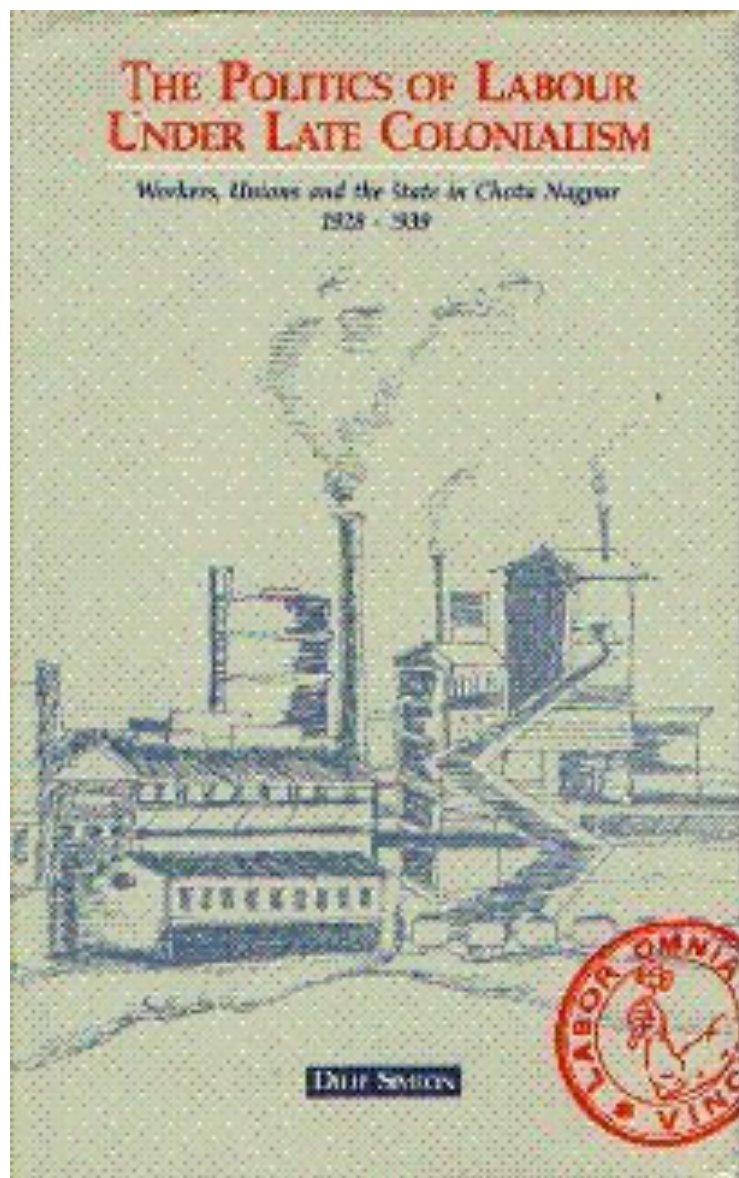


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**‘1938 - THE LABOUR MOVEMENT ON THE OFFENSIVE’  
(Chapter 8)**

**in: *Dilip Simeon (1995) The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism. Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur 1928–1939* (New Delhi: Manohar)**

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**CHAPTER 8: 1938 - The Labour Movement on the Offensive.**

**8.1 Prologue to a Hot Summer.**

Since the War, India has done much in the way of labour legislation... large portions of industry are still untouched by most of these measures... Even the health, safety, and child labour provisions of the Factory Act do not apply in the vast number of workshops or in the factories : Harold Butler, Director, ILO, on 8 January, 1938 (1).

labour conditions in this country have improved to such an extent in late years as to have elicited the following remark from Mr Harold Butler... 'As I see the position at the present moment, India has gone further in the matter of labour legislation than any other country in Asia' : JJ Ghandy, General Manager, TISCO, on 28 January, 1939 (2).

