

LABOUR AND HOUSING IN INDIA

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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PREFACE

I HAVE endeavoured in this volume to bring together the results of some investigations into labour economics, in which I have been engaged for the last few years as a research scholar in the Department of Economics and Sociology, Lucknow University.

The literature on Indian labour and the numerous problems connected with it is still very scanty, while the subjects of industrial housing, sanitation, and welfare practically have been disregarded. The Bombay Labour Office, no doubt, has been making some inquiries in Bombay city through paid investigators, and Mr. Burnett Hurst also has brought out a useful monograph on conditions in the same city. For the rest of industrial India, however, such problems have not received the least attention. No apology is needed, therefore, to present this volume to all those interested in Indian labour and social and civic welfare.

I have visited the labourers' quarters in the centres of cotton industry, such as Bombay, Ahmedabad, Nagpur and Akola; in Howrah and Calcutta, and the jute mill villages on the Hooghly; in the coal mines at Jherria and Ranigunge; in Jamshedpur, the headquarters of the Tata iron and steel industry; in the railway settlements, such as Kharagpore, Kanchrapara, Bhusawal, Gorakhpore and Alambag; and also in Cawnpore, the foremost industrial city of northern India. Everywhere direct personal touch with the working-class families has been sought. Mill managers and overseers, as well as municipal officers and social workers, have also been interviewed in most industrial towns, in order to obtain their views on the various problems treated in this book.

In the first part I have shown how the problem of housing the workers has become acute within recent years as a result of rapid industrialisation. This hardly permitted any initiative to the employers to cope with the fast expansion of the labour population, or breathing time for the working-men themselves for a gradual social adjustment. I have dealt next with the sociological issues, and analysed the effects of congestion and bad housing on the social, economic and moral life of the workers. Life in unventilated and ill-lighted one-room tenements, when these are crammed on all

sides, and are sheltering several families apiece, can well be imagined. If it be realised also that for such accommodation 10 to 20 per cent of the total family income has to be spent, the seriousness of the situation will become apparent. Naturally, the labourers leave their families behind them in the villages. The absence of domestic and social restraints, as well as the emptiness and discomfort of life under conditions of squalor, have their natural reactions on intemperance and immorality. High infantile mortality also follows as a matter of course amidst such surroundings. In most of our industrial cities one-third to one-half the children die within a year of birth. The death-rates from pthisis and other respiratory diseases are also appalling; these rates show not only no abatement, but appear to be on the increase.

In the concluding part I have examined schemes of housing reform which already have been undertaken in India by the employers as well as by municipalities, improvement trusts and co-operative societies. Little, however, has been achieved in comparison with the enormous tasks that still face us. Great Britain, America, Australia, New Zealand, and many European countries have progressed far indeed, with housing subsidies and state housing schemes. The provision of suitable house accommodation to every citizen is considered almost as important as education and sanitation. The movement of city and regional planning, and the establishment of garden cities and industrial suburbs, also is being increasingly advocated in the West for well ordered and wholesome industrial development.

No doubt, some kind of housing and town-planning legislation is urgently needed in India. A modest beginning might at least be made by passing an Indian Housing and Town-planning Act, an outline of which has been sketched towards the end of the book. Nothing, however, can be gained by importing wholesale plans and practices which have been successful in the West. The task of adapting the architecture of our workmen's homes to ancient domestic and social traditions, and to the amenities of life which our people seek, is as important as the task of reorienting the occupational segregation, characteristic of the Indian city, to the new and expanded needs of industrial life.

The provincial and city census reports have been freely and extensively used for the material relating to overcrowding and social composition of our chief cities. The public health reports of the

presidency towns and the unpublished reports of many other cities, as also some old and decaying municipal records, have been closely examined in order to bring out the effects of congestion and environment on mortality and morbidity rates. It should be pointed out in this connection that the collection of vital and census statistics in some of our cities is not free from blemish. Wherever I have had reason to doubt the accuracy of figures due to lack of precise definition of terms or the ignorance of the enumerators, I have sought to supplement or correct them by personal observation and investigation.

Throughout I have endeavoured to give an accurate picture of the situation and to shun all exaggeration. It is difficult to avoid strong language when one comes face to face with the most revolting conditions, where 'manhood is brutalised, womanhood dishonoured, and childhood poisoned at the very source.' But facts tell more than words. I shall consider my labours amply rewarded if these contribute to arouse the interest of the public and of the students at the universities in the lives of our industrial workers, in their daily trials and sorrows.

