

**Intersections**  
**Socio-Cultural Trends in Maharashtra**

edited by  
**Meera Kosambi**



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*To the S.N.D.T. Women's University  
and its ideology of  
women's empowerment through education*

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## Introduction

MEERA KOSAMBI

The abiding image of India as a land of contrasts is anchored, both in the scholarly and the popular mind, largely to the visible and recurrent presence of the old and the new in multiple combinations: sometimes the past lives on into the present, sometimes it is transmuted, and sometimes disrupted and recreated. While the socio-cultural continuities and discontinuities resonating through all of India form a common theme, its specific echoes in Maharashtra are explored in this volume.

The rationale for regional studies in a subcontinent like India is too obvious and well-established by now to need justification, or arouse fears of parochialism and local chauvinism. Maharashtra has been particularly fortunate in possessing a lively tradition of scholarship. Woven out of both local and international strands, it has spanned diverse issues of intellectual enquiry. These issues range from the mainstream religious tradition and the divergent sects of folk religion, to the moulding of religious identities in confrontation with the British colonial rule and the post-Independence political tensions; from the upsurge of Maratha power and the assertion of the Maratha identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the nineteenth century social and political reform efforts and the twentieth century political protest movements; they also span creative artistic expressions in different media. Some of these themes, emerging out of a combination of regional specificities, wield a powerful influence on the Maharashtrian psyche and consciously or unconsciously mould current and future socio-cultural developments which find a reflection also in research concerns. Many articles in this volume cover more than one of

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## Impact of the Great Depression and the Second World War on Agriculture and Industry in the Bombay Presidency: 1929–1945

Y.D. PHADKE

The Great Depression of 1929 which hit the economies of the advanced industrialised Western countries also affected the underdeveloped agricultural countries including India. Though the economies of the industrialised countries recovered quickly from 1935 onwards, India continued to suffer from the drastic fall in prices until the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. This paper seeks to assess the impact of the duration and intensity of the slump as well as of the Second World War, on agriculture and industry in the Bombay Presidency, during the decade (1929–39) of distress and discontent, and again, during the years of turmoil from 1939 to 1945.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Agriculture

In India the index of wholesale prices (taking the year 1929 as the base) fell by 18 points in 1930, and by 32 points in 1931, reaching its lowest level in 1933 when the index stood at 61.7. Though it did show a slightly upward trend from 1934, it was still at a low of 67.6 in 1938 as there was no substantial improvement. There was a sharp decline in India's balance of trade in merchandise. The total value of India's exports was

Rs 361 crore in 1929–30. By 1930–31 it had dropped to Rs 257 crore. The lowest level was reached in 1931–32 when it was Rs 181 crores. The fall in the value of the imports was equally drastic, the total figure declining by almost a half over the same years (Philips and Wainright 1970:295–96).

In a statement prepared by the Government of India for presentation to the British Parliament in 1934–35, it was admitted that the prices in general remained at a low level and the decline in India had been much greater in respect of exported articles (chiefly agricultural produce) than in respect of imported (manufactured) articles (*India in 1934–35* 1985:33). As the monsoon was fairly good from 1930 to 1933, and harvests plentiful, there was no scarcity of paddy, wheat and other foodgrains. However, the tenants and cultivators found it difficult to sell whatever they produced; and if at all they were able to sell paddy, wheat or millet, they had to do so at abnormally low prices. They could not find enough cash to meet their obligations regarding payment of rent or land revenue. It was in this context that Gandhiji and the Congress demanded reduction of land revenue by 50 per cent and total relief to small landowners.

Gandhiji's decision to choose the salt tax for attack and his fervent plea to break the salt laws baffled many of his colleagues and followers. In his autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru (1962:210) recalled how 'salt suddenly became a mysterious word, a word of power. We were bewildered and could not fit in a national struggle with the common salt.' Gandhiji's choice of salt tax proved to be a shrewd move by that astute politician who knew that while 'the average income of an Indian was 7 pice per day, he had to pay heavy taxes of which 20 per cent were paid as land revenue' (*Young India*, 23 Jan. 1930). With the exception of China, India was the only country in the world where the State had a monopoly of salt. In 1930 the wholesale price of salt per maund of 82 lbs. was as low as 10 pice, while the Government levied and collected 20 annas or 240 pice as tax per maund. In a period of falling prices, rising unemployment, retrenchment and reduction in wages, the burden of salt tax fell heavily on the poorer sections of society. The Government routinely destroyed the salt it could not sell profitably, a fact which was known to many.

