to

extend as far as possible the ambit of his control, unavoidably weakening his own lines of defence. Like all neighbourhood patrons, he had to compete not only for clients but also for the favour of those more powerful than himself, from employers and trade unions to politicians and minor officials.²³

By virtue of their place within the credit structure of the neighbourhood, shopkeepers and grain dealers also commanded considerable influence and some became desirable political allies.²⁴ In their case, too, their ability to do favours for people from their neighbourhood was central to their own business interests. Often, they were pressed to finance various social and political activities from festivals to strikes. The expenditure involved was sometimes considerable. For instance, it was reputed that, during Mohurram, mohollas spent between Rs 100 and Rs 400 to erect a tabut and carry it out in procession. Every street where a tabut was being prepared would also arrange for a maulvi to deliver the waaz up to the tenth day of the month. For his description over five nights of the martyrdom of Husain, the maulvi was paid between Rs 30 and Rs 100. These expenses were met – as was common to all religious observances – by the subscription of local residents. During Mohurram, it was said, 'youths preceded by drummers and clarionet players, wander through the streets, laying all the shopkeepers under contribution for subscriptions'.²⁵ Often these shopkeepers were non-Muslims. The shopkeepers had paid their dues – often, no doubt, with reluctance – because it was expected that they would. The relationship was more one of obligation than of enforcement. It was only when the arrangements of the ugarani, the

²³ Of course these relationships were not stagnant. Between the wars, the jobber's authority at the workplace diminished. This was partly because the growth of labour militancy made it increasingly difficult for him to reconcile the demands of his men with the imperatives of management. As the jobber's influence at work declined, it became more necessary and, at the same time, more difficult for him to entrench himself within the neighbourhoods. It was probably the case that, by the late 1930s, the jobber's position became less crucial to political and commercial advance in the neighbourhood. The extent of the jobber's decline should not, however, be exaggerated. In the mid-1930s, the Bombay Millowners' Association, in response to the declining efficacy of the jobber, introduced schemes to revamp the system of labour recruitment and control in the industry. However, individual mill managements remained the jobber's last defender. At the level of the individual mill, the jobber still retained his uses for management. Ineffective in countering industry-wide action, the jobber attempted to entrench himself in the neighbourhood in order to dominate more completely the politics of the particular mill. At this level, BMOA schemes to control the jobber met with considerable initial resistance from some of its own members. For a summary of the BMOA schemes to control badli hiring and the jobber system in general see the *Report of the Textile Labour Inquiry Committee*, vol. II: *Final Report* (Bombay, 1953), pp. 337–50; BMOA, *Annual Report* (1935), pp. 27–9 and BMOA, *Annual Report* (1936), pp. 37–40.

²⁴ BDEC, oral evidence, Ravji Devakram in GOB, HD (Special), File 550 (25) IIIB of 1938, pp. 277–9, MSA. ²⁵ *Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, vol. I, p. 185.

collection of funds for the tabut levied by each moholla, broke down that its operation became evident to the state. For this reason the violence of the arrangement was most noticeable to the police commissioner who wrote in 1911 that the money was 'extorted – there is no other word for it – from Marwadi and Bania merchants, who are threatened with physical injury unless they subscribe liberally'.²⁶

The first decade of the twentieth century was a sensitive period for the conduct of the Mohurram festival.²⁷ As the state intervened in this sphere, local shopkeepers discovered the language in which they could complain about the payments they had hitherto been obliged to make. The desire of the city police to intervene could find justification in the 'extortion' of which shopkeepers complained; at the same time, this gave the shopkeepers the means by which they could rid themselves of the burden imposed by these enforced payments. These complexities – and especially the expectations of the neighbourhood – can be illustrated by the outcome of a complaint lodged by some Marwadi merchants at Pydhoni police station that they were being harassed and assaulted by Muslims of the Bengalpura Moholla. When the police warned the 'leaders' of the moholla not to continue these extortions, 'this was treated as a grievance and Latiff himself had the impertinence to come to the Head Police Office and complain that "the police were not assisting the collection of funds"'.²⁸

A similar picture of service, obligation and reciprocity emerges from the role which shopkeepers played in the conduct of strikes. Without their long-term credit, the general strikes which lasted between a month and six months would not have been possible. During the 1919 general strike, for instance, even as the millworkers were out in the streets, most of the shops in the mill areas remained open.²⁹ This was at an early stage of the strike. Prolonged strikes often placed immense pressure on local credit arrangements. During the general strike of 1928, which lasted six months, workers had to turn to their lenders of last resort, reputed to charge the highest rates of interest: the Pathans. The Pathans' attempts to recover their loans was one important reason for the communal riots of February 1929.³⁰ During the general strike of 1940, the *Bombay Chronicle*

²⁶ Commissioner of Police, Bombay to Secretary, Judicial Department, Bombay, No. 545-C, 20 January 1911, reprinted in S. M. Edwardes, *The Bombay City Police*, Appendix, p. 198. Edwardes' account of Mohurram related largely to areas of the city outside the mill district. But some of these relationships described for these areas were equally applicable to the mill district.

²⁷ See J. Masselos, 'Power in the Bombay "Moholla" 1904–1915: An Initial Exploration into the World of the Indian Urban Muslim', *South Asia*, 6 (1976), 75–95.

²⁸ Edwardes, *Bombay City Police*, Appendix, p. 198.

²⁹ *Bombay Chronicle*, 13 January 1919.

³⁰ *Police Report on the Riots in Bombay, February 1929* (Bombay, 1929); *Report of the Bombay Riots Inquiry Committee* (Bombay, 1929).

reported that the cheap grain shops, offered to workers when they demanded an increased dearness-of-food allowance following the price rises which accompanied the outbreak of war, were unacceptable because they 'cut away the credit which workers had so far been enjoying with other grain merchants. In times of disputes between workers and employers, Bania grain dealers allow credit to workers to the extent of five or six months'.³¹ These were vital connections; even in times of industrial and political peace they could not be ignored; in moments of conflict, they were indispensable.

If the local shopkeeper was a figure of considerable importance, it was crucial to cultivate his protection and his patronage. For shopkeepers it was their ability to fulfil these functions that defined their local importance and drew them into more exalted political connections. During the one-day strike of 7 November 1938, Tukaram Laxman, determined to go to work, turned to the bidi or tobacco shop, when he was stopped by strikers: 'I requested the bidi shopkeeper to send me to work. I said "Mama, anyhow see that I get to work. Then the Bidiwalla asked the [presumably his] motor driver who was nearby to take me to my mill"'.³² On the same day, however, several grain shops were 'looted'. Baijnath Bahadur complained that strikers entered the shop in which he worked, removed the gunny cloth covering the grain, ate the grain and ran away.³³ The police commissioner described the looting of a shop near the Worli Chawls in similar terms: 'The shopkeepers were arguing with these people. The crowd seemed to treat the whole affair as a joke. They would just pick up a handful of grain and throw it'.³⁴ The apparent festivity with which these shops were looted concealed the underlying tensions in the relationship between shopkeepers and the residents of the neighbourhood.

The dada – essentially, a title for a neighbourhood leader – fascinated and repulsed contemporary observers. For the dominant classes of the city the dada symbolized the 'roughness' of industrial politics. Burnett Hurst described the 'dada' as 'a hooligan, who lives by intimidation. He is both lazy and dangerous'.³⁵ In public discourse, neither the employers' nor the workers' organizations cared to be connected with the world of the dada even though they operated within it. Anti-communists used the term to describe the following of communist unions; communists used it to signify strike-breakers. During the investigations which followed the

³¹ *Bombay Chronicle*, 7 February 1940.

³² BDEC, evidence of Tukaram Laxman, in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III B of 1938, p. 517, MSA.

³³ BDEC, evidence, Baijnath Bahadur in *ibid.*, p. 639.

³⁴ BDEC, evidence, W. R. G. Smith, Commissioner of Police, Bombay, in *ibid.*, p. 1049.

³⁵ Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay*, p. 49.

communal riots of 1929, Hindu and Muslim witnesses used the term in connection with the rival, rather than their own community.³⁶ In fact, 'dada' was a term of respect. Although, in public, everybody tried to dissociate themselves from 'dadas', as one trade unionist pointed out, 'I know personally that Dadas like to be called Dadas.'³⁷

The dada was not a special kind of working man. Several workers established themselves as dadas by participating in crucial neighbourhood activities such as the running of gymnasiums or rent collection. In the course of their activities, the dadas became, as V. H. Joshi, an official of the Girmi Kamgar Union put it, 'agents dealing in working people'.³⁸ The metaphor is instructive of the dada's vulnerability to the ultimate sanctions of neighbourhood politics: social and, in reality, commercial boycott. If the dada was 'an agent dealing in working people', he could not alienate his clientele. This was why 'the dadas left to themselves cannot harm a mass of people'.³⁹ For this reason dadas could be engaged against strikers least during periods of solidarity and most when they were in some ways least needed, at times of working-class vulnerability.

The scale of a dada's activities was determined by his social connections and the base from which he was able to operate. Some, like Keshav dada Borkar, dominated the whole area of Ghorapdeo for several decades; others were small men, neither recognized nor respected in the next chawl. In a sense, dada was properly a reputation rather than a status – a reputation for physical prowess or for getting things done. The dada, said Balubhai Desai, 'is a person who has got this reputation of controlling the hooligans by rendering services to the hooligans and protecting them, giving grain to them and really of course controlling them . . . some of these Dadas are rich'.⁴⁰ Their ability to exert this control depended upon their facility in providing such services. They did not always fight themselves, but they could mobilize men to do their fighting and in any case their leadership depended upon the belief that they were capable of fighting. In order to protect their followers they had to have the means to pay surety for those of their men who were arrested 'and help in any other way they can'. It was only 'in that way they collect the hooligans'.⁴¹ To build and maintain a following a dada needed influential friends and patrons; but to catch the eye of the great, let alone achieve a following, he needed to cut a figure on the street corner and in the chawl. Such prominence was often achieved through the leadership of a gymnasium.

³⁶ BRIC, oral evidence, Balubhai Desai, File 8, and A. R. Dimitimkar and S. Nabiullah, File 7, MSA.

