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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON LABOUR

Tour notes of Member-Secretary's observation visits in
Srinagar (Jammu & Kashmir) 24-6-1967 to 28-6-1967.

PAHALGAM
24.6.1967

On way to Chandanwadi and back.

The road at many places was being built. At some of these sites I started discussions with the workers about their problems. It seems throughout the season which was about seven months i.e. when the area was free from snow they could get some work or the other. In busy agricultural season they worked on land but when there was no work there they could be content with somewhat heavier work i.e. helping in road construction. Most of the roads were kucha roads. This meant that every year there would be some repairs needing their labour. The wage was Rs.2.50 paise a day. Their complaint, and rightly too, was the difficulty in maintaining themselves on this meagre income. But this was off-time (season) employment and for that purpose the rate could be considered attractive. The work was being done at a lazy pace. Whether this was due to their lower capacity to work, one does not know.

2. The persons who looked after horses - and in Pahalgam there are over 300 of them - were another category of labour needing attention of the Commission. Roughly the economies of their trade is as follows:-

They ply their ponies right upto Amarnath and back. In the season when the Amarnath pilgrimage starts they spent a week for going to Amarnath and back ($5\frac{1}{2}$ days work and $1\frac{1}{2}$ days rest) and for the other week they do trips nearer home. In the off season they go upto Chandanwadi and back for a day and the next day is spent for shorter trips. In terms of longer trips their earnings would be about Rs.10 to 11 a day and on shorter trips about half the amount. If they do not go on these trips they ply their horses in the town and earn as much on shorter trips. Including the pilgrimage the Pahalgam season is about seven months of which three months would be heavy and the remaining four months would be equivalent to $2\frac{1}{2}$ months. This means a total of $5\frac{1}{2}$ months work in a year. Of this $2\frac{1}{2}$ months is on longer trips and 3 months on shorter ones. Total earnings per horse will be about Rs.1100 to 1200 for the season. Of this expenditure on the horse would be a third. Higher figure was also quoted but on this estimate on feed appeared to be high. Two persons work in relays, therefore, income per person would be about Rs.400/- a year (at current prices). In addition they earn about another $\frac{1}{5}$ th the amount for the remaining period by picking up odd jobs, bringing the total income to about Rs.525 to Rs.550. Income is supplemented by the work of female

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members in the family. They work on carrying loads, doing odd chores for tourists and in the season get about 250 to 300 rupees, bringing the the total family income to near about Rs.800. With absence of their own this is just enough to live. One can believe this story.

Forest Labour.

II

25-6-67.

3. The Hotel owner who was also a forest leasee explained how his sub-contractors worked for him. The forest lease consists of right to cut the wood - trees marked by the Forest Department - and transport it to the place which is mentioned in the lease. The area leased is divided into smaller portions which each contractor manages according to the labour strength he is capable of mobilising. One percent of the money of the contract is to be deposited with Government for paying workers' families in case of accident. This along with the money which the contractor himself provides for attracting labour and keeping it takes care of the liability which the employers have to incur by way of accident insurance. Apart from this there is, of course, the wage bill. Forest workers -unskilled type-get about Rs.2.50 to Rs.3/- a day. At times the rate goes upto Rs.4/-. The more skilled complement of workers/as much as Rs.10 to Rs.12 a day. Because of their skill /earn they are in demand and a contractor cannot afford to lose them. In the off season some retaining allowance also has to be paid to the more skilled among them. Complaints are mostly of the type of middle-men trying to fleece the workers by demanding a small premium for getting them employment or getting a small cut from the daily wages. Cases when the middlemen has defaulted i.e. taken money from the contractor and not paid it to workers are not many. This will be only in cases where the leasee himself is progressive. In the case of weaker leasees the leasee himself may have a share in the money saved by his agent by denying to workers their legitimate dues. Such cases in the experience of Mr. Gani were not many. Roughly about 2% to 3% of middle-men would be such bad customers. But very soon they go out of business either because he will not be able to produce enough labour or because labour will know that he is not fair and will not join the gang. The second requires some consciousness among workers and that has come among them in recent years. This is also a welcome development.

Construction Labour.

4. Mr. Gani apart from being a forest leasee is also a Contractor for road and building construction. There his argument was simple. In his experience, on house building the labour component will be about 20% of the total cost. By making labour to work with a whip in Supervisor's hand this /could be brought down to 18% but can /percentage go upto 22% if one is liberal. In the rest of the money contracted for there are possibilities for economy. A contractor who recognises the potentiality of savings in the other 80% earns respect from his labour. This sounded plausible. According to him, labour even without organisation has now become conscious of its rights; it is not possible to cheat it as was formerly the case. Moreover there are now arrangements/by which it can make its voice

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heard. By and large he would not complain about the labour he has had the opportunity to handle. Worker is anxious to work for the money it receives.

Agricultural Labour.