The *Bombay Administration Reports (BAR)* from 1929 to 1934

reveal the drastic fall in prices of foodgrains and other essential commodities such as milk. The index of retail prices (taking the year 1926–27 as the base) showed a sharp decline in the prices of rice, wheat, jawar, bajra and pulses, which fell in 1933–34 by 43, 38, 44, 43 and 42 points respectively. Farmers who preferred to grow cash crops such as cotton and groundnuts suffered the most. According to Neil Charlesworth (1985:226), the average price of Broach Cotton fell by 19.6 per cent between 1932–33 and 1938–39, and that of groundnuts in Karad Taluka of Satara District by a third over the same period. The extent of cotton cultivation had fallen to 3.8 million acres by 1932–33, a decline of nearly 25 per cent on the levels of 7 years previously. Cotton cultivation continued to shrink; its total extent of 3.63 million acres in 1938–39 represented a further decline since 1932–33.

The Government of India admitted that 'between 1928–29 and 1933–34, the fall in the price of primary goods was steeper than that of manufactured goods' (*BAR 1929–1934*). Sir George Schuster remarked that India felt the severity of the fall in the case of what she had to sell but did not obtain a corresponding advantage of the fall in prices of what she had to buy. While the price of exported goods, which were mainly agricultural, recorded a fall of about 45.9 per cent between 1929 and 1934, the fall in the prices of imports, which were mainly manufactured, was only 28.2 per cent. This disparity in the fall of prices further aggravated the economic distress of the agriculturists (*BAR 1929–1934*).

Land revenue, excise, stamps and forests constituted the chief sources of the Bombay Presidency's revenue. They not only ceased to expand but also began to shrink because of the depression. Receipts from these four chief heads of revenue during 1932–1934 were, on an average, less by 4 crore than what they were between 1921–22 to 1929–30. Govindrao Pradhan, Gulam Hussain Hidayatullah and Dhanjisha Cooper, the three Finance Ministers from 1930 to 1936, found it difficult to present balanced budgets and had to present deficit budgets with a view to providing some relief to the farmers. They had to grant suspensions and remissions under the ordinary rules as well as give special concessions. From 1930 to 1934, suspensions granted by them amounted to Rs 198 lakh apart from the definite loss of revenue owing to remissions which was over Rs 189 lakh (*BLCD*,

Feb.-March 1935:55). Even estimates of deficit mentioned in the budgets of 1934-35 and 1935-36 actually turned out to be underestimates as the anticipated deficits of Rs 1 and 2 lakh respectively. The demand for the separation of Sindh from Bombay province was supported by many non-Muslims, as the Bombay Government had to spend much more on the low income yielding Sindh.

The Government of Bombay had to impose a cut of 10 per cent in the salaries of all government servants in December 1932. In April 1933, the incidence of the cut was reduced to 5 per cent before it was discontinued from 1st April, 1935 (*BLCD*, Feb.-March 1935:45). The Reorganisation Committee appointed by the Bombay Government to suggest economy measures had recommended the closing of all Government Arts Colleges on financial grounds but the Government decided to close the Deccan College at the end of the academic year 1933-34 and increased fees in other colleges. It did not accept the recommendation of the Reorganisation Committee to abolish the Industries Department. As a result of the economy measures, the Government could save Rs 1.2 crore. Apart from relying on retrenchment and reduction in salaries, an attempt was made to reduce expenditure by scheduling only two sessions of the legislature, instead of three, in a year. However, the Government refused to accept a cut in the salaries and allowances of the top-ranking civil servants including members of the Governor's Executive Council who were subject to the rules, regulations and conditions of work approved by the Secretary of State for India in England.

### Rural Indebtedness

As a result of the Great Depression, there was an alarming increase in rural as well as urban indebtedness. In 1930, the Bombay Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee stated in its report that the total amount of indebtedness of the agriculturists in the Bombay Presidency was Rs 81 crore (*BPBR 1930*), and some members of the Bombay Legislative Council such as Syed Miran Shah believed that it had gone up to Rs 100 crore. The rate of interest charged by money-lenders varied from region to region. In northern Gujarat the rate of interest was about 12 per

cent, in Konkan it was 18 per cent, in the famine areas of the Deccan and Karnataka it was 24 per cent while it was not less than 36 per cent in Sindh. Even the cooperative societies charged about 10 per cent interest (*BLCD*, July 1935, XLII:815). The Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee stated that the average debt per family was Rs 329 and it was highest in the Khandesh District where it was Rs 685 per family. Vamanrao Patil, a member of the Bombay Legislative Council estimated in September 1936 that the amount of debt had nearly doubled itself as a result of the Great Depression (*BLCD*, Sept.-Oct. 1936:483-84).