³⁷ BRIC, oral evidence, G. L. Kandalkar and V. H. Joshi, p. 71, MSA. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61. ⁴⁰ BRIC, oral evidence, Balubhai T. Desai, File 8, pp. 29–31, MSA.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

These gymnasiums, where wrestling contests were held and where men trained in stick play, proliferated in the mill district. Their cultural and political role will be examined later in this essay. What must be stressed here is that they formed an important part of the dada's domain. It was here that dadas served their apprenticeship and it was through these gymnasiums that they often built their reputations. According to V. B. Karnik, the prominent trade union leader of the 1930s,

every gymnasium used to have, say, two dozen or three dozen or sometimes even a much bigger number of students and those students were under the control of the gymnasium – that is the dada who taught at the gymnasium. And that dada could utilise his students in any way that he liked . . . Every party tried to get the support of one dada or the other.⁴²

The extent to which workplace and neighbourhood overlapped and the roles of jobber and dada could be combined was indicated by Dhaku Janu Lad, a jobber in the Bombay Cotton Mill. He had been prevented from going to work during the one-day strike of 7 November 1938. His less prominent brother had, however, managed to enter the mill. Because his brother had not returned when the first shift should have ended, Dhaku Janu walked to the mill to see whether he needed help. Crowds of strikers who had failed to stop some workers entering the mills, now decided to prevent them from leaving instead. The police might escort the workers out of the workplace, but they could not extend this service to their doorsteps. For this reason, it was unsafe for the workers to leave the mill. When Dhaku Janu approached the mill gates, 'those who were working in the mill went up to the Manager as soon as they recognised me'. The manager sought the help of the police to escort the workers out of the mill, and Dhaku Janu Lad took two separate groups of workers to their rooms.⁴³ The provision of this kind of service was among the most crucial demands made upon dadas and jobbers. They acted as informal guardians of a public order and morality which they interpreted, sometimes arbitrarily, and enforced without an excess of decorum.

The material conditions which made informal welfare organization necessary for most workers also created nodes of power and influence in the neighbourhood. The struggles waged around the jobber, the grain dealer and the dada indicate the reciprocity of these power relations. As people got together to meet their social needs, their actions defined the extent, and the limits, of social control. It is important to turn from the institutional basis of dominance in the neighbourhood – arising from its

⁴² Interview, V. B. Karnik, April 1979.

⁴³ BDEC, evidence, Dhaku Janu Lad, GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III B of 1938, pp. 103–17, MSA.

material structure – to the patterns of association which occurred within them. The collectivities fostered by the conduct of religious festivals, especially in the earlier twentieth century, and the gymnasiums of the mill district reveal how social behaviour itself provided a basis for political mobilization.

The relationship between these collectivities and politics is difficult to determine. Of course, the fact that men were brought together to crack a pot during the Gokulashtami, carrying Ganpati to the sea or dance with the *tolis* bands at Mohurram did not mean that they could then be frogmarched into politics. The observance of some religious occasions, such as the Ganpati festival, had an explicitly political content and others, like Mohurram during the early years of the twentieth century, began to reflect social antagonisms, invited the intervention of the state and were dragged into the public domain.⁴⁴

The associations which emerged in the conduct of religious observances became the focal points of community sentiment and rivalry. The internal structure and organization of the *melas* – the companies of dancers at Gokulashtami – provide further insight into the complex interplay between leaders and followers. Participation in a *mela* sometimes depended upon the payment of an entrance fee, a monthly subscription and contributions to the general expenses of the *mela*. Before being admitted to the *mela*, each entrant had to take an oath in which he swore not to divulge its secrets to any other *mela* and not to join its opposing or rival party even if he severed his connections with his own. Group loyalty was a central feature of these *melas*. The leader of the *mela* was afforded considerable respect, usually being a man of some local prominence, and it was expected that the members of the *mela* would remain strictly obedient to him. But the leader had to manage the *mela*, protect its interests and was held personally responsible for making all the necessary arrangements on the day. His continued leadership depended upon satisfying his team.⁴⁵

In their organization, leadership and group loyalties, these associations resembled street or neighbourhood gangs. As one observer of the *tolis* bands which danced at Mohurram wrote:

Each street has its own band to parade the various quarters of the city and fight with bands of rival streets. If the rivalry is good humoured, little harm accrues; but if, as is sometimes the case, feelings of real resentments are cherished, heads are apt to be broken and the leaders find themselves consigned to the care of the police.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See R. I. Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), pp. 75–97; Masselos, 'Power in the Bombay "Moholla"', 75–95. ⁴⁵ K. Raghunathji, *The Hindu Temples of Bombay* (Bombay, 1900).

⁴⁶ Cited by the *Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, vol. I, pp. 187–8.

The dynamic of neighbourhood competition on such occasions lay in the reputation which neighbourhood leaders, especially the *dadas* who led these gangs, were seeking to gain or conserve. These rivalries were part of the permanent social relationships of the neighbourhood, not the product of spectacular occasions alone.

Like the great festivals, the gymnasium was an important, albeit less public, focus of working-class culture. The *akhada* or gymnasium was not necessarily a place which the 'respectable' abjured. Sir Purshottamadas Thakurdas announced proudly that he had trained at one in his youth and that he now sent his grandson to an *akhada*. Balubhai Desai, the Congress politician, claimed in 1929 that he still attended an *akhada*. It was, however, he added, an *akhada* only for 'decently behaving gentlemen', and he chose it because it was the only gymnasium in Bombay with machines 'for reducing fat which I am taking advantage of'. A more common feature of gymnasiums, however, was *lathi-play*. Those who trained in *akhadas* thus acquired a special skill. Balubhai Desai applauded its use as a form of self-defence. 'A *lathi*', he said, 'can give you protection if you are surrounded even by 50 people and you can escape unscathed.'⁴⁷ But *akhadas* were not associated with physical culture or self-defence alone. Young men, brought together at a gymnasium, skilled at fighting and trained in the use of *lathis*, had considerable potential for political mobilization, and frequently provided a basis for neighbourhood action. As social centres, gymnasiums could also become focal points of political organization. According to the moderate labour leader, Syed Munawar, '*akhadas* and *teashops* were the rendezvous of riff raffs and hooligans . . . those were the best places for them to meet'.⁴⁸ During the communal riots of 1929, they were again identified as sources for the organization of violence. Indeed, one witness argued that the Muslims had been put at a disadvantage in the riots by the decline of the Muslim *dada* 'since the Mohurram *taboot* processions in Bombay were stopped more than 15 years ago, and since the closing of the Muslim *talimkhanas*'.⁴⁹

Gymnasiums were also pulled into industrial action, on both sides, by strikers and management alike. Some workers, by virtue of being *dadas*, could deploy the gymnasium members in support of a strike, while the management recruited strike-breakers from their ranks. The role of the gymnasiums in political mobilization is more easily identified than the part they played in industrial action. Political pamphlets and the reported speeches of strike leaders often claimed that gymnasiums were being used in strike-breaking. But it is extremely difficult to document the relationship between gymnasiums and mill managements. Obviously, strike-

⁴⁷ BRIC, oral evidence, Balubhai T. Desai, File 8, pp. 69–71, MSA.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, oral evidence, Syed Munawar, File 3, p. 279.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, oral evidence, A. R. Dimtimkar and S. Nabiullah, p. 271.

breaking could offer gymnasiums a means of earning an income; the greater their income the better equipped they would be in relation to other gymnasiums, the more effective in attracting members and perhaps the more successful in the contests arranged between them. It is easy to see that strike-breaking could become an activity essential to the success of some gymnasiums. From the point of view of the jobbers or the management, importing the hired strength of a gymnasium to settle scores on the shopfloor was not always advisable, nor often necessary. It was only when the employer 'became desperate and wanted to see that the mill started again', when he felt he had exhausted all other options, according to V. B. Karnik, the Royist labour leader,

that he would get hold of a dada and recruit some strike-breakers . . . it all depended upon the market; if there was demand for cloth then he was anxious to re-open the mill; if there was no demand for cloth then he was not so keen; if the mill remained closed for a week or ten days or even a month it did not matter to him.⁵⁰

There is as yet little available evidence on the organization and working of gymnasiums. Such evidence as exists suggests that the organization of some gymnasiums could be extremely elaborate. For instance, the Hanuman Vyayam Shalla was found in 1912 by a certain Narayan Rao. By 1928 it claimed branches in parts of the city as dispersed as Vajreshwari, on the outskirts of Bombay in the neighbouring Thana district, and Bhoiwada in the heart of the mill district, apart from its headquarters in Prabhadevi. In January 1928 it acted as host to a contest between fifty other gymnasiums from all over Bombay. This particular occasion involved over 150 wrestling bouts and the collection amounted to over Rs 2,500. It was likely that a lot of money would pass through gymnasiums; no doubt competition for their control could be fierce. Elections were held to decide the constitution of the committee. Gymnasiums sometimes even advertised their elections in the Marathi press, notifying their members of the time and place at which they would be held, and announcing how they could establish their qualification to vote. The candidates were sometimes men of considerable importance. In the case of the Shri Samarth Vyayam Mandir, the nationalist campaigner, Dr N. D. Savarkar, offered himself as a candidate.⁵¹

It was as much a mark of prestige for gymnasiums, as it was for chawl committees and neighbourhood leaders, to be able to invite eminent people to their great occasions. When the Hanuman Vyayam Shalla held its contest in January 1928 it invited S. K. Bole, founder of the Kamgar Hitvardhak Sabha and, in 1928, vice-president of the Bombay Textile

⁵⁰ Interview, V. B. Karnik, April 1979. ⁵¹ *Nava Kal*, 6 January 1928.

Labour Union, to preside at the function. S. K. Bole, it was reported, gave the gymnasium a handsome donation.⁵² Because of their obvious importance in political mobilization, politicians and trade unionists did not treat such connections lightly. Indeed, their political relevance enabled gymnasiums and their dadas to form alliances at exalted levels, which, in turn, then became an important factor in their position within the neighbourhood.

The tensions and conflicts within the working class were most obviously manifested in the neighbourhood; but here, too, the solidarities of labour politics were forged. Political experience in this arena was formed, in part, by the struggle to constrain and at times direct neighbourhood leaders. Power and control in the neighbourhood entailed a set of shifting relationships in which dominance was achieved and limited through negotiation, manoeuvre and sometimes violence. As the neighbourhood was increasingly brought into the sphere of industrial and public politics as well, it shaped the development of the political consciousness and political action of the working class.