My special thanks are due to Dr. Radhakamal Mukerjee, Professor of Economics and Sociology, Lucknow University, both for writing the introduction to this book and for valuable help throughout its preparation.

University of Lucknow.
October, 1929.

RAJ BAHADUR GUPTA.

INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege to introduce to the public the first exhaustive and systematic treatise on the subject of *Labour and Housing in India* from the pen of my pupil and friend, Dr. Raj Bahadur Gupta, formerly research scholar, and now a colleague, in the Department of Economics and Sociology. Dr. Gupta's work is a mine of new information; it augurs well for the book that the Lucknow University's first award of the Ph.D. degree was given to it. Much of the economics of the present day is written from the arm-chair and in the library. Here we have the freshness of an investigator who is not only quite at home with blue-books and reports, but also goes for his materials to the factories and the homes of the labourers. Thus the human interest is much more alive and throbbing than in most of our current economic literature.

The subject also has an imperative human appeal; it vitally concerns not only our economic but also our social future. The efficiency of the labour force of a country ultimately governs its economic status in the world. In India there is a cheap supply of labour, both for the fields and the factories. In agriculture, farming is not conducted on scientific lines, and hence labour is cheap relatively to capital and machinery. In fact, the introduction of scientific methods and investment of capital in agriculture are retarded by the abundant supply of agricultural labour. In the manufacturing industry, however, the shibboleth of cheap labour can no longer apply, for, as a matter of fact, Indian mill labour in relation to quality and quantity of production is not cheap. Labour is inefficient and dear in relation to the capital and the machinery which it handles. It is a sociological paradox that where man is cheap quantitatively he is dear qualitatively. In our industrial centres nothing is cheaper than human life, nothing dearer than good living and sanitary conditions.

There is no clearer index of bad environmental conditions in an industrial city than a heavy infant mortality. On the other hand, there can be no surer criterion of social efficiency and sanitary administration than the lowering of this mortality. The infant mortality of our chief industrial towns is appalling. Dr. Gupta's

investigations show that in Bombay and Cawnpore almost half the number, and in Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Nagpur and Rangoon more than one out of four children die within a year of their birth. In industrial towns in England only one out of ten children die in the same period. If we take into consideration the child mortality in those wards of our industrial cities which are inhabited by the lower middle and labouring classes, the effects of overcrowding and insanitation will be most clearly apparent. In some of these wards, eight or nine out of ten children die within a year. Dr. Gupta has found a close relation between house accommodation and child mortality. The greater the congestion the higher the mortality, and vice versa. In Bombay, the study of the infant mortality rate by the number of rooms occupied has distinctly shown a correspondence between house room and infant welfare. The extent of overcrowding also is much more serious in Indian cities than in the cities of the West. Of the total population of Bombay, 66 per cent live in one-room tenements as against 64 per cent in Cawnpore, 6 per cent in London, 5 in Edinburgh, 9 in Dundee, and 13 in Glasgow. The average number of persons per room in the one-room tenements is 4·03 in Bombay, 3·25 in Glasgow, 3·2 in Cawnpore, and 2·5 in Edinburgh. In the worst section of Bombay, the Sewri section, no less than 96 per cent of the population live in one-room tenements with five persons per room. In Karachi the overcrowding is even worse than in Bombay, the percentage of persons living in rooms occupied by 6 to 9 and 10 to 19 persons being 32·3 and 12·4 there, as against 22·1 and 10·8 in Bombay.

Dr. Gupta has estimated from Glasgow figures that in a one-room tenement a child loses at least 10 inches in height and 12 lbs. in weight as compared with a normal child.

The improvement of housing conditions in our industrial cities has thus come to the forefront of our industrial programmes. It is now realised more and more that the whole future of our industrial development is bound up with the question of improving the living and hygienic conditions in our mill towns and industrial centres. The publication of Dr. Gupta's work, therefore, is most opportune now that a Royal Commission is investigating the whole problem of Indian labour.