The problem of increasing rural indebtedness was studied by a Committee appointed by the Maharashtra Provincial Congress Committee. In order to inquire into the distress of the agriculturists of Baglan and Kalwan Talukas in Nasik District, five members of the Committee visited 29 villages in Baglan and 13 villages in Kalwan, and made personal inquiries with 114 Khatedars individually in 7 villages. Of these 114, only 5 Khatedars were without any debt while the others were heavily indebted (*BLCD*, Feb.-March 1935:296). Before 1937, the Government of C.P. and Berar passed laws restricting the activities of the money-lenders and appointing debt conciliation boards. No such laws however, were passed in the Bombay Presidency till the Congress Ministry came into power in July 1937.

Some peasants who suffered owing to the Depression participated in the Civil Disobedience Campaigns of 1930 and 1932. Younger members of the Non-Brahmin Party who were landholders, left their party in disgust and joined the Congress. Within the Congress a distinct leftist group, led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose, emerged and was supported by the Communists, the followers of Manavendra Nath Roy and Members of the Congress Socialist Party which was formed in 1934. Swami Sahajananda from Bihar, N.G. Ranga from Andhra, Indulal Yajnik from Gujarat and others who were identified with the Kisan Sabhas joined hands with the leftists and pressurised the Congress leaders to pass legislation in favour of the cultivators and tenants. In May 1936, a sub-committee of the Maharashtra Provincial Congress Committee to study problems of farmers, recommended the abolition of the Khoti system

which prevailed in Ratnagiri and Kolaba District. The Khots who formed a separate organisation to safeguard their interests, set up candidates against Congressmen who contested elections in February 1937. S.L. Karandikar and R.N. Mandlik, two leaders of the newly formed Democratic Swarajya Party won the elections from Ratnagiri and Kolaba Districts with the support of the Khots. Some Khots, including S.S. Mahajan, the President of the Ratnagiri Congress Committee, urged the M.P.C.C. not to abolish the Khoti system. In view of the opposition of the Khots, Sardar Patel, on behalf of the Congress High Command, gave them an assurance in writing that the Congress did not have a plan to abolish the Khoti system immediately (Phadke 1990:141). The objective of the Congress was to abolish it within 20 years. Dr B.R. Ambedkar who had established the Independent Labour Party on 15 August 1936 had included the abolition of the Khoti system as part of the party's programme mentioned in the election manifesto. Though Dr Ambedkar's Khoti Abolition Bill was rejected by the Bombay Legislature, Morarji Desai, Revenue Minister in the first Kher Ministry, incorporated some provisions in the Tenancy Bill with a view to giving protection to the tenants against the Khots.

The Tenancy Bill created a new category of 'protected tenants'. Anyone who had cultivated land continuously for a period of at least six years before 1 January 1938 was recognised as a 'protected tenant'. Landlords who owned any land which was cultivated by a protected tenant could take it back for their personal use provided they had given one year's notice and paid back whatever amount was spent earlier by the protected tenant for improving the quality of their land. Though the Bill aimed at giving protection to a restricted number of tenants, even such a mild measure was strongly opposed by landowners who dominated the Congress. Gangadharrao Deshpande, President of the Karnataka Provincial Congress Committee supported by A.B. Latthe, the Finance Minister, led the intra-party campaign against the Bill and urged Gandhiji to intervene on behalf of the landlords. Even after the Tenancy Bill was passed by both the Houses of the Bombay Legislature, Latthe circulated a note among his colleagues in the Ministry warning them of the serious consequences of such a statute (Phadke 1989:169-70). It should be remembered that Bombay was one of the few

provinces which had no tenancy legislation till the Tenancy Act passed in 1939 became a law on 2 April 1940. After the Kher Ministry's resignation, Section 93 Administration (of the Act of 1935) under the Governor promptly amended the Act to assume power to apply it wherever they liked and actually applied it to a few talukas in the Province. It was only in 1946 that the Tenancy Act was applied immediately to the whole province as soon as the second Kher Ministry took charge of Government.

The election manifesto of the Congress in 1936 had assured the voters that if it came into power it would announce a moratorium to enable farmers to pay back the loans and also attempt to provide credit to them at a lower rate of interest. However, the Congress Ministry made no such move even after coming into power in July 1937. In June 1938, a joint meeting of the four PCCs in the Province, presided over by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, approved a note prepared by Latthe. The Agricultural Debtors' Relief Bill was passed on 25 October 1939 nearly a week before the first Congress Ministry resigned. Section 93 Administration under the Governor applied this Act only to a few talukas and this Act too was applied to the whole province only in 1946.

### **Price Control**

During the years of the Second World War from September 1939 to August 1945, the agricultural seasons were fairly satisfactory except in 1941-42, but there were considerable fluctuations in the prices of the agricultural produce mainly on account of transport difficulties, loss and diminution of overseas markets and speculative activities. The abnormal rise in the price of rice was due mainly to the shortage of Burma rice imports in the market. The movement of agricultural products was aggravated by internal disturbance arising out of the Quit India campaign of 1942 and by the pressure on transport facilities.