III

Social relationships in the neighbourhood increasingly impinged upon industrial politics. This was partly because material conditions limited the possibility of organization at the workplace. In an overstocked labour market, employers were well placed to defeat workers' combinations and at times even exclude them from the workplace.⁵³ Consequently, if workers were to demand better conditions, fight wage cuts or protect employment levels, it was imperative that they organize in the neighbourhood as well. The arcane procedures and legal niceties of collective bargaining were never far removed from the baser negotiations of the street.

In dealing with labour unrest, mill managements employed the usual forms of repression, as well as some novel ones. Workers who participated in trade union activity were less likely to be promoted to more responsible and lucrative posts. They were obvious candidates for retrenchment after an industrial dispute or during a recession. They were also vulnerable to discrimination in the allocation of machinery or the distribution of raw materials. As the Social Service League pointed out, 'Complaints about victimization of workmen taking a prominent part in the trade union

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ One mill manager told B. Shiva Rao, 'For every one who goes out of this gate there are nine more waiting outside who would be grateful for the wages I am paying.' Shiva Rao, *The Industrial Worker in India*, p. 55.

movement are frequently heard.⁵⁴ Trade unions – particularly those which did not meet with the employers' approval – could neither collect subscriptions nor hold their meetings in the vicinity of the workplace. By choosing with whom they would negotiate, by choosing between rival unions or factions, employers could deal with their most favoured workers and thus strengthen the organizations they approved of while attempting to destroy those they considered dangerous. Such action was by no means confined to the textile industry; however, both within and outside it, these measures were most effective when the conditions of employment were casual and the level of skill low.

Significantly, although the millowners failed to combine across the industry in order to control production when their markets slumped,⁵⁵ they were able to coordinate impressively in dealing with industrial action. As early as 1893, the millowners had circulated the names of strikers among themselves.⁵⁶ As conflict in the textile industry intensified between the wars, their efforts grew more vigorous. By the mid-1920s the Sassoon group, for instance, was employing agents to spy upon the meetings and organization of their workers as well as to take down and translate such speeches as were made.⁵⁷ Each mill had in its Watch and Ward department its own organized force for coercion. The superintendent of the Watch and Ward department at the Sassoon mills was 'a well known boxer' called Milton Kubes. When asked how he had collected the speeches he claimed to have done in 1928, Kubes said, 'I have got my own secret service'.⁵⁸ The millowners were also able to mobilize their own brigades for political action. In opposition to the Red Flag Union, it was said, the millowners 'post their own pickets, publish leaflets, handbills and keep watch and ward inspectors'. The object of the pickets 'is to help the loyalist workers to go to work . . . and to see that they are not molested . . . They simply move around in the chawls, post themselves as pickets in front of the mill gates, and advise willing workers to go to work and if any of their workers are molested they go to their rescue.'⁵⁹ To organize such pickets, millowners relied upon their jobbers either to mobilize the support of their workers against the strike or to encourage anti-strike alliances in the neighbourhood. By the mid-1930s, they had become more systematic in keeping an eye on trade union activities, reporting on workers'

⁵⁴ RCLI, *Evidence, Bombay Presidency*, vol. I, part i, written evidence, The Social Service League, p. 445.

⁵⁵ Dissatisfaction in this regard was often expressed in the speeches of the chairmen of the Bombay Millowners' Association at their annual general meetings; see, for instance, BMOA, *Annual Report*, 1934, Chairman's speech, p. ii.

⁵⁶ BMOA, *Annual Report*, 1893, p. 16.

⁵⁷ BRIC, oral evidence, Milton Kubes, File 5, pp. 241–3, MSA. ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, oral evidence, Syed Munawar, File 3, p. 269.

meetings and sharing information with each other. Indeed, this political intelligence was embodied in the monthly report of the labour officer of the Bombay Millowners' Association to its committee. It was also made available to the police as well as to official inquiries into strikes, disturbances and seditious conspiracies, and seems to have been treated largely as unproblematic evidence.⁶⁰

In addition, the millowners were increasingly able to call upon the assistance of the state. Fearful of the infiltration of class struggle into nationalist agitation and concerned at the spread of support for the communists among Bombay's workers in the late 1920s, the provincial government grew increasingly ready to intervene in industrial disputes. From the late 1920s, the government constructed a legal framework for the conduct and settlement of disputes, sent more police to the mill gates during strikes to restrict picketing and control 'intimidation', and prosecuted the communist leaders of the labour movement more readily for incitement or conspiracy. The presence of the state was most evident, however, in the form of the police when they supervised pickets or escorted blacklegs to work. Introducing the Prevention of Intimidation Bill in 1929, the Home Member of the Bombay Government recalled his memories of the general strike of that year for the benefit of the Legislative Council:

One of the most remarkable sights it has ever been my fortune to view was a long procession headed by mounted police, followed by foot police and then by a hollow square with women workers in the middle and the workmen around them on all sides. The procession was wound up by more armed police and another party of mounted police. As they marched along the road, the street corners and points regarded as dangerous were guarded by still more police. Day after day these men and women were thus escorted to their work and away from it in complete security. These measures continued so long as they were necessary. As the number of men at work increased and the danger of their being overawed by strikers decreased the police precautions were gradually relaxed.⁶¹

These were formidable obstacles against which to conduct a strike; they could scarcely leave the forms of industrial action, let alone its possibility, unaffected.

This structure of dominance within industrial relations, ranging from the economic sanctions available to employers at the workplace to the political means of repression outside, was often sufficient to smother any sustained resistance from the workers. For one thing, industrial action necessarily placed jobs in jeopardy. Moreover, unless workers were able

⁶⁰ BDEC, evidence, extracts from the monthly reports of the Labour Office, BMOA, in GOB Home (Special), File 550 (25) III of 1938, pp. 173–245, MSA.

⁶¹ *Times of India*, 8 August 1929.

to effect a fairly complete strike, they stood little chance of negotiating their demands with management, let alone achieving any concessions. When the state intervened, workers were placed under greater pressure to devise means by which they could prevent their jobs being usurped by 'blackleg' labour. It shifted the focus of action to the neighbourhood where social pressure as well as force could be deployed to maintain an offensive. Workers' combinations, excluded from the workplace, were forced to act in the social arena outside. The disputes of the workplace were brought into the street. Patterns of association developed in the neighbourhood were integrated into the conduct of industrial action. Managements were, at times, also active in forging anti-strike alliances in the neighbourhood, but unless workers had been able to constrain and immobilize these alliances, they would have been able to offer little effective resistance. As the neighbourhood itself became an arena of industrial conflict, workers used their social connection outside the workplace in two ways: first, as a material base and second, for varying degrees of direct action.

Neighbourhood social connections, indispensable to the daily life of workers, influenced the possibilities of their collective action. How long workers could remain on strike was governed by the extent to which they could draw upon the material resources of the neighbourhood and especially upon the credit they were able to mobilize. If through participation in a strike a worker risked his job, his willingness to strike would to some extent be influenced by his chances of finding another job, and for this he depended upon his neighbourhood connections. Industrial action sometimes even brought into play the rural connections of the workers. M. S. Bhumgara, formerly manager of the Khatau Makanji Mills, explained in 1931 that it was upon workers who had lost all connections with the land that 'the millowners generally depend to break the strike as these people have no home to return to and hence they are the worst sufferers at such times'.⁶² Those workers who could fall back upon their village connections were often the most resilient in industrial action.⁶³ Migrants with strong rural connections were expected to be less concerned, perhaps even less conscious of their economic interests in the city than urban proletarians with nowhere else to turn. In this case, however, it would appear that migrants with the strongest rural connections could also be the most conscious of their 'urban' interests and most active in their defence.

⁶² RCLI, *Evidence, Bombay Presidency*, vol. I, part i, written evidence, Mr M. S. Bhumgara, p. 499.

⁶³ In January 1928, during the strike wave which finally launched the general strike, the police observed: 'The strikers were determined not to work the new system and are gradually leaving for the native places by the coasting steamers and trains after receiving their wages'. *BPP SAI*, 1928, no. 3, 21 January, para. 61.

Strikers, trade unions and the political parties also had to rely upon the pressure which they could bring to bear upon the community as a whole in confronting strike-breakers. Their actions were based partly on their own strength of numbers, partly on the alliances which they could effect within the structure of neighbourhood power and partly on their ability to publicize and thereby discredit workers and jobbers, *dadas* and gymnasiums involved in strike-breaking. It was sometimes said of the communist-led *Girni Kamgar Union* that it hired 'mavalis and bad-mashes', literally 'roughs', to stop workers crossing the picket lines or to 'intimidate' blacklegs in their chawls.⁶⁴ But most unions did not have money for such enterprises. They were probably most capable of hiring *dadas* when their membership figures rose dramatically and their subscriptions permitted them a few luxuries, as for example during some general strikes. Yet at such times, the militant mood of the workers was often enough to enable them to dispense with these extravagances. On the other hand, as V. B. Karnik put it, if 'usually it was the strikers themselves who used to take the lead in organising this type of defence' against organized blacklegs, 'sometimes some of the strikers may themselves be *dadas*'.⁶⁵

One of the achievements of organization – especially the extensive organization which the communists were able to build up after 1928 – was that unions could deal with *dadas* in an attempt to contain their hostility or negotiate their support. From 1928, the *Girni Kamgar Union* maintained a list of *dadas* in the mill district and invited workers to contribute to it.⁶⁶ *Kranti*, the union's official organ, published the names of 'loyal' workers, which meant their jobbers and escorts as well.⁶⁷ Workers, too, were involved in making the identities of strike-breakers public, and, indeed, moral outrage was repeatedly expressed at their deeds at meetings and through leaflets. For instance, the residents of a wadi sometimes held public meetings at which local *dadas* were forced to explain and justify their actions. Blacklegs were often brought to strike meetings and humiliated. On 31 May 1928, two blacklegs were arrested by workers and brought, their faces blackened with soot, to Nagu Sayaji's Wadi, the communist stronghold in Prabhadevi. There, the communist leader, S. A. Dange, lectured them on the treachery which blacklegging involved. Dange was later arrested for his part in this episode, but was released on bail when the two workers failed to pick him out in an identity parade.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ BRIC, oral evidence, S. K. Bole, File 3, p. 217, MSA.