5. We went on a drive on the road to Srinagar to see labour working on farms. This is the season when transplanting operations were going on. Labour-both male and female was engaged on these operations. We had an interesting experience. We wanted some of them to come and talk to us. They did not come because they had just finished their self imposed rest interval and were back at work. They wanted to complete the allotted work and go back to their homes. However, three of them obliged by being subjected to our questioning. Wage rates here were lower Rs.1.50 a day plus a mid day-meal and tea. Obviously tea could be a recent addition. Total would work out to about 2.50. They get this type of work for the whole season, from farm to farm around their village. Rates for harvesting would be somewhat higher. They have small pieces of land of their own. They appeared to be casual workers - not attached to a farmer. Their children go to school but they cannot afford to retain them there. They are withdrawn when they become capable of earning. By and large their lot is miserable. At the same time when they were asked how they managed to stay without work for the off-season their answer was the usual one: by incurring debt. How do they repay it? By working in the next season, or selling their produce. Some get a retainer against next year's work. This again was an honest answer. Farmers who hold more land, according to them get more privileges. Things which were not there in the villages have now come school and dispensary, but these are beyond their reach because a dispenser of medicine or teaching wants to be bribed. This was a sad comment! The fact however remains that they have a desire to send their children to school or use better medicine.

6. The story from the other side was not any different from what we heard already about labour being conscious of their rights. The advantage of inputs in agriculture was going to the comparative richer farmers and so on. Limit on holdings in the State is 22 acres. Therefore, comparatively bigger landlord means (or may mean) anyone being more than 15 acres. As compared to size of ceilings in the rest of India this was low.

7. Kashmir had its land reforms in 1948 which permitted a land holder to have not more than 22 Acres. This according to some was the turning point in Kashmir agriculture. They are now producing more but still dependence on cheap rice from other parts of India is there (Rice coming here from plains is sold at a very cheap rate-subsidised). As a result of these drastic land reforms, land has gone into the hands of comparatively small holders, some has gone to agricultural workers also. They work harder on land and productivity is reported to have gone up. Some older people have nostalgic memories of

Maharaja's days. They do not consider any change in the environment as change for the better. And still they are prepared to admit that their dependents dress better and have a better outlook on life. One can draw one's conclusion on this basis. As an insight into what they do in the colder months came the story from a hawker from whom we purchased a fine blanket. This was the creation of an old lady in winter months right from spinning of coarse wool to the weaving of the finished article. The report that she took the whole of the winter months for this work to get more money for the piece throws light on joblessness of people in winter.

8. Number of workers in Jammu and Kashmir who depended solely on land for their living would be low. A variety of work was available to them because of nature's gifts - tourists traffic and so on. Handicrafts have a flourishing trade in Jammu and Kashmir, though the conditions of work of persons engaged in handicrafts are poor. Here again it is the middleman who takes a major share because of his skill in securing raw materials and marketing of finished goods. State has now entered in a big way to see that these workers have their due and cut the middle man's margin.

Migrant Labour

9. Migrant labour is another problem in Kashmir. Roughly about 50 to 60 thousands go to plains. There are special official arrangements to look after such labour in places like Jullundur, Amritsar, Simla, Chandigarh, Delhi etc. with a Deputy Commissioner at Headquarters. At the receiving end there could be more facilities but these have been slow in coming. The migrant labour is out of Jammu & Kashmir for about 4 to 4½ months. (The State Government's memorandum will review the arrangements for this purpose made at both ends and the nature of assistance needed).

III

SRINAGAR
28.6.67

Carpet Weaving Factory.

10. We visited a carpet weaving factory which was executing export orders and saw the complete process. The expert artisans are first asked to prepare a blue-print for the carpet after a careful study of the design required by customers. This design is drawn on a larger blue-print in all its minor details of colour and operation. This larger blue-print is then annotated. There would be a notation for each line till the area covered becomes repetitive. The annotation consists of the colour of the wool on top and the nature and number of knots at the bottom. There is considered skilled work-more skilled than the drawing of the larger blue print (perhaps). Once the annotation is available it goes to the main artisan who has a warp beam of strong cotton thread (longitudinal). The weft will be provided in wool of

different colours. Generally the artisan works with the help of one or two juniors usually below 15 years from his family. The artisan explains how the line is to be completed by reading the notation himself and demonstrating how the notation is to be translated with the weaving of carpet. Generally boys who enter at the age of eight to ten acquire the skill of reading the notation in about four years. Then they start on working on their own or narrower strips of carpet till they blossom into full artisans using their own mates. The rate is fixed on the basis of the knots woven - at 10 N.P/1000 knots according to the intricacy of the design and the variety of colours required in the design. On an average according to the factory owner, the main artisan can make about Rs. 3 to Rs. 3.50 a day. His mates will earn about half the amount. Considering the present price level the rate could be considered as poor. It is compensated to some extent by the earning of minors, but this is at the cost of their education. An artisan cannot afford to educate his wards though education is free. For him a uneducated child is an asset and his desire to be educated is a liability.