The excessive rise in price of agricultural produce and the difficulties in distribution led to the intervention of the Government in the direction of price control and organised distribution of many agricultural products. The Government of Bombay had to take measures to check food hoarding and other anti-social actions. The Bombay Cotton Control Act of 1942



provided for the regulation or prohibition of the cultivation of any variety of cotton other than scheduled varieties in notified areas and prohibited the mixing of non-scheduled with scheduled varieties of cotton in areas such as West Khandesh where the cultivation of only Jarila variety of cotton was permitted and other varieties prohibited.

The Bombay Growth of Food-Crops Act was enforced with a view to reducing the acreage under short stapled cotton which would not be easily marketable. Section 4 of the Bombay Growth of Food-Crops Act was applied in 1945-46 beginning with the Kharif season to many areas of the province.

A conference of the representatives of the Central Government, Provinces and Princely States was convened in April 1942. It passed several resolutions which formed the basis of what came to be known as the 'Grow More Food Campaign'. Attempts were made to increase the area under food and fodder crops by bringing new land including fallow land under cultivation, double cropping and diverting land from non-food crops to food crops. Efforts were also made to increase water-supply for irrigation. The use of manure and fertilisers, and the supply of improved seeds were increased. Until 1947, however, there was no definite plan or target, and the Central Government preferred to confine itself to granting subsidies and loans to the schemes it had formulated. With a view to ensuring equitable distribution of consumer goods, rationing was introduced in all important urban areas and levy schemes were implemented. Prices of essential consumer goods were fixed by the Government from 1942.<sup>2</sup>

The co-operative movement in the Bombay Presidency received a set-back because of the Great Depression. The total number of co-operative societies in the Presidency was 5,896 in 1930-31, and declined to 5,093 in 1937-38, largely because of the failure of the agricultural credit societies. There was a sharp increase in the number of defaulters as well as in arrears. Corruption increased and so did the number of co-operative societies which were liquidated. The co-operative societies had to reduce the rate of interest by 2 to 6 per cent on loans advanced to members. Three co-operative training institutes had to be closed down in 1936 because of the lack of funds for training, and could be re-opened only in 1944. It was only after 1939 that

the co-operative movement picked up again with the establishment of co-operative housing societies in urban areas, multi-purpose societies, and sale and purchase societies in rural areas.

## II. Industry

The Great Depression made the position of the cotton textile industry in Bombay City worse. In 1926, the city had 78 mills; the number was reduced to 73 in 1931, and declined further to 55 in 1934. The number of textile workers in the city was 150,000 in 1926; it was reduced to only 96,000 in 1934 as a result of unemployment (*BLCD*, Aug.-Sept. 1934:176). Some workers left Bombay, and the 1931 Census revealed that the city's population was reduced by 14,000 from the total population of 1,161,400 as recorded in the 1921 Census. Even before the onset of the Great Depression, Bombay City's textile industry faced several problems after 1923 owing to a fall in the price of raw cotton, declining export of yarn to China, increasing competition especially with Japan, increased cost of production, and a series of strikes of long duration in 1924, 1925 and 1929 (Phadke 1991:2).

In Bombay City, textile mill-workers had to work for 10 hours instead of 12 and even children employed in the city mills did not have to work for more than 5 hours. The textile workers in Bombay City received on an average Rs. 38 as wages per month while the workers in Solapur received only Rs. 24 per month. Compared to the workers in Bombay City, textile mill-workers in other cities such as Ahmedabad or Solapur received less wages and worked longer hours. Mill owners preferred to open new textile mills in Ahmedabad after 1926 as a result of which the number of mills in Ahmedabad increased from 59 in 1926 to 73 in 1931. Higher cost of fuel and water, higher local taxation, obsolete machinery and absence of an organised infrastructure to settle disputes between employers and workers were other important factors which contributed to the decline of the textile industry in the city of Bombay (Gandhi 1937:159-61).

The Great Depression created more problems for workers as employers resorted to wage-cuts as well as retrenchment. In the

February-March 1934 session of the Bombay Legislative Council, R.S. Asavale, a member associated with the trade union movement, stated on the floor of the House that textile workers in the city of Bombay had to accept a cut of 30 to 40 per cent and in some mills a cut of even 50 per cent in 'dear food' allowance. Weavers who had earlier earned Rs 60 to 80 a month were compelled to accept Rs 25 to 30 a month in 1934 (BLCD 1934:965-66).