⁶⁵ Interview, V. B. Karnik, April, 1979.

⁶⁶ BRIC, oral evidence, G. L. Kandalkar and V. H. Joshi, File 16, p. 71, MSA.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, S. K. Bole, File 3, p. 247.

⁶⁸ *Proceedings of the MCC*, statement by S. A. Dange, pp. 2447–8.

Often, strike-breakers suffered social boycotts. Their names, particularly those of collaborationist head jobbers, were read out at strike meetings. Indeed, during the general strike of 1940, these lists of names were sent in with so much enthusiasm that it embarrassed the leadership. The secretary of the Council of Action for the conduct of the strike, R. S. Nimbkar, had to advise speakers not to read out these names as they were not always correct and 'were sent sometimes on account of personal grudge'.⁶⁹ Men and women going to their mills were taunted. Strikers would, it was said, call out to somebody on his way to a mill: 'He is a *malik*'s son, that is why he is going so faithfully to work.' Such action, said Kandalkar, presenting hostile evidence against the communists who had jockeyed him out of power by the late 1930s, 'no doubt caused some embarrassment to the workers who were going in for work . . . being put to shame in the presence of their brother workmen naturally annoyed them.'⁷⁰ That moral pressure could be effective emphasizes the ambiguity inherent in the behaviour of some 'blacklegs'. Although the effect of working during a strike was clearly to contribute to its defeat, it would be misleading to assume that when workers crossed the picket lines they simply signified total opposition to industrial action, or revealed thereby an undeveloped social consciousness. Several contradictory pressures, both moral and material, for as well as against action, operated throughout the conduct of a strike, and governed workers' options. Indeed, it was for this reason that moral pressure, which often entailed some degree of physical coercion as well, could be effective at all: it found an ideological resonance in the public morality of the neighbourhood.

At the same time, moral pressure and public embarrassment, however effective, were not always enough. Throughout the 1930s, communist leaflets highlighted the causes of unemployment and argued the case for an identity of interest in the long term between the jobless and the workers in an attempt to deter 'blacklegs', while maintaining a steady, moralizing attack against 'blacklegging'.⁷¹ Notions of morality and justice – or more clearly injustice – infused the most direct and physical forms of public pressure. At a meeting called to propagate the one-day strike of 1938, Lalji Pendse said that 'some goondas have beaten our volunteers' and called upon those children of workers who trained at gymnasiums to 'teach a good lesson to these dadas'.⁷² Towards the last stages of the 1940

⁶⁹ Commissioner of Police, Bombay, Daily Report, 6 April 1940, in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (23) C-I of 1940, p. 83, MSA.

⁷⁰ BDEC, evidence, Girmi Kamgar Union, Bombay (Kandalkar) in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III of 1938, p. 431, MSA.

⁷¹ See leaflets collected in GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (46) of 1934 and 543 (46) pt I of 1934, MSA.

⁷² BDEC, confidential statement submitted by the Bombay Millowners' Association in GOB Home (Special), File 550 III of 1938, p. 315, MSA.

general strike, the Council of Action of the Bombay Provincial Trades Union Congress had to deal with the exertions of Mane Master. At a meeting on 31 March 1940 a communist worker, Khaire, said that,

Mane Master was defaming the Marathas and blackening the face of the Great Shivaji by conducting on the one hand the Shivaji Gymnasium at Bhoiwada and on the other hand trying to break the strike. This Mane Master who was a member of the Maratha League had blackened the face of the Marathas and was himself a blot on Maratha society and as such they should break his legs.⁷³

It was sometimes necessary as well as possible for strikers actively to picket particular neighbourhoods, road junctions and even inside their chawls. For instance, during the 1938 strikes Madanpura was picketed so effectively that the Simplex Mill reported that its 'jobbers complained that they were not allowed to leave the moholla'. The experience of the Simplex Mill was by no means exceptional; workers from the New Great Eastern Mills, who lived in Kamathipura, and from the Madhavji Dharamsi Mills suffered a similar fate.⁷⁴ The efficacy of such action depended upon the particular political circumstances of each neighbourhood. As S. K. Patil, the brain behind Congress organization in Bombay city in the 1930s and general secretary of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee, explained it, not all strikes or meetings could be broken:

the breaking activities can succeed only in certain areas. Even in the labour area, there are spheres of influence. If you go to a sphere other than your own, it is easier for them to break up a meeting, because they have a larger following round about. That is not possible everywhere.⁷⁵

The fact that several mills of the Sassoon group continued to work on 7 November 1938 was attributed to perhaps the most significant dada in Bombay between the wars, and a Congressman, Keshav Borkar, 'The peculiarity about those mills', said deputy commissioner of police, U'ren,

is that they are in the area which is looked after by Keshav Borkar. He was naturally against the strike . . . It is quite obvious that by virtue of the fact that he holds sway in that area, the Red Flag Union did not think that they could get much success there . . . The mere fact that he was the headman of that area, I think, was sufficient for the Red Flag volunteers not to bother with that area.⁷⁶

⁷³ Commissioner of Police, Bombay, Daily Reports, 1 April 1940, in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (23) C-I of 1940, p. 21, MSA.

⁷⁴ BDEC, confidential statement submitted by the BMOA, Annexe B-I in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III of 1938, pp. 317–43, MSA.

⁷⁵ BDEC, oral evidence, S. K. Patil in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III B of 1938, p. 401, MSA.

⁷⁶ BDEC, oral evidence, Mr U'ren, Deputy Police Commissioner in *ibid.*, pp. 681–3.

The balance of power in the streets was clearly a crucial factor in determining the geography, and sometimes even the possibility, of political action.

Another common response to the structure of control which workers had to face was to impose pressure at the most vulnerable point of most strikes: the jobber. In 1928, strike-breaking jobbers were hounded out of their neighbourhoods. S. D. Saklatwalla of the Tata group of mills informed the Fawcett Committee that one jobber had 'to change his place of residence twice because they [workers] once found that he had entered the mill and . . . they were therefore persecuting him. He said he changed his residence although he had to pay increased rent.'⁷⁷ In one case reported in 1938, Jaysingrao Bajirao, a head jobber of the winding department related how during the one-day strike of 7 November, workers waited in batches of ten to twenty until 11 p.m. at night 'in order to assault me if I ventured to go out of the mill gate'.⁷⁸

It was because workers were often most effective in political action beyond the workplace that the millowners preferred the state to intervene in the conduct rather than the settlement of strikes: for instance by deploying the police to prevent picketing not only at the mill gates but also in the neighbourhood.⁷⁹ Ten years later, the millowners continued to argue a similar case: but more explicitly and with increased vehemence. During general strikes, 'the collection of crowds in streets and thoroughfares near the mills should certainly be prevented', urged the Bombay Millowners' Association, 'as otherwise free access by employees to their place of employment becomes impossible'. Such access was a necessary pre-condition for taking blacklegs into the workplace and maintaining production. Preferably, they argued, pickets 'should be confined to peaceful conversational persuasion and they should not be permitted to shout slogans or use abusive language or better still they should not be allowed to speak at all'. They were particularly emphatic that picketing at the workers' 'place of residence' should be made a criminal offence, for 'it is precisely this type of picketing that is most desirable to prevent'.⁸⁰

The intimidation of 'ordinary workers' by 'strikers' often explained to the millowners as well as the Home Department why political agitators and their allies were able to shut down their mills. Clearly, intimidation by itself did not explain the solidarity of a strike, as, for instance, the

⁷⁷ Proceedings of the BSEC, 1928-29, vol. I, p. 121, MSA.

⁷⁸ BDEC, oral evidence, Jaysingrao Bajirao in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III B of 1938, p. 553; see also the evidence of Dhaku Janu Lad, p. 105, MSA.

⁷⁹ BMOA, *Annual Report* (1928), Chairman's speech, AGM, p. iii.

⁸⁰ BDEC, BMOA answers to the questionnaire in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III of 1938 pp. 141-5, MSA.

Bombay Millowners' Association believed it did;⁸¹ at the same time without 'intimidation' it was impossible at times to conduct a strike. In public discourse, intimidation simply meant that union bullies threatened to beat those who went to work. Undoubtedly, the sanction of physical force lay behind most forms of 'political' pressure in the neighbourhood. But intimidation was not conducted only by such 'professional' groups. It was more usual for workers who favoured a strike to act in their own chawls to prevent their fellow residents from going to work. Since their own jobs were in the balance, it is unlikely that their actions needed to be instigated or organized for them. One jobber described the working methods of those who canvassed for the 1938 strike: 'Usually five or ten men are real workers, they approach people but these five or ten people are followed by a large crowd.'⁸² When union bullies acted successfully in their self-conscious role as bullies, they appear to have done so with the aid and approval of the chawl.

As intimidation became a subject for public debate, workers began to use it to their own advantage. One millowner told the Bombay Riots Inquiry Committee, 'I have had certain talks with groups of work people, and I have questioned them: "Why don't you come forward and report these people [who intimidate] to the police?" They say "if we do so, we are marked men".'⁸³ However, there was an underside to the picture presented by the employers and the state. As N. M. Joshi argued, workers used intimidation as an excuse to remain on strike. 'It may be that there was intimidation on your part', he told S. D. Saklatwalla, during their negotiations after the 1928 strike, 'and so the men could not tell you the truth.'⁸⁴ Similarly, K. F. Nariman, the populist Congress leader, pointed out that the intimidation of which workers claimed to be the victims was often fictional. 'Sometimes what happens is this', said Nariman,

The millhands do not want to go to work for reasons which they believe exist. When somebody on behalf of the millowners asks them 'Why don't you go?' they have not got the courage to say that they do not want to come [to work]. They say that they are intimidated and so we [*sic*] do not come. They narrate their grievances to the Union. If anybody who commands their confidence asks them the question they would narrate their grievances.⁸⁵

By pleading intimidation as their excuse for industrial action, workers attempted to establish their bona fides as loyal employees and thus to ensure they were given back their jobs.