In the year 1938 workers began asserting themselves not only in industrial centres such as Bombay, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Madras and Calcutta, but in smaller towns such as Jubbulpur, Travancore, Bareilly and Dehri-on-Sone. Unionisation spread to the Jharia coalbelt, and to such sectors of the working class as bidji, pottery, coir, press, saw-mill and shellac workers, ekka drivers, lorry drivers, and rickshaw pullers (3). In Jamshedpur, the year opened in the shadow of the violence in Golmuri on 25 December. ML Sircar, Abdul Bari and JN Mitra met Sri Krishan Sinha on 7 January and a visit to Jamshedpur by him was arranged (4). On 10 January he was received by officials and managers, to whom he spelled out the ministry's approach to labour unrest :

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1. Searchlight, 14/1/38.

2. Searchlight, 3/2/39.

3. See chapter 5 of C Revri, Indian Trade Union Movement.

4. Searchlight, 8/1/38.

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I am not an enemy of the capitalist. But the management ought to learn a lesson from England. In every other country of Europe there is a demand for the introduction of socialism, but England pursues its own course because she has made ample provision for the removal of the grievances of labour. We have to follow in the footsteps of England. Capital must not ignore the claim of labour. It is only thus that the cry for revolution can be ended... But labour must not depend only upon Government support. Everywhere labour unions must be formed and large numbers of labourers ought to join them... no capitalist can afford to ignore the united voice and demands of thousands of labourers (5).

The Bihar ministry's growing estrangement from the Kisan Sabha had made it anxious to stem radicalism within 'Labour', to which end the government sought the co-operation of the employers. Developments within the national movement had made the working class the focus of increased political attention. Their under-organised predicament and the illiberal attitudes of the capitalists had created a space for militant unionism which the ministry was anxious to fill with controllable unions. Sinha's message was a signal to the capitalists to collaborate with the Congress unions to stave off a worse predicament. In the past, the administration had intervened in disputes with an assumed stance of neutrality. Now it began to take the first steps towards functioning with political purpose.

TISCO's GM, JJ Ghandy described his meeting with Sinha,

The Prime Minister stated that he knew of the great work the Company was doing for its labour... I told (him) that... we were rather disappointed to see the unreasonable attitude taken up by the local Labour Association... I did give (him) copies of all the bulletins issued by (it) during the last few months... the Prime Minister said that he was surprised that such malicious propaganda was undertaken by a responsible Trade Union and promised to take this matter up with Bhattasali, Mitra, Sane, etc. Finally the Prime Minister told me 'Mr Ghandy, I want to assure you that the Government of Bihar is very friendly towards the Steel Company and I hope that the Steel Company will do everything to help the Congress Government so that it may not be subjected to continuous pressure from the left-wingers' (6).

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5. [Searchlight](#), 13/1/38.

6. [TFL](#). Letter dtd 16/17 January 1938, from JJ Ghandy to AR Dalal. It is significant that Sinha omitted Bari's name.

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Independence Day in Jamshedpur was celebrated with the involvement of the Cable Company and Tinsplate unions, which had just fought skirmishes over despotism at the work-place. On 4 February, just prior to the Haripura session of the Congress, MN Roy visited the city and urged unions to join the Congress. Old JLA activists such as P Bhattasali, JN Mitra, NK Sane and BN Sarkar, president of the Sakchi Ward Congress were allied to Roy. The latter believed that with Homi's decline, the time was ripe for the formation of a new union in TISCO under the leadership of individual Congressmen. (The Royists played a role in establishing Bari's dominance, but began to regret it by the summer) (7). In February and March strikes over discharges broke out in the Eagle Rolling Mills at Kumardhubi, and the Reliance Firebrick & Pottery Works at Chanch. Sanitary work at Kumardhubi was disrupted, and sweepers had to be brought in from Dhanbad (8). Unrest was reported in the Giridih Mica Factory and the copper works in Moubhandar, and picketting continued at the Wire Products factory (9). Without doubt, 1938 had begun energetically.