### Workers' Strikes

Textile mill-workers in Bombay City and Solapur protested against the wage-cuts by organising strikes in 1934. Leading Communists who had successfully led the 1928 strike were arrested in March 1929 and, like the accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, jailed for more than four years. In their absence, younger leaders such as S.V. Deshpande and B.T. Ranadive had taken over the leadership of the Red Flag Girni Kamgar Union. In December 1929 there was a split in the All India Trade Union Congress, and intense factionalism in the Girni Kamgar Union had considerably weakened the trade union movement. Even among the leaders in the Meerut jail there were sharp differences over strategy and tactics, which led to the expulsion of S.A. Dange from the CPI before the Conspiracy case hearing was not completed (Phadke 1993:4-5).

In December 1930, Narendranath Bhattacharya alias Manavendra Nath Roy had returned to India after living in exile for fifteen years. Calling himself 'Dr. Mahmud', he led a small group in Bombay until his arrest on 21 July 1931. The Royist group competed for control with the two factions of the CPI led by S.V. Deshpande and B.T. Ranadive, respectively. The mill-workers' strike in Solapur which started on 15 February 1934 lasted for three months. The wages received by the workers in Solapur were the lowest in the Presidency. A woman worker did not get more than Rs 7 per month. In such circumstances any wage-cut would have resulted in starvation (Phadke 1993:5-6).

The three mills in Solapur had made enormous profits during the War and in the following three years. In 1921, the Laxmi Mills paid a dividend to the extent of 75 per cent. In 1929 it could

pay 36 per cent dividend, while in 1930 it paid only 12 per cent to the shareholders. The Vishnu Mill paid 60 per cent in 1921, 24 per cent in 1929 and 12 per cent in 1930. The Solapur Mill's dividend was 50 per cent in 1922, 35 per cent in 1929, and only 6 per cent in 1930 and 1931 (BLCD Feb.-March 1934:959).

The Bombay Government resorted to repression and arrested 93 persons. When 60,000 textile workers in Bombay City stopped work on 23 April 1934, the Government arrested 227 persons, of whom 89 were convicted and included Royists as well as prominent members of both the factions of the CPI in Bombay. The Government brought in the Emergency Special Power Act to suppress the strike even though the Governor of Bombay had given a written assurance earlier to R.R. Bakhle, a moderate labour leader, that the Act would not be used against those who either participated in non-violent *satyagraha* or were active in the trade union movement and resorted to constitutional methods. The Act was also used to expel two labour leaders who made an attempt to establish a union at Dhulia and Amalner. In Bombay City, the police resorted to firing. The Government appointed a committee to look into the grievances of the workers and the committee justified the wage-cuts enforced by the mill-owners. When the strike failed, the angry workers assaulted the leaders of the strike such as K.N. Joglekar, D.K. Bedekar, Dr. M.R. Shetty and Wamanrao Kulkarni. In his autobiography, Kulkarni admitted that their decision to organise a strike during a period of economic depression and increasing unemployment was sheer madness and an inevitable result of their left adventurist strategy (Kulkarni 1989:68-83).

After the end of the strike Lord Brabourne, Governor of Bombay, wrote to Samuel Hoare:

Now that the strike in Bombay has come to an end, I feel, I should bring to your notice once again, how very strongly we in Bombay feel that some definite steps should be taken during the next 18 months to arm future Governments with some weapon against Communism. The mill-hands had definite grievances due largely to the haphazard fashion in which wage cuts had been introduced but without the intervention of the Communists, they would most certainly *not* have resorted to a strike. In the absence, however, of any

legislation making the promotion of strikes for Communist purposes unlawful, Government were not in a position to take any steps to prevent the strike from materialising. The question of using the Bombay Special (Emergency) Powers Act at an earlier stage was discussed but with the knowledge that the workers had certain legitimate grievances, it was thought necessary to test their wishes by allowing the strike to run and to reserve the powers under the Bombay Special (Emergency) Power Act for use when conditions indicating a strong probability of disorder might arise.

Owing to a long period of depression in the industry, there was great reluctance among the workers to lose their employment and everything, therefore, was in favour of the mill-owners. The breakdown of the strike was accelerated by the fact that various parties among the labour leaders were at loggerheads with one another and partly, of course, owing to the removal of the more dangerous persons, played their cards badly (*GOI, Brabourne to Hoare, 1934*).

After analysing the failure of the 1934 textile strike, Brabourne urged the Secretary of State for India to persuade the Government of India to pass a law which would enable the Bombay Government to take precautionary action against the Communists in Bombay:

As we pointed out in our original letter of 21st June and of 14th June, 1934 to Government of India regarding the use of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the real difficulty in taking any sort of precautionary action consists in the fact that the criminal aspects of Communism have never been defined by law. The real reason, in fact, for taking action against them is not their immediate activities but their ultimate object. The Communists are essentially a permanent menace. Even in the case of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Section under which all India action can be taken is a temporary section and when it lapses in 1935 the initiative will be confined to the Provinces where the ban could then be imposed or removed by Executive order of the Government of the day. Bombay supplies most of the active organisers and leaders of the movement. Bombay breeds a class of agitators possessed of an organising ability which is not commonly found in other parts

of India. The activities of the Congress Socialist Party in fostering agrarian discontent will play into the hands of Communists (*GOI, Brabourne to Hoare, 1934*).