⁸¹ BMOA, *Annual Report* (1928), Chairman's speech, AGM, pp. v-vii; BMOA, *Annual Report* (1933), Chairman's speech, AGM, p. v.

⁸² BDEC, oral evidence, Dhaku Janu Lad, in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III B of 1938, p. 105, MSA. ⁸³ BRIC, oral evidence, J. Addyman, File I, p. 85, MSA.

⁸⁴ Proceedings of the BSEC, vol. I, p. 122, MSA.

⁸⁵ BRIC, oral evidence, K. F. Nariman, File 6, p. 89, MSA.

We have already seen that workers could exert some pressure on their jobbers in a variety of ways and it was by no means customary for the culmination to be violent. Although there was no positively definable point at which the jobber's position would be entirely rejected, it was essential for him to bend with the political temper of the mill district, to know when he should act with the workers and when he should act against them. It was particularly in the face of mass action, effectively orchestrated by a powerful trade union, and extending to more than a single mill, that the limits of a jobber's power were exposed, and that employers appeared vulnerable without the physical potency of the state. In periods of working-class solidarity, the jobber's opposition or his participation in victimization could lead to the desertion of his men, moral opprobrium from the community and the severance of the social and commercial ties upon which his position rested. At such times, working-class action to neutralize hostile neighbourhood alliances of all kinds was most successful. It is not intended to suggest that the ability of Bombay's workers to resist their employers or shackle their neighbourhood leaders was by any means equal or uniform. Their place within the material as well as the muscular structure of the neighbourhood registered differences between workers; some were plainly better equipped than others to absorb or counter their antagonists. Nor can it be said that there was any linear development in the balance of power between the 'forces' for or against the labour movement, let alone that these forces in their entirety remained consistently on either side of the divide. Clearly, the success of the Girmi Kamgar Union enabled it in 1928 and 1934 decisively to alter the existing political balances of the neighbourhood, and it was probably the case that working-class action was in general most effective when the union was able both to protect workers at the mill and coordinate their action in the neighbourhood.

The permanent social relations of the workplace, and of the industry, pushed strikes which began within the limits of the workplace into the wider arena of the neighbourhood. As workers attempted to cope with the limits which this structure of control imposed upon them, paradoxically their actions acquired an important political edge. Conventionally, we should consider a strike as a form of industrial or even political action, as an event which related directly to the workplace and concerned particular groups of workers. However, as industrial action was forced into the public sphere, into the streets and neighbourhoods, the effects of industrial disputes were generalized. In this wider context, the parochial disputes of a mill or a group of mills were placed before the mill district as a whole. By being placed in the wider arena of the working-class neighbourhoods, each individual strike became an essential part of the collective

experience of Bombay's workers. As a result, the apparently limited nature of industrial disputes became essential to the process by which the social experience and the social consciousness of the working class as a whole were forged.

IV

It has already been argued that the social exchange of the neighbourhoods shaped the perceptions of Bombay's workers and influenced the forms of industrial action. But its ramifications were wider still. It exercised an important influence upon the character of workers' politics in the public domain. From the late 1920s onwards, the communist-led Girmi Kamgar Union became the dominant force in the politics of the mill district. Not only was the GKU the only union to achieve a more or less permanent presence in industrial politics but it also led every general strike in the industry after 1928. Throughout much of this period, it was subjected to considerable repression by the state. In the early 1930s, the Bombay Millowners' Association withdrew its recognition of the union; in 1934, along with other communist organizations it was declared illegal. As a result, the Girmi Kamgar Union was at times incapacitated. But it was a measure of its achievement that although it was subjected to severe repression and its members to victimization and disfavour, it was repeatedly able to re-assert its ascendancy. 'Had it not been for certain measures', the police commissioner admitted in 1935, referring to the Meerut arrests and the passing of such repressive legislation as the Criminal Law Amendment Act and the Bombay Special Emergency Powers Act, 'the communists would no doubt have become a positive danger by this time.' For, although its activities 'have been paralysed to a great extent by the internment of active communists . . . [and] they have comparatively few leaders and organisers . . . the subterranean activities of the Communists are not effectively kept in check by the measures adopted by the Government from time to time'.⁸⁶ As late as 1940, Bombay was still considered the 'nerve centre of Communist agitation in India'.⁸⁷ Not only did the communists survive this repression, but they also succeeded in creating an active political tradition: in the 1930s, their office became a landmark in the mill district and rival unions competed to adopt the name of the Girmi Kamgar Union.⁸⁸

The spread of support for the communists reflected changes that were

⁸⁶ Commissioner of Police, Bombay, to Secretary, GOB, Home (Special), Secret no. 3757 B, 8 August 1935, in GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (77) of 1935, p. 77, MSA.

⁸⁷ Departmental note in GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (42) of 1940, p. 16, MSA.

⁸⁸ During the 1930s, three unions adopted this name.

occurring within the political culture of the working-class neighbourhoods, changes which were the outcome of growing conflicts, both in the workplace and outside. In the process, tensions within the working class and between millworkers were exposed. It is not intended to suggest that the intervention of the communists heralded the dawn of working-class unity. However, it is also clear that from the late 1920s onwards, an impressive community of political sentiment formed around the communists. As Syed Munawar, the 'moderate' trade union leader, said in 1929, 'Communist principles have captured the minds of textile workers to a great extent in the Parel area.'⁸⁹ For the millworkers in particular, the Girni Kamgar Union created the possibility of a sustained political expression.

The place which the communists came to occupy in the mill district was partly the result of the nature of their intervention in industrial politics. It has already been argued that material conditions as well as the employer's policies made workers' combinations vulnerable at the workplace. This meant that trade unions had to maintain an effective presence in the neighbourhood; at the same time, it also meant that they were excluded from the area of the daily social relations of the workplace and forced to operate often at a level removed from the thrust of working-class action.

The tension between trade union organization at the level of the individual mill and at the level of the whole industry was crucial to the determination of the politics of the textile industry. The system of labour control based upon the jobber worked best at the most parochial level. At this level, what mattered was the extent to which jobbers, acting within the context of the neighbourhood as a whole, were able to resist or incorporate pressures from the workforce. At this level, too, trade unions were most easily rendered ineffective. As long as a significant proportion of jobbers and workers were not connected with a particular union, there was little need for the employer to recognize its existence, and even when a trade union acquired any considerable influence amongst his workers, an employer could discipline or at worst dismiss some of them as a warning to the rest. It was at a more general level that trade unions operated, making alliances with jobbers and then representing their case to management, to the Millowners' Association and to government when necessary. Significantly, the first trade unions in Bombay were essentially pleaders' offices where grievances were heard and services, such as the writing of leave notices and the drafting of petitions, were provided.⁹⁰ Yet, to operate successfully at this more general level, it was obviously essential to establish more than an ephemeral presence at the workplace.

⁸⁹ BRIC, oral evidence, Syed Munawar, File 3, p. 267, MSA.

⁹⁰ See Confidential Proceedings of the GOB, 1917, vol. 25, pp. 15-19, OIOC.

The major problem which trade unions faced was their inability to act at both levels. Most trade unions were constrained by this intermediary position. As intermediaries who built upon their jobber and neighbourhood connections, they were better placed to mediate in the workers' disputes than to lead them. Trade unions, like the Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha, the Social Service League and the Bombay Textile Labour Union (BTLU) never became company unions, but nor were they free to champion the workers' cause. Following the momentum of workers' action could bring them directly into conflict with jobbers and other neighbourhood patrons. It could also invoke the displeasure of the state and of the employers, whose benevolence and trust was vital to their political survival. For it was their influence in ruling circles which made these unions valuable allies for the workers and the lesser leaders of the neighbourhood. 'Had the millowners been a little more sympathetic towards the Union', the representatives of the BTLU mused upon the fate of their own organization, 'the success it had achieved would have been more substantial and the Union would not have required to go through the agonies it went through after the 1928 strike.' It was 'only recently', the union argued in the aftermath of the communist-led strikes of 1928 and 1929, 'when an undesirable element has entered the trade union fold that the employers have begun to talk in terms of sympathy towards the unions'.⁹¹ Their political alliances inhibited them in advancing the workers' interests and thereby also restricted their membership. At least, by force of habit, these unions were better placed to act as advocates when they had no clients than as spokesmen when they had no audience.

Not only their material interests but also their conception of their own role in relation to workers limited the efficacy of their leadership. Organizations like the Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha and the Social Service League were concerned mainly with social work and the 'uplift' of the poor. They were, as the Labour Office reported, less trade unions than 'associations for the welfare of their members'.⁹² Their aim was to rescue workers from the depths of ignorance. In response to low wages, they suggested more education; as a solution to bad housing conditions, they tried to teach workers hygiene; faced with poverty they advocated thrift. Their strength lay in speaking on behalf of the poor; in active struggle, they often disintegrated.

It is against this background that the intervention of the communists in the labour movement in 1927-28 was significant. It marked a radical

⁹¹ *RCLI, Evidence*, vol. I, part i, written evidence, the Bombay Textile Labour Union, p. 353. The outcome of these agonies was that by 1931 the union's membership figure stood at 56 and was to fall further to 20 in 1938; see *Labour Gazette*, 'Principal Trade Unions in the Bombay Presidency', *passim*.

⁹² *Labour Gazette*, 2:7 (March 1923), p. 26.

transformation in the style and content of trade union leadership. The communists entered the labour movement in 1927 through the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal, a trade union founded and organized by jobbers and mill clerks during the 1924 general strike. Since 1927, rationalization schemes had been introduced into certain mills. Although their object was efficiency, these schemes increased workloads, created the possibility of greater unemployment and induced among the millworkers 'a genuine fear of less wages'.⁹³ As strikes followed these changes in work practices from mill to mill, it became apparent that individual resistance, however determined, was doomed. As N. M. Joshi put it later, 'a strike in one mill does not and will not succeed. If there is discontent on a large scale there must be a general strike. Then only the grievances have some chance of being redressed.'⁹⁴ Between August 1927 and April 1928, strikes occurred in twenty-four mills.⁹⁵ Under the impact of this political determination among the workers, the leadership of the labour movement vacillated.