## **8.2 Working Conditions in 1938.**

Evidences rendered to the BLEC by Chota Nagpur's new unions highlighted the context and motivations of the workers' offensive. Managements remained hostile to their leaders. In TISCO, the demand over the reinstatement of discharged JLA activists remained pending. Most jobs were non-graded, with fixed incomes over several years, and temporary hands filled vacancies by rotation, never attaining security. Professor Radhakamal Mukerjee, a member of the BLEC, stressed the fact that till the late thirties, nearly 90% of TISCO's 28,674 workforce (excluding contractor's labour), were daily rated. Formally,

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7. Searchlight, 26/1, 29/1, and 9/2/38; FR-1, February 1938. MNRP, (LRC-1 Bihar), T Parmanand to VB Karnik, 4/6/38, Bhattasali - MN Roy letters, dtd 9/3/38, and 1/4/38; BN Sarkar to Roy, 11/4/38. See Appendix 8.1.

8. FR-1, February; FR-1, March 1938. BLEC vol 3-C, p. 147; and vol 3-B, book 4, p. 410. The Kumardhubi Worker's Union represented workers of Bird & Company's Kumardhubi Engineering Works, the Eagle Rolling Mills (350 workers), and the Kumardhubi Fireclay Silica Works (1400 workers). Homi had intervened in the Reliance Works, whose workers won the concession that no dismissals would take place without charge-sheets. The agreement stated that Homi would "supply a sample charge sheet" : BLEC, vol 3-B, Book 4, p. 423-425, Terms of Settlement with Mr Homie on 15 February 1938. About their experiences with Homi the KWU activists stated : "We have come to the conclusion that trade-unionism cannot flourish under the leadership of autocratic leaders and it is extremely necessary that leaders should arise from the ranks of labour" : BLEC, vol 3-C, p. 159. Workers at the Eagle Rolling Mills were on an hourly rate of pay : Radhakamal Mukerjee, The Indian Working Class, p. 58.

9. FR-2, February; FR-1, March 1938.

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therefore, they were temporary hands, denied the leave facilities given to the monthly raters, who numbered 3380. There was no paid leave and leave forfeiture was a means of punishment. The practice of posting workers temporarily at superior jobs without paying them a higher rate was ubiquitous, and an "Acting Allowance" was demanded by most unions. Summary dismissals were a foremost concern, and one of the main sources of conflict. In TISCO as elsewhere, a worker could be dismissed with a supervisor's chit. The unions wanted regulated recruitment and charge-sheeting, plus a permanent Labour Commissioner (10). Company recruitment was criticised for nepotism (11).

The living wage for a single adult worker in Jamshedpur for 1938 was estimated at Rs 20/- per month; and the proposed calorific intake for Indian workers, 3000 calories. About 40% of TISCO employees earned less than this, in a city reputed to be the most expensive in terms of its cost of living indices, and 62% of the families resident in the steel city consumed less than the minimum number of calories, the diet of the Adivasi workers being the most deficient (12).

At the Copper Corporation's mines there were no service rules for miners. The union wanted the abolition of sardari recruitment. There were no maternity, Provident Fund, or pension benefits, only gratuity and a return ticket home after 10 years (13). 948 coolies and rezas earned an average Rs 9/- a month and the 2231 mine-workers, Rs 27. The 22 covenanted hands drew monthly salaries of Rs 555 (14). Indebted miners paid between one to three annas per rupee per month as

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10. BLEC. vol 3-C, pp. 1; 52-4; 75-6; 92-6; 100-1; Radhakamal Mukerjee, The Indian Working Class, pp. 40-41, 60. Also see above, ch 1.2, fn 15.

11. BLEC. vol 3-C, pp. 52; 74; and 99; and vol 4-C, pp. 3-4. The TWU suggested appointments through a superintendents' committee "who shall not accept recommendation from any of the office staff of the Bureau". It complained that 25 Parsees comprising half the C-class apprentices had been appointed in 1938. The management stated that 10 out of 75 positions were reserved for Parsees.

12. Radhakamal Mukerjee, The Indian Working Class, pp. 145-147; 223-229.

13. BLEC. Vol 3-B, Book-1, pp. 394-396, pp. 400, 406; Vol 4-C, p. 162. The workers who gave oral evidence in April 1939 denied that they were entitled to gratuity : *ibid*; vol 4-C, p. 160. Since detailed provisions for gratuity were laid down in the Memorandum ending the strike, it is likely that the management made a 'political' claim, during its course.