The work of Professor Patrick Geddes and Mr. Lanchester, in reviewing the conditions and requirements of city improvement and development in different parts of India, has contributed to arouse

the Indian civic conscience in this regard. Garden cities have been planned here and there, though the people who benefit are not always the labouring classes. There are fine railway settlements at Kanchrapara, Jamalpur and Alambagh, which, however, are meant to cater more for the needs of the higher employees. There are workmen's villages attached to the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, in Madras, while there is a big scheme for a labourers' colony at Indora in Nagpur. These are mostly villages comprising a large number of huts, and if they are isolated and properly drained, and linked up into an orderly road system, the result will be inspiring to others. Jamshedpur, with her well laid out roads, parks and different grades of houses, is now a beautiful city, but its future is uncertain on account of the growing increase of population and demand upon living space. A few miles from Lahore, a garden city for the middle class is being built; the beauty and the symmetry of the plan deserve the highest praise. Apart from these tentative or imperfect attempts at building garden cities, there are in several of our mill towns labour settlements built by the employers. In some, the living and sanitary conditions are satisfactory; to many, Professor Geddes' appropriate description, 'standardised slums,' applies.

As a general rule, mill towns and industrial centres are still allowed to be built and to grow in India without reference to any plan or to the possibilities of industrial development and expansion of population.

Calcutta, with her large number of single huts, or *bastis*, compacted together; and Bombay, with her immense back-to-back tenement houses, represent two characteristic types of bad housing which are gradually spreading to every smaller industrial town in India. The colossal problems of sanitation, sewerage and transport in such big cities can be solved only by the adoption of Western methods of town-planning, industrial housing and means of communication. For cities like these the system of zoning and development of industrial suburbs as well as cheap suburban transport have long been felt as essential to relieve congestion, but progress in these directions will await education as well as the adaptation of national habits to meet the demands of new development schemes.

On the other hand, in many of the smaller industrial towns and villages, which are becoming as closely packed as some of the labour *bastis* of Calcutta, Cawnpore or Nagpur, there is great scope

for improvement if we can only renew the traditional practices under the new conditions. Many of the mill towns and municipalities are unable to provide the costly systems of sanitation in vogue in the West, and, instead of waiting a long time for better finance, it will be economically sound if we can develop along the lines of indigenous tradition.

In India the most important problem of drainage is to get rid of the surface water during the monsoon rainfall. One often notices the labour quarters on the banks of the Hooghly, in Madras, Madura, Nagpur or Ahmedabad, flooded during the rains, spreading filth and disease all around.

A system of organised drainage for the smaller mill towns remains prohibitive in cost; for many of the smaller municipalities suffer from financial straits. The traditional Indian method has been to construct a series of tanks on a lower level, which act as safety valves in cases of sudden rainfall. In a tropical climate the tank equalises the temperature and affords facilities for bathing and washing, the lack of which has been so trying to the Indian factory hand in his new environment.

Municipalities can also ill afford to undertake costly engineering works to bring water from a great distance. In too many of our factory towns and villages, the enormous crowds which gather at water-hydrants as long as water is available indicate the inadequate supply. In mill centres one occasionally comes across a definite restriction of the quantity of water which a labourer's family may obtain. In such cases a tank on the higher site of the mill village or city, deepened and embanked for purposes of cleanliness, will ensure the supply of good drinking water. Other tanks might be constructed at lower levels, to provide facilities for bathing and washing.

The tank has played a very important part in Indian social and religious life. Temples and guest houses are built on its banks, while its waters are regarded as sacred, and saved thereby from pollution. In many of the garden cities of southern India the tank is as much an object of worship as the god in the temple itself, while the floating boat and water festival assure its periodical purification. If we can revive the respect for tanks in our present day industrial environment, not only will the labourers get a more stable and copious supply of water, but there will also be far greater facilities for bathing and washing than they can enjoy at present.

A tank or a river is always a source of delight and pride for an Indian. Unfortunately, the modern Indian city development seems always to begin with the abolition of the tank and to ignore the advantages of river transport. In the jute mill villages, along the banks of the Hooghly, the provision of a canal system would be economically sound. The canals, instead of being neglected, as at Bally or Triveni, should be systematically linked up with factory and storage areas. The possible developments of waterways are seen in the Netherlands, as well as in Malabar and Cochin, where the coast from Quilon to Cannanore is fringed with garden cities.

A further instance of disregard of opportunities will be seen in the shallow pits along the railway lines, dug for earthwork. These excavations might be used for drainage channels, so that the water would not stagnate as now, thereby causing malaria. Such channels might be used for irrigation or form a part of an extended canal system, connecting the factories and goods-sheds with the villages where the factory hands live.