The Secretary of State, however, supported the Government of India which had its own reasons to turn down the plea of the Government of Bombay. Samuel Hoare in his reply to Brabourne stated:

I am rather inclined to share your doubt whether action under the Criminal Law Amendment Act is likely to prove very effective. But the Government of India seem to be fairly confident that this Act can be usefully applied against Communism in spite of the difficulty of obtaining convictions. We cannot overlook the forthcoming elections for the Central Legislature. They think that it would be hard, and I agree with them, on Government supporters in the Assembly to ask them to pass a Bill like this which would be likely to have a very bad effect on their chances against the Swarajists in the election. I have therefore agreed with the Government of India that the Bill should be held over unless a definite emergency arises in Bombay (*GOI, Hoare to Brabourne, 1934*).

### **Government Policy for Resolution of Industrial Disputes**

Though the Government of Bombay successfully suppressed the 1934 strike, it was aware of the need to redress at least some grievances of the workers who suffered because of the Great Depression. The Trade Disputes Conciliation Act was passed in 1934 and a Labour Officer to help workers was appointed. The Act also provided for the creation of a Board of Conciliators to deal with industrial disputes. The Bombay Government's plea for extraordinary legislation to make some aspects of Communism criminal was not acceptable to either the Government of India or the Secretary of State; therefore Robert Bell, the Home Member, moved a three-clause Bill called the Special Powers Act Amendment in September 1935. Its provisions were identical to those of the Ordinances issued in 1932. The 1935 Bill was an obnoxious measure providing for detention without trial, and was denounced by Justice

Govindrao Madgaonkar in a letter published in the newspapers. Madgaonkar observed:

I would rather be denounced by the Communists as an exploiter of the proletariat, be bombed by the terrorist as a mercenary and a traitor and be boycotted by the passive resister as one lacking in patriotism and self-sacrifice rather than have such a law enacted for my supposed benefit even by a purely Indian Government, much less by the present Government. I am content with the protection of the ordinary laws and the courts (*BLCD*, Sept.-Nov. 1935:588).

The Government ignored such criticism and got the Bill passed by 53 votes in favour and 36 against. The opposition (led by R.R. Kale, a liberal leader) protested against it by staging a walkout which was a rare event in the years before Independence.

The labour front was very quiet in 1935 and addressing the session of the Bombay Legislative Council on 24 February 1936, the Governor declared that the number of industrial disputes in the textile industry in Bombay City was the lowest since 1921. From 1932 to 1935 the industrialists from Bombay were busy restoring cordial relations with the Government, and the textile industry was helped towards a slight recovery from the onslaught of the Great Depression by the Pact signed between Sir Homi Mody and the Lancashire industrialist, Sir William Clare Less, on 28 October 1933, as well as by the Indo-Japanese Trade Agreement of 4 January 1934, and the Indo-British Agreement of 9 June 1935. The trade union movement was gradually revived in 1935 and 1936. Dange was released on 12 May 1935, B.T. Ranadive on 2 February 1936 and M.N. Roy on 20 November 1936. On 17 May 1936, the AITUC decided to bring about the merger of the two rival organisations, the AITUC and the National Trade Union Federation. In the elections of February 1937, the Congress had won 88 seats out of 175 in the Bombay Legislative Council and the First Congress Ministry headed by B.G. Kher assumed office in 1937. Supported by the leftists, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress President, raised the issue of lifting the restrictions on the Communists and cancelling the orders of externment. Even after coming into power the Kher

Ministry had not removed the restrictions on seven labour leaders with communist leanings (Chopra 1985, I:868).

In a letter to the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, Bombay Governor Sir Roger Lumley stated:

I think Munshi is quite genuinely scared of the communist menace. Munshi admitted that the mill-hands in Bombay who are all Mahrattas are very suspicious of the Gujaratis like himself. If Congress can be committed as a result of this situation to dealing with Communism that, I suppose, will be a substantial gain (Chopra 1985, I:1019).

Munshi sought Gandhiji's permission to arm the Bombay Government with Emergency Powers, but Gandhiji declared that extraordinary measures and Emergency Powers were taboo for Congressmen. He advised Munshi to concentrate on organising the labour in Bombay on thoroughly Congress lines (Chopra 1985, I:1020). Though on 19 October 1937 the Bombay Cabinet decided to remove the remaining bans and restrictions on Communists, it unanimously favoured emergency powers if trouble became imminent.