11. Another type of skilled work in the carpet factory was to weave intricate designs in wool on a hessian base with the help of a needle. This requires more skill - all the ten fingers are in use - five seen and the other five unseen on the other side of the hessian. Here also the procedure is the same translating the design on the hessian in wool of different colour. Workers are mostly adults and the payment here is on the basis of complete pieces done by the artist. The rate works out more or less the same as in the case of an adult carpet weaver - both the operations require careful training of the eye and hands and their coordination. Wages have gone up in recent years but in terms of real wages there has been no change - a statement not denied by the proprietor. There will be in addition in a carpet factory persons who wash the carpets, provide a base where needed and the clerical staff for administering the Factory. Working conditions are more homely - There is no noise as in other weaving factories. Each artisan does his own work - not much of coordination is needed. The working hours can be varied according to the needs of the worker to complete the piece. (If he is needy of money he completes his piece by working harder):

Self-employed artisans.

12. I went to see the artisans who were working on their own. This was (i) work on shawls (ii) wool work and (iii) papier mache. Though I could not see artisans working on finer shawls, those who were working were reproducing through their needlework complicated designs in different colours. With change in tastes, we were told, the customers prefer more colour and more needlework. This means more work for them. The study about earning was, however, the same. Though they have been working for years there is practically no improvement. Money wage of course is going up. The practice in most cases is that the base material, on which to work, is supplied by the show-owner who takes the finished product after the artisan had worked on it. The wage per day even on more intricate designs

does not go beyond Rs.4/-. There may be some underestimation in this. The advantage is that the worker has no fixed hours to observe nor is he to subject himself to supervision. Most of the Srinagar artisans prefer to work on this basis.

13. Got on talking to an old artisan. He has been in this line for about 35 years. With him was working another old man with an equal-perhaps longer-experience of work -This latter lost his wife twenty years back but did not marry because of poverty. He lives with his son and daughter-in-law. Both these artisans had small families. They new the advantage of educating their children. They do not want them to pursue this life which is quite hard on eyes and fingers. They would prefer them to read and take to some other leisurely profession. Asked whether they were not proud of their work they said that they were but it did not fetch them enough money. That is why they were not wanting to put their children in this trade. One of the old men said he was prepared to undergo any sacrifice to educate his wards. He was comparatively well off because he was in charge of a mosque in the area and had his own house. Living was distinctly poor. Some changes have taken place in the environment but still they have along way to go to take advantage of this changes. There is also a race to grab these advantages among the more well-to-do people.

14. Next was a wood working shop. Here again one of the workers was below 12 years; rest of them were adults. This work required somewhat more exertion on the part of the artisan. Payment worked out to be somewhat higher. There is also some variation in the estimates of earnings quoted by different artisans. Estimates of the elderly artisans are likely to be more conservative. Most of this work goes to shop-keepers who because of their organisation can get away with as little as they can give to their artisans. There is no organisation among workers to protect their interests. Each one respects his individuality so much that he is not anxious to organise or even come into a cooperative type of venture. In the process they suffer. Each one looks to Government for help to protect him from the unduly low price paid to their skill by the middleman. At the same time they complain about possible corruption if their fortunes were tied up with Government administration. There is not much difference between a small employer and his workers; they all work together.

15. Papier mache establishment which we visited last provided the same scene as the wood working shop except that the person who was running the show with the help of 4 mates -two of them adult and two children -was more informed about what is going on in the world around him. He explained the process and the work he has to put in on each piece. In doing so he pointed out vividly the inequity between what he gets and what the shopkeeper earns. For a piece which contains his work valued at about Rs.10 to Rs.11, the shopkeeper earns anything between Rs.25/- to Rs.40/- according to his capacity to cheat his customers. He has a small family -he

cannot afford a bigger one. He will practise family planning till he can earn more. Asked how Government could come to his help he said-"Let all this work be owned by Government and the Government should be the sole exporter. The money which the Government can earn through this trade will be somewhat lower in the beginning but will catch up. Artisans will also have protection. If Government gets the margins it will also be accountable to the public about the utilisation of this margin in the public interest etc." There was one striking face among his employees. This employee looked extremely intelligent but had to stay away from school because he was the eldest of the sons and had to help the father to get the required stores for the house. There is no arrangement for part-time education. Even if it were there, it is not known whether it would have been taken advantage of because of long hours spent on production requirements. When questions about education were asked the boy's face showed some despair, which was understandable because boys of his age and his younger brothers were getting education. The boy was earning about Rs.2.50 to Rs.3 a day. Here also the owner of the adventure did not want his son to come to this profession.

16. It appeared to be quite plain that none of the artisans want their children to experience the drudgery which had been their privilege. Possibly, the situation was different when the conditions of life were more tolerable. If in future the woodworkers' son is not to take his father's profession where will he go? opportunities in organised industry may not help fully because (a) to the extent the large industry competes with handicrafts - the income of that engaged in the latter will suffer, (b) employment opportunities will go down, and (c) Handicrafts have a market because they are handicrafts. Is there any evidence of change in profession among the artisans? Does the son of a wood worker take to papier-maché or needlework and vice versa? It is too early yet to say anything definite about this.