The only significant pressure in favour of a general strike came from the communists; but they were still incapable of carrying the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal with them. To lead a strike when the workers' mood was militant offered the communists an invaluable opportunity of establishing organization among the workers. Moreover, unlike the other unions, the communists of the Bombay Labour Group had two advantages. First, they attributed a positive value to industrial action, for larger purposes than the immediate conflict, in developing the political and revolutionary consciousness of the working class. At the same time, their enthusiasm was not as yet weighed down by neighbourhood or even jobber connections which they would have to defend. The Girni Kamgar Mahamandal and the Bombay Textile Labour Union, on the other hand, with more established political connections were hesitant to risk their linkages in a strike liable to fail. As the strike wave spread across the mill district, both groups were faced with the danger of being outflanked by the communists. Tensions between the two rival courses of action dominated the affairs of both these unions. By March 1928, the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal divided and one of its founders, Mayekar, was expelled in a dispute over the control of funds.⁹⁶ 'What happened in this strike', as Dange said later, 'was that the rank and file was forcing the lead on the organisation.'⁹⁷ This general strike lasted for six months. The intensity of

⁹³ Departmental note in GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (10) E Pt D of 1929, p. 25, MSA.

⁹⁴ Proceedings of the BSEC, vol. I, p. 71, MSA.

⁹⁵ Proceedings of the MCC, statement submitted by S. A. Dange, pp. 2413-15.

⁹⁶ Proceedings of the MCC, examination of Arjun A. Alwe, p. 961; BPP SAI, 1928, no. 20, 19 May, para. 793; GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (18) C of 1928, MSA.

⁹⁷ Proceedings of the MCC, statement submitted by S. A. Dange, p. 2424.

class consciousness which was expressed in the period was never perhaps to be repeated.

The linkages which were forged in this strike placed the communists firmly in control of the GKM and enabled them to dominate trade union politics. They were now forced to confront the problems posed by the structure of industrial relations. The initiative taken by the communist leadership in reflecting working-class militancy enabled them to establish their political presence at the level of the industry as a whole. To consolidate this support, it was imperative for the Girni Kamgar Union, as it was now called, to penetrate the level of the individual mill. This was precisely what occurred in the following months. The general strike of 1928 had ended on the basis of an agreement that the rationalization schemes would not be extended until the committee of inquiry appointed to investigate the dispute had reported. Between October 1928 and March 1929, seventy-one lightning strikes occurred as millworkers resisted victimization or zealously ensured that the agreement was not breached. The Girni Kamgar Union's intervention in these disputes had, as Dange put it, a 'magical' effect upon organization.⁹⁸ On 30 September 1928, the Girni Kamgar Union had a membership of 324; by the end of that year, they boasted 54,000 members.⁹⁹ The organizational achievement of this period was the mill committees which sprang up throughout the industry. Workers from each department elected representatives to the mill committee. At the same time, the Girni Kamgar Union opened several centres within the mill area for the enrolment of members and the collection of subscriptions, but especially to establish and extend connections with the workers of their neighbourhoods. These centres supervised the work of mill committees in their area. The members of a mill committee would contact their centre as soon as a dispute arose in their department or their mill. Each centre elected a committee, which in turn elected a managing committee for the union as a whole and to whose decisions it remained subordinate. The committee of each centre was elected by the most effective unit of the union machine: the mill committee.¹⁰⁰

The representatives elected onto the mill committee were responsible for the organizational tasks of the union in their department. They enrolled members and collected subscriptions; they acted as watchdogs of the workers' interests; they formulated grievances and approached management to negotiate settlements; and if this brought them no joy,

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2507.

⁹⁹ 'Report of the Court of Inquiry into a Trade Dispute Between Several Textile Mills and their Workmen', 1929, p. 11, MSA.

¹⁰⁰ See BRIC, oral evidence, Milton Kubes, File 5, pp. 209-13, MSA; see also *Proceedings of the MCC*, statement submitted by S. A. Dange, pp. 2498-537.

they approached the union, or more frequently in practice, proceeded to strike. In this way, they brought the union to that microcosmic level of the individual mill and department from which it had so effectively been excluded in the past. While it was their ability to intervene at this microcosmic level which enabled the Girni Kamgar Union to gain such formidable support and create such an extensive organization, it was precisely their strength across the industry as a whole which prevented the millowners from excluding them from the politics of the workplace. 'We are helpless', complained Sir Manmohandas Ramji in 1929. 'If we dismiss a man who is a member of that union, the question of victimization comes in, and we create a strike. If today my mill is working partially and I suspect a man who belongs to that union and try to dismiss him, there will be a strike next morning.'¹⁰¹ The strength of the Girni Kamgar Union across the industry enabled it to protect its members as well as advance their interests at the level of the mill.

The mill committees linked, and operated at the junction of the workplace, the neighbourhood, the mill and the trade union headquarters. But the mill committees of 1928–29 did more than this – they also became 'parallel organs of supervision and control' in rivalry with the jobber and constraining his freedom of action. In 1928–29, they sometimes seemed to give substance to Dange's claim that the Girni Kamgar Union 'overthrew the power of the jobbers and the head jobbers'.¹⁰² Through the mill committees, workers gained access to the union offices. The result was to give meaning to the union as an alternative source of patronage, extending from the workplace and the neighbourhood to the union headquarters, which operated at a level well beyond the jobber's reach. Their presence forced jobbers to choose between making an alliance with the union to preserve their position with the workers and risk managerial disfavour, or else to ally with the management to break the mill committee and isolate the union. As the union penetrated the workplace, it brought new complexities to bear upon the jobber's function of labour control.

However much the mill committees checked the jobber's power in the short term, it did not, contrary to Dange's claim, overthrow him.¹⁰³ At times the union leadership even found itself attempting to defend the jobber against the opposition of workers. At a public meeting to elect the mill committee for the Kohinoor Mill, on 24 November 1928, one section of the workers pressed for the exclusion of the head jobber of the weaving department and his six men. Dange and Alwe advocated restraint: they argued that it would not be practical to exclude men of

¹⁰¹ BRIC, oral evidence, Sir M. M. Ramji, File 2, p. 367, MSA.

¹⁰² *Proceedings of the MCC*, statement submitted by S. A. Dange, p. 2514. ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

influence, especially those who had the backing of their department. They suggested a compromise in the form of a resolution to warn that those who opposed the majority opinion of the mill committee or ignored union policies would be removed.¹⁰⁴ To attack the jobber, it was clear, the union would have to proceed with care. In the short term, it was arguably sufficient and perhaps only possible, to constrain him. The mill committee could not overthrow the jobber; but their failure meant that as the union's position across the industry weakened, the jobbers were able to re-assert themselves.

In 1929, the Girni Kamgar Union, by leading another general strike, built upon the momentum established in the previous year and then exhausted it. Already, the arrests and imprisonment of its most important leaders created chaos in the union's organization. In 1930, G. L. Kandalkar, its new president, declared his support for the Congress and carried an important section of the union into the nationalist fold. In the face of growing unemployment in the industry, the millworkers' militancy was seemingly diluted. As the overarching trade union organization grew weaker, its relationship with the mill committees grew more tenuous. The weakening of the bond between the mill committee and the union or a decline in the activism of the union made it easier for the jobber to turn the mill committee into yet another institution around which to consolidate his power. However, where they survived, mill committees formed a core of shopfloor organization, through which the Girni Kamgar Union could rehabilitate itself.

To some extent, the organizational basis of 1928–29 was revived during the strike wave of 1933–34; moreover, it was diversified and extended more formally to the neighbourhood. The Millowners' Association emphasized the vital role of the union's chawl committees in the conduct of the general strike of 1934.¹⁰⁵ In December 1937, the police noted the fact that the organization of the union integrated both workplace and neighbourhood. 'They have gone to great trouble', it was reported, 'to establish "communist cells" in mills and industrial concerns, and in addition they have appointed Chawl Committees to influence the workers still further.'¹⁰⁶ Although the communists could not re-create their achievement of 1928–29, these changes enabled them to absorb the growing repressive pressures at the workplace and, at the same time, to maintain their presence in the neighbourhood.

¹⁰⁴ *Proceedings of the MCC*, vol. X, Marathi Exhibits, Girni Kamgar Union Minute Book, Public Meetings, pp. 6–7.

¹⁰⁵ BDEC, evidence, extract from monthly report of the Labour Officer, BMOA, August 1935, in GOB, Home (Special), File 550 (25) III, of 1938, p. 181, MSA.

¹⁰⁶ GOB, Home (Special), File 546 (13) B (1) of 1937–38, p. 7, MSA.

The re-assertion of the communist ascendancy out of the doldrums of the early 1930s occurred through industrial action, in the strike wave of 1933–34. This militancy forced choices upon workers, jobbers as well as other trade unions. In 1934, when the communists attempted to persuade the Council of Action, composed of the representatives of several unions, to support a general strike, ‘quasi-communists such as Alwe and Abdul Majid felt they had to come in or be pushed aside’ and the Royists ‘in order not to lose such influence with the workers as they had, felt impelled to join in and pose as communists’.¹⁰⁷ That the communists were able to exert such pressure on the other unions in 1934 suggests the extent of their recovery. That they recovered at all was due to the powerful base and the political sympathy they had created in 1928–29.

It was probably their stance of continued opposition to the employers and the state which established for the communists their place within the political culture of the neighbourhood. The communists came to be identified as the only political group untainted by their association with the state, for instance by nominations to provincial and central legislatures, to royal commissions, and even to ILO conferences. This enabled the communists to present themselves as the one political group in the labour movement which acted in the interests of the working class alone. When asked why the Girmi Kamgar Mahamandal had permitted the communists to enter and work in the union although it had recently rejected the leadership of the ‘outsiders’ of the Bombay Textile Labour Union, Arjun Alwe, President of the GKM, replied: ‘we believed to be true the fellow-feeling which they exhibited towards the workers’.¹⁰⁸ After 1928, the communists’ exertions in the workplace and neighbourhood served to confirm, at least for some workers, this assessment.

Between the wars, the state intervened increasingly in the working-class neighbourhoods. The effect of this intervention was not universally to antagonize workers. Legislation was passed to protect trade unions and govern working conditions, to grant maternity benefits and to provide compensation for injuries and even to ensure the prompt payment of wages. The police were known to arbitrate in labour disputes and occasionally even to ensure the payment of overdue wages.¹⁰⁹ In practice, however, there was little life in the new legislation; and the police, the most immediate point of contact between workers and the state, appeared increasingly as the most organized of the repressive forces which con-

¹⁰⁷ W. R. G. Smith, Commissioner of Police, to R. M. Maxwell, Secretary, GOB, Home (Special), no. 3035 L, 20 June 1935, in GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (48) L, pp. 99–101, MSA.