The Kher Ministry believed that an increase in wages would remove the principal grievance of the textile workers. The Textile Labour Inquiry Committee recommended an increase of 11.9 per cent in the wages of the Bombay workers, 9 per cent in the wages paid at Ahmedabad and 14.3 per cent at Solapur. On 2 September 1938, the Industrial Disputes Bill was moved which sought to replace voluntary conciliation. The Bill also made strikes under certain circumstances illegal. Describing the Bill as the Workers' Civil Liberties Suspension Act, Dr. Ambedkar denounced it as 'bad, bloody and brutal', on the ground that it would benefit only slave unions (Moon 1982, II:232). Dr. Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party joined the Communists in organising a one-day general strike on 7 November 1938 in which nearly 50,000 workers participated. Stone-throwing by workers was followed by police-firing. Mill-owners in Bombay City were not happy when the Finance Minister A.B. Latthe levied a sales tax on cloth. They found it difficult to compete with the Japanese as well as mill-owners from other parts of India. In 1939, four mills in Bombay employing 18,000 workers had to be closed, and for nearly seven

months (from 11 April to 1 November 1939) workers of the Phoenix Mill led by Dange were on strike. It was only from the beginning of 1940 that the textile industry in Bombay City started making profits as a result of a sharp reduction in imports of cloth from Japan and Lancashire.

There was a sharp increase in the gross profits made by the textile industry in Bombay as a result of the rising prices and slightly increased production of coarse and fine cloth during the years of the Second World War. According to Gulzarilal Nanda, in 1940, the gross profits of the textile industry in Bombay province were Rs. 7 crore in 1940, Rs. 23 crore in 1941, Rs. 46 crore in 1942, Rs. 109 crore in 1943 and Rs. 85 crore in 1944 (*BLCD*, Nov. 1946, II:118). After the visits of the Roger and Grady Missions, production of cloth increased only in 1941-42 by about 220 million yards. The increase in profits of the textile mills was largely due to drastic diminution of imported cloth and expansion of exports from 177 million yards in 1938-39 to 818 million yards in 1942-43 (Singh 1944:83). In the summer of 1943, prices shot up to more than five times the pre-War level because of a shortage of cloth.

As a result of the pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union which was signed on the eve of the Second World War, the Communists condemned it as an 'Imperialist War' and were in favour of obstructing the war efforts. As the outbreak of the War led to an appreciably higher rise in the cost of living for the Bombay workers, the Communists urged the workers to resort to a strike for their demand of an increase in wages as well as payment of dearness allowance. The Government of Bombay appointed a Conciliation Commission presided over by Sir Sajba Rangnekar. The Chairman and the two employers' representatives recommended a 10 per cent increase in wages while the two non-communist workers' representatives, Jamnadas Mehta and S.C. Joshi recommended in a minority report a rise of 20 per cent in wages. Despite the willingness of the workers' representatives to reduce their demand to 15 per cent increase in wages, the employers accepted the majority report. The workers, supported by Jamnadas Mehta and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, decided to go on strike (Phadke 1993:16-20).

A general strike was organised by the Communists under the auspices of the Girni Kamgar Union from 4 March 1940. Dange,

Ranadive, S.S. Mirajkar, S.V. Deshpande, S.V. Parulekar, N.V. Phadke, R.M. Jambhekar, S.G. Patkar and other Communists were arrested while Dr. G.M. Adhikari, Ajaykumar Ghosh and P.C. Joshi went underground to escape arrest. The General Strike was called off on 13 April 1940. The Government of Bombay continued to take action against the Communists under one pretext or another. Sixteen leading Communist-cum-Labour agitators including R.S. Nimbkar and K.N. Joglekar were arrested on 13 June 1941, just ten days before Germany's invasion of Russia on 22 June 1941 (Phadke 1993:20-22).

When R.S. Nimbkar wrote a letter from the Nasik Central Jail to Sir Ferozekhan Noon on the latter's appointment as Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council, Sir Ferozekhan replied: 'Russia is now our ally. Would you not reconsider your attitude towards war and come out of the jail and help us in fighting the universal enemy?' (*GOI*, H/P File 94/24/1941). Nimbkar was released unconditionally on 22 April 1942 and he assured Bombay's Home Secretary that he had always advocated conciliation to precede strikes in any industrial dispute, and even arbitration in some cases, before he was arrested. Nimbkar had severed his relations with the CPI as early as 1933 though he continued to be an office-bearer of the Girni Kamgar Union.

After Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, the liberal labour leader N.M. Joshi noticed the change in the attitude of the Communists towards the War. Instead of opposing India's participation they were willing to unconditionally support the War. The changed view of the Communists was reflected in the resolution passed by the Bombay Provincial Trade Union Congress which declared that: 'the treacherous attack of Hitlerite Germany against the USSR has fundamentally altered the situation. It is no longer an imperialist war. Win the all people's war for USSR, for yourself' (*GOI*, H/P File 44/61/42, Poll-I).