14. The wage differential between European and Indian hands was 20:1 for the miners, and 61:1 for the coolies. It may have been more, since workers claimed they earned as low an average as Rs 20/- per month, due to absences caused by illness or exhaustion : BLEC; Vol 4-C, p. 159.

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interest to Marwaris, Kabulis and shopkeepers, who were known to physically assault defaulters. Supervisory staff relieved them of upto 25% of their earnings (15). The management recognised no occupational diseases (16), but workers complained that blasting fumes often caused fainting, that there were over twenty accidents every month, and that men could lie for 8 hours without attention. One tap served 2000 miners, and nine hours were spent at the workface. There were 12 levels, with miners at the lowest needing two and a half hours to walk up the inclines to the surface. They wanted the workday to be calculated on a "surface to surface" basis (17).

Piece rates at TISCO's iron mines at Noamundi earned their workers a daily wage of four to five annas for 9 to 12 hours labour. They worked the ore for four days, clearing earth without payment for two; and reckoned their weekly earnings at Re. 1/13 annas. Compared to 1929, wages drawn in 1938 showed decreases of 32% to 26% for coolies and rezas, whereas supervisors and skilled workers obtained increases of between 5% to 76%. The miners hated the work regime and declared a preference for direct employment. There was no water supply at the five-mile long work-faces. The doorless coolies' 'huttings' were overcrowded and disease-ridden, home sometimes for 12 persons (18). Noamundi was a malaria prone area : some workers were ill for two to three months in a year. There was one doctor and one compounder for nearly 4000 workers. The 14-day annual leave was consumed in convalescence, and company employees demanded more leave (19).

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15. BLEC. Vol 4-C, pp. 163-166. Workers claimed the total debt amounted to Rs 62,000. Moubhandar workers claimed that creditors used sticks and swords to intimidate them : p. 153. The management complained that workers exhibited "a spirit of dissatisfaction with everything done in behalf of the employees", : *ibid*, Vol 3-B, Book 1, p. 420.

16. BLEC. Vol 3-B, Book 1, p. 415.

17. BLEC. Vol 4-C. p.152, 156, 160, 164. "Every week a man faints once and then he is not able to come for 3 or 4 days. The wages for that period are lost." The Moubhandar workers named phthisis, asthma, chronic bronchitis, hernia, and rheumatism as occupational diseases.

18. BLEC. vol 3-B, Book 3, pp. 421-439; vol 3-C, pp. 232-244; and vol 4-C, pp. 360-374.

19. BLEC. vol 3-C, pp. 232-244; and vol 4-C, pp. 360-374. Management reported that 28 people died of various diseases in 1935 and 1937 : vol 3-B, Book 3, p. 437.

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The intensification of work was a major issue. The copper unions claimed there had been a 22.4% decline in the wage-cost per ton of finished metal between 1932 and 1937, and a 20% decline in wages from 1935 to 1937. Depleted percentages of copper in the ore had required deeper and heavier workings (20). Saving Rs 20/- per ton relative to 1932, the company saved Rs 3.6 lakhs in labour costs in 1936. Despite good dividends and bonuses for shareholders and covenanted staff, workers' were refused benefits. They even paid for their own shoes and lamps (21). Tinsplate workers, subject to a 25% increase of work after the 1929 strike, had agitated for more hands to be employed in three departments. They had no recess for meals. In the Cable Company, work intensification and 30% wage-deductions since 1930 had been achieved through suspensions and re-hirings (22). Moneylenders often attached entire salaries and intimidated workers, some of whom spent a large amount on milk and food. All unions demanded minimum wages (from 12 annas to Re 1/- daily for unskilled workers, and Re 1 to Re 1/4 annas for semi-skilled workers) (23).

The lack of rest rooms and creches in most factories caused acute discomfort during summers and the monsoon. Workers distrusted company doctors in matters of accident compensation, and complained of sparse medical facilities. There was no ophthalmic specialist in TISCO despite the frequency of eye ailments. No company housed more than 20% to 30% of its workforce. Three-fourths of TISCO workers still lived in unsanitary bustees, as did 60% of the copper miners (24). Its zamindari status allowed it to charge high rents (increased upto 135% over two decades), and restrict the transfer, sale, and renting of houses. For Tata's workers, there was only one boys' high school with a 700-student capacity, (the union did not mention a girls' school).