¹⁰⁸ *Proceedings of the MCC*, examination of Arjun A. Alwe, 12 August 1931, p. 972.

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, Edwardes, *Bombay City Police*, Appendix, p. 197.

fronted the working class. Indeed, police action during strikes defeated pickets and aided blacklegs and in the process contributed to the suppression of workers’ demands and the destruction of their organizations.

Moreover, as conflicts between national and imperial interests were increasingly articulated in the political domain, they helped to clarify the relationship between the workers and the state. During and immediately after the first world war, the living conditions of most workers, characterized by rising prices, high rents and general scarcities, worsened considerably. Grain prices rose almost immediately after the war began, and the government had to take active measures to prevent food riots. The opening of labour camps in Dadar in 1917 and the work of military recruiting officers led to considerable tension within the working-class neighbourhoods of Bombay.¹¹⁰ The impact of the first world war upon workers was to reveal to them that the Indian economy was ‘now influenced by international factors’.¹¹¹ Imperialism signified another force which governed their conditions of life but over which they had no control. Several factors clarified these perceptions. First, the millowners were closely identified with the social rituals of a foreign ruling class. Second, the nationalist campaigns of 1917–22 stirred people’s minds and involved a racial self-assertion. It could affect the way in which workers related to their Anglo-Indian and Parsi supervisors who were closely associated with the British rulers. Third, the economic campaigns of their employers also sharpened the lines of conflict between Indian workers and an imperial state. Indeed, at certain points, the state appeared to be the cause of their worsening economic conditions and of their industry’s problems.

Although the millowners were perceived by the workers as being socially associated with this ruling imperial culture, their attempts to confront the long-term depression in the industry’s fortunes brought them into conflict with the state. When the Government of India refused to abolish the excise duty on Indian mill production, the Bombay millowners cut wages by 11.5 per cent. This wage cut led to a general strike. Indeed, when in the face of the threat of prolonged working-class action, the Government abolished the excise duty, the millowners rescinded the wage cut. Similar connections between the economic policies of the colonial state and the worsening conditions of the industry and its workers were made by the capitalist class during its currency campaign of 1927–28. Within the labour movement it appeared as if both the

¹¹⁰ ‘Statement relating to the disturbances in the City of Bombay in April 1919’, in Bombay Confidential Proceedings, 1920, vol. 53, pp. 13–27, OIOC; ‘A Report from the Commissioner of Police, Bombay to the Government of Bombay Concerning Political Developments before and during 1919’, in Curry Papers, Box IV, item nos. 54 and 55, Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge; *BPP SAI*, 1917, no. 29, 21 July, para. 794.

¹¹¹ *Proceedings of the MCC*, statement submitted by S. A. Dange, p. 2404.

Government of India and the capitalists were arguing opposite cases while professing the interests of the working class, and that both posed as the guardians of labour in order to promote their own particular interests. It was said that while the government's case for a higher exchange ratio rested upon the contention that a lower ratio would depreciate wages and lead to serious strikes, the capitalists argued that in order to function at the higher ratio they would be forced to reduce wages.

It was not merely at one remove that workers were forced into confrontation with the state. Their economic struggles also brought them into political arenas. In the immediate post-war period, a pattern of resistance and surrender to wage demands had established itself. Its consequence was to make the power of combination and the effectiveness of industrial action increasingly clear. During the 1920s, as the millowners organized across the industry to influence the policies of the state, their Association began to affect the management of individual mills. As the level of the individual mill and the industry were integrated, workers, too, had to act across the industry to press their demands. As strike activity occurred on a larger scale, negotiations were conducted at more elevated levels. The mill manager no longer conducted the case for the management alone; the centralizing initiatives of the Millowners' Association became increasingly important. The state intervened less through the office of the police commissioner and increasingly from Government House. The mutuality of workers' interests became more evident and their conflicts with the state occurred at new levels. A general strike, a matter of industrial politics, could entail visible forms of class confrontation: from the police escorting blacklegs across the picket lines to the work of an arbitration court headed by a High Court judge or a civil servant, whose rulings were perceived to be unjust.

To a large extent, the political experience of the working class was constituted in relation to the state; this relationship in turn influenced the development of their political consciousness. For instance, the police impinged upon the conduct of a strike in various ways. During the general strike of 1928, police reporters attended workers' meetings; policemen supervised pickets at the mill gates and attempts were made to restrict their number to two;¹¹² and when picketing was carried into the neighbourhoods, the police presence extended to the chawls as well. At a meeting at the communist stronghold of Nagu Sayaji's Wadi in Parel on 1 June 1928, according to the police reporter's account, Dange reminded his audience, 'the police have no right to come to your room without a warrant . . . Even if he comes in the room with uniform but is not armed

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 2438-9; BRIC, oral evidence, K. F. Nariman, p. 87, MSA.

with a warrant, you can consider him a thief . . . You must protect your own chawl.'¹¹³ The opinion was being more readily expressed that, in general, the police had shown greater solicitude for the millowners than for the strikers.¹¹⁴ For many people, the police came to represent not the guardians of the law but the long arm of tyranny. 'Many things are not reported to the police out of fear', said one observer, who also noted that 'Hindus . . . always avoid to go to the courts and police.'¹¹⁵

The Borkar riot which occurred on 11 December 1928 in support of the communist leaders, two months after the general strike had officially ended, showed how in a single moment the levels of neighbourhood and industrial and public politics could be combined. The origins of the riot dated back to the split within the old Girni Kamgar Mahamandal in March 1928, when Mayekar was expelled from the union. Finding his old bases of support being pulled away from under him, Mayekar came to lean upon his friendship with Keshav dada Borkar, gymnasium owner and neighbourhood boss of Ghorapdeo. Borkar's terrain at Ghorapdeo became Mayekar's last refuge. Throughout 1928 Mayekar, now isolated within the labour movement, opposed the communists with the help of Borkar, and attempted on several occasions to break up their meetings. 'For six months and more', reported Horniman's *Indian National Herald*, 'the leaders of the communist-led Girni Kamgar Union were repeatedly disturbed by his unwelcome presence which at once acted as a disintegrating factor on one section of the workers and an infuriating phenomenon on the other.'¹¹⁶ The effect of Mayekar's intervention 'through his friend Borkar',¹¹⁷ at several communist meetings was interpreted very differently by left-wing sympathizers and by the police. While the police commissioner reported that frequent complaints were received that they were 'seeking to stir up trouble at the communist meetings . . . but no serious clash occurred',¹¹⁸ the *Indian National Herald's* version was that the communist leaders 'went to the length of even dissolving crowded meetings', to avoid confrontation. Indeed, at practically every meeting the leaders exhorted the men to remain restrained in the face of provocation.¹¹⁹ If the Mayekar-Borkar alliance had been able to create a riot, this would have provided the police with the kind of opportunity they sought

¹¹³ GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (18) C of 1928, MSA.

¹¹⁴ BRIC, oral evidence, W. T. Halai, File 5, p. 81, MSA.

¹¹⁵ BRIC, oral evidence, Dr P. G. Solanki, File 6, p. 165; see also, oral evidence, G. L. Kandalkar and V. H. Joshi of the Girni Kamgar Union, File 16, pp. 65-7, MSA.

¹¹⁶ *Indian National Herald*, 7 December 1928.

¹¹⁷ Letter, Commissioner of Police, Bombay, to Secretary, GOB, Home, Bombay no. 5395 L, 13 December 1928, in GOB, Home (Poll), File 265 of 1928, MSA. ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Indian National Herald*, 7 December 1928. Mayekar, claimed the paper, only 'masquerades as a labour leader and is, in fact, alleged to be an agent of the Criminal Investigation Department'.

to take further repressive action. During the strike, Mirajkar had told a strikers' meeting at Kalachowki on 2 August 1928 that:

our strength lies in unity and peace. On Monday attempts are [sic] made to disturb our peace with the use of lathis. If they use their lathis we can also retaliate in the same way; but as we want to win the struggle, we must keep peace. If we disturb peace, lathis and guns will be used and under that threat they will try to put men into the mills. But our men are firm and they already know the knavery of the millowners. They [strikers] have already resolved not to fall prey to the hirelings of the millowners.¹²⁰

On 11 December 1928, a message was received at the Girni Kamgar Union office, calling for their assistance in connection with a dispute at the David Sassoon Spinning and Manufacturing Mill at Ghorapdeo – the heart of Borkar's territory. The communist leader R. S. Nimbkar, P. T. Tamhanekar, Govind Kasale and a few others who went to investigate found the complaint to be false. As they left the mill, Nimbkar and his associates were set upon and attacked by Keshav Borkar and a gang of about twenty men. Complaints lodged at the local police station, however, 'of course failed to trace the assailants'.¹²¹ The following morning workers from the David Sassoon, Morarji Gokuldas, Moon and Shapurji Broacha mills did not resume work, out of sympathy for their bruised leaders. At a meeting of the Girni Kamgar Union at Poibavdi that morning, Kasale, who had taken the brunt of the attack, displayed his wounds. Clearly the temper of the meeting was highly charged. Plain-clothes policemen in the crowd were identified and assaulted.¹²² Within minutes, about 500 workers set off towards Borkar's house, 'with the intention presumably of settling accounts with him. He got intimation of their advance and left his house.'¹²³ By the time the crowd reached Borkar's house they were estimated to be more than three thousand strong. The contents of his house were pulled onto the street and a bonfire was lit. His furniture and cooking utensils were damaged; the house was ransacked, the tiles on his roof were removed and thrown away; his gymnasium was wrecked.¹²⁴

As the morning wore on, mill after mill was brought out on strike by workers who gathered at the gates and stoned the premises until those who had remained inside the mill were locked out by the management. The

¹²⁰ GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (18) C of 1928, MSA.

¹²¹ *Proceedings of the MCC*, statement submitted by S. A. Dange, p. 2522.