On 7 December 1941, the Girni Kamgar Union (Red Flag) advised the workers in Bombay to accept the grant of bonus declared by the mill-owners, though the Rashtriya Girni Kamgar Sangh sponsored by the Congress claimed credit to itself for securing the grant of bonus from the mill-owners. The Special Branch reported to the Home Secretary on 30 December 1941 that the Communists were advocating a change in policy and were

ostensibly supporting the war effort. Lalji Pendse had taken the lead in proclaiming this change. Though the agitation for extra dearness allowance continued, the Special Branch informed the Home Secretary that the labour situation was quiet (GOB, H/Sp.Br. File 543(13)-B(4), 1941-43). Consequent to his appointment as labour advisor to the Government of India in May 1942, R.S. Nimbkar severed his connection with the labour unions. Several Communists except S.A. Dange and Soli Batlivala were released and the ban on the Communist Party of India was removed on 24 July 1942, three weeks before the Quit India campaign was launched by Gandhiji on 8 August 1942.

As a result of the food scarcity in the mill area, textile workers resorted to sporadic strikes. On such occasions, the Red Guard Volunteers organised queues in front of the ration-shops. On 30 January 1943, the Special Branch in a report to Symington, Bombay's Home Secretary, admitted that the efforts of the Communist volunteers proved of considerable assistance to the police (GOB, H/P Br. File 543(13)-B(4), SP to Symington, 30 Jan. 1943). Despite the Industrial Relations Bill passed by the Congress Ministry in 1938, the employers refused to recognise any union. Though the machinery in the textile mills had become old and obsolete, the mill-owners did not bother to replace it. The working conditions in the mills continued to be unsatisfactory. Bribery and corruption in respect of recruitment and exaction of overtime work were not checked. There was an increasing tendency to resort to violence. Jobbers in some mills began to wear steel waistcoats and some supervisory staff including Labour Officers were found carrying revolvers.

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While the textile industry in the Bombay Presidency went through severe crises from 1929 to 1945, the foundations of the sugar industry were being laid as a result of the protection granted to the sugar industry in 1932. The world-wide depression had led to a drastic fall in the price of machinery used in sugar factories. With the slowing down of sugar production in other countries, farsighted Indian businessmen such as Walchand Hirachand seized the opportunity to convert a liability

into a profitable venture. In the Bombay Presidency, there was only one sugar factory at Belapur in 1920 while in 1939 there were 11 sugar factories. Manufacturers of paper, cement and matchboxes also profited considerably as protective tariffs were imposed on these commodities, and increased further. In 1938, for the first time, aluminium production was undertaken in India in the Bombay Presidency. By the end of 1939, plans to develop an automobile and rayon industry were publicly discussed. Diversification of industry in the Bombay Presidency proved to be the only silver lining in the dark cloud of depression which cast its long shadow for a decade. After the end of the Second World War, it was found that Bombay Province had 1,491 (i.e. 57.8%) of the 2,577 factories in India, and 8 lakh out of a total of 18 lakh workers in India. Compared to other provinces in the country, Bombay was industrially much more advanced and enjoyed relatively more industrial peace from 1941 to 1945 (Phadke 1997:12).

### Notes

1. A more elaborate treatment of the topic is given in Phadke (1991, 1993, 1997).
2. See Govt. of India, *Agricultural Legislation in India*, Vol. III: *Agricultural Production and Development*. 1952, p. iii.

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## Bombay Time

JIM MASSELOS

*Oh dear! Oh dear! I'm a sad old year,  
My form is bent, and I'm grey and sear,  
My time of departure's drawing near,  
Yet they rob me of half an hour.  
My life and my name so soon to cease,  
Couldn't they let me die in peace!  
Why must they shorten my earthly lease,  
Why rob me of half an hour?*

(‘L.R.C.’ 1881:2)

When I was studying in Bombay in the early sixties I was often late for appointments and so frequently that my friends noted how easily I had adjusted to Bombay time. I gathered it was a feature of Bombay life to be always half an hour late and I was no exception to the rule; like my friends, I learned to joke about being late and about Bombay standards of punctuality. Looking back I now realise my friends were using a common city idiom about time, a terminology that was an instinctive part of their vocabulary. I suppose I read it then as reflecting something about the character of the city and its people, an attitude towards time ostensibly different from that of my friends in Sydney, even though they were probably equally as often late for appointments.

Had I been perceptive, in the way I should have been as an historian, I would have realised there was nothing in the character of the city itself—or any deep-seated cultural attitude to time—that promoted the idea of lateness, of being behind by half an hour. Rather, what I should have understood was that I