On the banks of the rivers big industrial cities, like Cawnpore and Ahmedabad, or smaller mill towns like those of Bengal, are ceaselessly polluting the stream, while the problem of water-supply, which is much simpler here, is seldom tackled with care and respect for Indian susceptibilities.

The pollution of rivers in America has raised most indignant protests, and called for colossal schemes for the disposal of city refuse and sewerage, while in England even sanitary authorities are not permitted to pollute a natural stream by sewerage matter.

This brings us to the question of the removal of refuse in our mill towns, which must also be suited to the habits and traditions of the various classes of the Indian community. One of the main reasons for the accumulation of filth and dirt in the labour quarters of our industrial cities and mill towns is the absence of an adequate number of latrines. In some of the mill villages on the river Hooghly I found one latrine for 50 families. In Nagpur there are 14,456 houses in which there are no latrines at all. Not less than 56 public latrines were to be provided for, with about 1,100 seating arrangements. Yet the provision is inadequate, and people respond to calls of nature at each and every place. Similarly, in Ahmedabad more than 60 per cent of the houses are without latrines. In most of our smaller mill towns the evil is serious, and calls for urgent measures. The long period of waiting before a public latrine, as well

as a heterogeneous group of men, women and children answering the calls of nature in open meadows, constitute a picture where there is no decency, no regard for others, and, finally, a callous indifference to the laws of hygiene. Most of the streets and bye-lanes of labour quarters everywhere are strewn over with night soil. Very frequently the sewerage is ill-collected and ill-removed, with the result that myriads of dangerous germs pollute the atmosphere of a slum, which aggravates the dangers of congestion.

In India, the field latrine is the existing practice in the villages, and even to-day in the small industrial towns and villages, the provision of open space, with some degree of privacy, will not only be cheaper but also safer than elaborate sewerage schemes. We might here refer to the suggestion of a very eminent sanitarian, Dr. Vivian Poore, who thought 'that house and garden might be a self-contained sanitary system,' and he did by experiments prove that a house, with a garden of about half an acre, could deal with its own refuse of all kinds, and that a perfectly sanitary arrangement could be made without any drains going outside the limits of the garden itself, so that it will be realised there are possibilities in this direction. There is no doubt that, in many homes of the Indian middle class, we find an orchard and garden utilising the refuse of the household for fruit and vegetable gardening, which makes the family more or less self-sufficient in this respect.

Another feature of Indian life which needs utilisation in the new industrial environment is the strong group or communal spirit. Often in the slums of a heterogeneous city like Calcutta or Bombay, we find men belonging to the same caste congregate together in separate quarters of their town; and we have in addition their *punchayats* as well as their communal temples installed in slumdom. With the provision of more liberal space, and of a tank in the middle, with beautiful steps and a temple on its bank, there will be a revival of the community life, the discontinuity of which has been the chief cause of deterioration of the villager in his new environment. The caste *punchayats*, which now deal with social disputes and observances, may be utilised for labour organisation and welfare. Co-operative societies may utilise the caste spirit, while common canteens, stores, as well as welfare associations, may take the place of village institutions.

A hundred families belonging to the same caste may be grouped into a village within the city, which will thus be split up into several

natural areas dominated by common attitudes and sentiments. Each such natural group will have a common meeting room, a common well, a common canteen, a common latrine, and a common school. To bring the village into slumdom is possible under this arrangement. Co-operative housing and public utility societies as well as community centres should be initiated to develop the civic consciousness and enlist the co-operation of the people themselves in the solution of their problems of housing and social welfare. The different natural areas into which a city may be divided will have its characteristic type of houses, so that the chief difficulty of the Indian town-planner, arising from the fact that every grade of house from the chamar's hut to the landlord's mansion is wanted everywhere, may be obviated to some extent. As we recognise the distinction between administrative and natural areas, we can grapple more easily with many of our municipal and educational problems, the tasks of community organisation and zoning as well as housing and sanitation.

In India the village is often found split up into self-contained caste wards, each with its temple, its communal fund and its municipality, as well as its own recreations and festivals. The traditions of handicraft and trade still support the tendencies of segregation and decentralisation to a large extent. This characteristic national trait may be utilised in schemes of city development and extensions outside the present urban areas. Nothing has contributed more to the deterioration of the Indian mill operative than the barrier of thought, feeling and action between urban dweller and villager. The development of civic institutions in line with those which preserved his *morale* in the village can alone rescue him from his selfish, improvident and unrestrained life. The mill hand is a villager, and a villager he will be. The reason why he loses *morale* in the city is that he is divorced from his group scheme of values, his institutional setting.