¹²² Telegram, police commissioner to Secretary, GOB, Home (Special), no. 5368 L, 12 December 1928, in GOB Home (Poll), File 265 of 1928, MSA.

¹²³ Letter, Police Commissioner to Secretary, GOB, Home, Bombay no. 5395 L, 13 December 1928, in *ibid.*, pp. 41–5.

¹²⁴ Report of H. C. Stokes, Inspector, Byculla Police Station, D. Division in *ibid.*, pp. 13–15; *Times of India*, 21 December 1928.

police were alerted and brought into action: the result was riot. By the time Inspector Klein of Bhoiwada Police Station met the crowd on Suparibagh Road, they were, according to him, armed with sticks, bamboos, iron rods, gymnastic paraphernalia and 'obviously bent on mischief'. With a small force and awaiting reinforcements, the police attempted to stop this crowd by throwing a cordon across the road. The result was that the police were routed. Crowds appeared from every direction and hemmed the police in on all sides, while 'stones were also being thrown from the rooms and windows of the neighbouring houses'. When Klein fired with his revolver, the crowd 'held back slightly but came on with renewed vigour'. The constables began to climb into the police lorry and Klein failed to 'force them to stand fast'.¹²⁵ His deputy was set upon by the crowd and badly beaten. Klein was forced to take refuge in a nearby building while 'the mob furiously attacked the house from outside'.¹²⁶ The police lorry had to be chased by Superintendent Spiers, who noticed it hurtling away from the action.¹²⁷ Spiers returned to the scene of action, fired into the crowd, 'drove the rioters helter-skelter off the roads', and rescued the brave if battered Klein.¹²⁸ However, several features of this riot must be noted. First, the nature of the police intervention had the opposite effect to what was intended: for instance, the attempt to stop the crowd with an ineffective cordon at first, and later by the show of a pistol, and an attempt by some constables to snatch away the red flag which some workers were carrying aggravated the situation.¹²⁹ Second, five workers died in the riot, four of them from bullet wounds. 'We must put an end to the idea prevailing in police circles', one newspaper reporter wrote indignantly, 'that human life is so cheap that it can be wantonly destroyed on the slightest provocation.'¹³⁰ However, it must be taken as an indication of popular anger and determination that the crowd withstood considerable police firing and returned to counter-attack, 'with renewed vigour'. Third, the 'mob' on the streets was neither undifferentiated nor, in its response, exceptional to working-class sentiment. As the police commissioner noted, 'I am told by the officers that the stones were being hurled not only by the rioters on the road, but by millhands who were in the rooms of houses adjoining the road. These stones could not have been obtained on the road itself and it appears to me that the strikers were out

¹²⁵ Report by Inspector Klein, Bhoiwada Police Station to Superintendent of Police, E. Division, Bombay in GOB, Home (Poll), File 265 of 1928, pp. 21–5, MSA.

¹²⁶ Letter, Commissioner of Police, Bombay, to Secretary, GOB, Home, Bombay no. 5395 L, 13 December 1928, in *ibid.*, pp. 41–5.

¹²⁷ Report by W. D. R. Spiers, Superintendent, E. Division, in *ibid.*, pp. 27–31.

¹²⁸ Letter, Commissioner of Police, Bombay, to Secretary, GOB, Home, Bombay no. 5395 L, 13 December 1928 in *ibid.*, pp. 41–5.

¹²⁹ *Indian National Herald*, 7 December 1928. ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

yesterday for mischief and had brought the stones with them.¹³¹ Yet the scene of action – Suparibagh Road – was one of the main thoroughfares through the mill district. If we are to believe that ‘this strike was mainly brought about by those (communist) leaders and was done very secretly and in a well organized way’, we must also believe that this conspiracy involved a vast proportion of the Bombay working class. Significantly, what began as an expression of protest on an impressive scale against the anti-union activities of Borkar and his men, culminated in a full-scale battle with the police.

While it was by supporting the militant tendencies within the neighbourhood, and through their apparent refusal to collaborate with employers and the state that the communists staked their claim to be the party of the working class, this claim was not always accepted. In the early 1930s, for instance, their refusal to associate with the Congress and their attempts to lead their constituents – exhausted by the strikes of 1928–29 and faced with the threat of unemployment – into battle once more cost the communists membership, neighbourhood allies as well as political sympathy. The support for the communists was not a simple fusion of shared antagonism towards the capitalist class and the state. Clearly, the Girmi Kamgar Union brought to trade union politics a fresh concept of the conduct of working-class politics, and in contrast to the condescension of the vacuous sermons of improvement of the early labour organizations, a new concern with the daily issues of working-class life.¹³² These departures in trade union leadership arose, in a sense, from necessity. Faced with exclusion at the level of the individual mill, the communists lacked the resources – essentially the good will of the state and the employers – to renew their linkages through patronage. To function as a trade union at all, the Girmi Kamgar Union had to intervene energetically in the disputes of individual mills and build up enough support across the industry to prevent the employers from disregarding them. In one sense, the price of survival itself was militancy. However, this brought them into immediate conflict with the state. The conduct of a strike, which required organization and action in the neighbourhood, carried workers into public forms of confrontation and shaped their political consciousness.

¹³¹ Letter, Commissioner of Police, Bombay, to Secretary, GOB, Home, Bombay no. 5395 L, 13 December 1928, in GOB, Home (Poll), File 265 of 1928, p. 45, MSA.

¹³² Their leaflets, fly-sheets and public meetings dealt with such questions as jobber tyranny, methods of wage calculations, the shortcomings of ‘efficiency’ schemes which increased workloads without improving machinery, the use of the rotation of shifts to weed out troublesome workers and the causes of unemployment. See, for instance, the communist fly-sheets and leaflets collected in GOB, Home (Special), File 543 (46) of 1934 and File 543 (46) Pt 1 of 1934, MSA.

V

‘In recent times’, K. F. Nariman was to say in 1929, ‘a new spirit of organization and class consciousness has come into existence among our labouring classes.’¹³³ But it is difficult to estimate the impact of this class consciousness upon other competing social identities amongst Bombay’s workers. It would be misleading to suggest that the response of Bombay’s workers to the growth of industrial action and the communist ascendancy in labour politics was in any sense uniform. The possibilities of action varied with their village connections, their position in the neighbourhood and their bargaining power in the workplace. For instance, weavers, working in the most profitable and rapidly growing sector of the industry, and protected by their level of skill, formed the most militant section of the workforce; while Mahars who manned the unskilled jobs in spinning departments or north Indian workers, whose lines of supply from their villages were weak, were more easily contained. The predominant cultural influence within the labour movement was exercised by Marathas from Ratnagiri and Satara. ‘Labour activity in Bombay’, Jhabvala was to say, considering his isolation, ‘is largely Mahratta in its nature. The leaders must be conversant firstly with the Mahratta language, secondly with Mahratta habits of life and with a good deal of social outlook upon life that is Mahratta partly in its character.’¹³⁴ On the other hand, after 1929, Muslim workers were probably increasingly alienated from the labour movement in Bombay, partly no doubt as a consequence of increasing communal tension within national politics.

Many of these cultural differences were developed into political conflicts and sectarian rivalries by the actions of the employers and the state. As we have seen, the jobber system operated along the lines of these cultural divisions; it not only facilitated strike-breaking but also could, if necessary, enable employers to replace one group of workers with those of another caste or religion. Indeed, the communal riots of 1929 began during a strike when Hindu workers tried to stop Muslims from going to work.¹³⁵ It is probable that industrialization, far from dissolving caste, strengthened its bonds. The cotton textile industry did not depend upon the perpetuation of these bonds, but it profited greatly from their use. Caste should, therefore, be seen less as a cultural condition whose

¹³³ *Times of India*, 8 August 1929.

¹³⁴ *Proceedings of the MCC*, statements made by the accused, non-communist series, examination of S. H. Jhabvala, p. 756. This comment must also be read in the light that Jhabvala by his own admission ‘knew very little Mahratti’ and was, when he spoke these words, apparently isolated within the labour movement.

¹³⁵ Memorandum by Director of Information, GOB, 3 May 1929 in GOB, Home (Poll), File 344 of 1929, pp. 113–15, MSA.

primacy was being challenged by the emergence of 'class' than another important tension embedded within a class context.

This essay has attempted to depict a network of social relationships out of which the working-class experience was formed. It was in the neighbourhood that the classic picture of the Indian working class, bound immutably by their changeless past, their powerless present and their hopeless future was most apparent. Yet the neighbourhood, which was integral to the relationships of the workplace, became an important base for industrial and political action. It was here, where tensions within the working class were played out, that the solidarities of class also received their most public expression.

5 Workers, violence and the colonial state: representation, repression and resistance

I

That Indian workers were prone to spontaneous and violent action was a commonplace among policemen, civil servants and employers. This perception was not confined to colonial rulers or Indian elites alone. It expressed and informed the anxieties of wide sections of the population. As rural migrants, illiterate and uneducated, devoid of factory experience, short of commitment to the industrial setting, apparently lacking in proletarian maturity, Indian workers were deemed to be inherently rough and volatile. They were believed to be acquiescent and incapable of organization, but easily provoked, liable to violent outbursts and particularly vulnerable to the blandishments of political agitators. Their volatility was often perceived as a function of their pre-industrial character. Such workers, it was supposed, could not readily form, or sustain, trade unions, and their inability to organize only reinforced, in this view, their tendency to express their grievances through violence.

Observers commented on the frequency of lightning strikes. Trivial grievances, they noted, led to immediate closures. Employers complained that workers often went on strike without formulating their grievances and after the strike had begun would put forward several and extravagant claims. Strikes, it was said, were maintained by threat, intimidation and assaults upon 'loyal workers'. Trade unions that formed usually failed to formulate demands or negotiate concessions and, if they did, they could rarely persuade their members to accept any settlements they might achieve.¹ As a result, trade unions proved incapable of channelling workers' grievances into organized and disciplined expression. In any case, in this view, rural migrants were incapable of organization. The circularity of this reasoning captured one of the numerous contradictions that beset the colonial discourse about labour: their rural and pre-industrial mentalities rendered workers too volatile to form trade unions, but

¹ *Report of the Industrial Disputes Committee, 1922, in Labour Gazette, 1:8 (April 1922), 24.*