Our mills and factories seem as conservative and stay-at-home as our villagers. The factories should go a certain distance, exploit new opportunities in the interior of the country, and reach labour nearer home. Industry and cultivation of the land have to a large extent entered into partnership in Belgium. A high proportion of its workers, in factory, mine, office or shop, continue to live on the land, to cultivate their own plots in their spare time, with the assistance of their wives and children. That this has been possible is due to the high development of the vicinal railway system, light railways or tramways laid at comparatively small expense along the roads,

and now reaching a total length of 2,706 miles. The development of light railways, of canals, as well as motor transport, might create new industrial centres in the country, each with its zone of influence, from which every morning the network of cheap communications may gather in the mass of labourers and exchange the goods of the town for those of the village. The labourers will go where there is employment. They will not bring down the wages of field labour by competition. The standard of living in the villages will be raised. On the other hand, the growth in numbers of a floating immigrant population will not perpetuate the present deplorable living and unhygienic conditions in the industrial centres. Industrial development in India is gradually assuming a form of nodal congestion, and the present distribution of railway communications as well as neglect of waterways and of cheap transport on the country side are contributing to it.

Thus the costly schemes of town-planning and industrial housing are baffled by the continuous drift of unskilled labourers to the city. The wages of the labourers cannot rise on account of increasing competition. Both housing and sanitary conditions are lowered, while the labourers also find it increasingly difficult to maintain connection with their village and their family. Thus they become habituated to slums, and their slums bring in their train other slums. Without an integration of the interests of town and village, region by region, neither town nor village can be saved from deterioration.

Dr. Gupta emphasises, towards the end of his book, the need of adapting town-planning plans and methods to the regional and social tradition. The modern city in India has grown as a parasite. It dominates the region by force and by cunning, and contributes little to its welfare. A 'tentacular city,' like Calcutta, Bombay or Cawnpore, rears its head over the debris of ruined villages and broken homesteads, and the rapid expansion in its population has been due not to natural increase, but to migration from the surrounding rural region. Not merely is village production disorganised, but the institutions and culture of the village are gradually destroyed. The village now has to depend upon the city for primary and essential social functions. The city, on the other hand, is a different social world, and cannot assimilate the social traditions and processes of the village. The family, the social group, the community have broken down, and the time-honoured practices of our agricultural civilisation have been set at nought. Social degeneration, therefore,

has been manifest in various forms. Disease, crime, family breakdown, pauperism and vagabondage all are epidemic in our new cities ; the Indian mind to-day seems to accept the liquor shop, the brothel, and the alms-house as being as inevitable as industrialism and the flimsy finery of urban existence. Dr. Gupta's penetrating study of the housing problem has explored the different phases of this perilous situation. He is not satisfied with the social survey, he has his diagnosis and treatment. Dr. Gupta suggests housing and town-planning legislation to check unregulated urban growth and cope with the present shortage of house accommodation ; his proposals about co-operative housing, and for enlarging and stiffening the housing and sanitary bye-laws, as well as zoning regulations, which are honoured more in their breach than in their observance, are wise and practical. Dr. Gupta has also sociological insight, sympathy and breadth of outlook. I am confident that his book will command wide attention and contribute much to arouse a new civic conscience in the country. Municipal councillors, sanitarians, engineers and employers will do well to consider some of the practical measures of housing and planning reform that are advocated here. Industrialism is advancing rapidly in the country ; its progress is measured by wages and profits, but the vast human scrap-heap, which it scatters wildly and disastrously, strikes fewer people. Thus deep in the background of the racial sub-consciousness there are angry hisses and red sparks of revolt. The flames spread in slack seasons and during strikes and lock-outs, but are hidden by the fumes and smoke of general fear and prejudice. Our problem is to prevent the wreck and tragedy that are now called inevitable ; to save industrialism, and adjust it somehow to an ancient people's nature. One way of adjustment consists in giving a decent home to the Indian working-man, so that he need not seek unwholesome pleasures away from home, nor his children spend most of their time near drains and dust-bins.

September, 1929.

RADHAKAMAL MUKERJEE.

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