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20. BLEC. Vol 3-C, p. 94.

21. BLEC. vol 3-C, pp. 88-97; vol 4-C, p. 164.

22. "We are strongly against this kind of intensification which denies normal 'offs' for meals and relaxation and turns human beings into machines for non-stop production" : BLEC, vol 3-C, pp. 78; 94; 101; and 103. According to the Cable Company union, the average monthly wage-rate in TISCO was Rs 47/7 annas; in Tinsplate Rs 43/3 annas; in the ISWP, Rs 24/10 annas; and in the Cable Company, Rs 23/9 annas. The labour cost per ton of production had gone down from Rs 30/8 annas in 1932 to Rs 8/9 annas in 1937.

23. BLEC. vol 3-C, pp. 55; 66; 80; 83; 102; & 105. Usurers' rates varied between 36% to 150%.

24. BLEC. vol 3-C, pp. 62; 63; 67; 79; 95-6; 104-5.

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The comparative analysis of work and remuneration presented by the Tinplate union demonstrated an awareness of the distinctive nature of skills. Lower rates for similar jobs (compared to TISCO) were criticised, on the ground that work in Tinplate required more concentration. All unions wanted graded rates, and opposed the payment of differential rates to workers doing the same job. They demanded better working conditions; protection from supervisors and improved service and retirement regulations (25).

### **8.3 The Tata Workers' Union.**

In March 1938, TISCO workers debated the question of an alternative leadership and a possible strike over wage-cuts and the reduction of Sheet Mill shifts. Khushi Ram recounted how, in an attempt to provoke workers and lay them off, supervisors asked them to sweep and clean, which they refused to do. He suggested that this refusal sprang from the fact that they were mainly Jats, Rajputs, Punjabis, and Sikhs, who resented what they perceived to be a loss of stature. At a meeting called by shop-floor activists, workers remonstrated with Homi for supporting the lay off scheme. Hooting, and the flinging of shoes and stones symbolised the disillusionment with 'Homi Sahib': Ham log be-maa-baap reh gaye. ("We were left orphaned"). Then followed a re-enactment of the initiative taken by the staff of the Rail Finishing Mills in March 1928. The Sheet Mill workers' decided to send two workers to Patna to ask for Bari's intervention. (Us time mein Bari sahib idhar-udhar ghooma karte the. Congress ka zor tha, decide kiya gaya Patna se Bari ko manganey ke liye...\*). Khushi Ram also mentioned his own participation, along with a fellow-worker, Mohammad Dost, as departmental representative in the ad-hoc committee which prepared the ground for a new union (26).

The Sheet Mill workers had given Bari an entry into TISCO affairs over a specific issue, and senior Congress leaders soon began interceding with management on his behalf. Several thousand workers attended his rally on 22 March. The JLF men present protested at Homi being called a dalaal, and Babu Singh was shouted down for praising Homi's initiative in reinstating activists. Abdul Kadir objected to Bari's attack on the Muslim League. A fight ensued and the police intervened.

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25. BLEC, vol 3-C, p. 73-85; 92-96.

26. Interview with Khushi Ram, dtd 8/4/81, in Jamshedpur. \* "In those days Bari sahib used to loaf about the place. The Congress was in full cry, so we decided to call Bari from Patna". Mohammad Dost, he said, later went away to Pakistan. Also see Searchlight, 25/3/38, and Moni Ghosh, Our Struggle, p. 43.



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Finally Bari was asked by acclamation to negotiate with the management (27). At a conference in Calcutta on 30 March, the Directors agreed to increase the number of weekly shifts from Monday, 4 April (28). Homi was losing ground. A record of a conversation on 2 April indicated that he wanted to recuperate his influence through dissimulation, by claiming that it was his union that had obtained the concession :

(Homi) informed me that Mr Dalal... had telephoned from Calcutta to Mr Ghandy... that under the influence of Dr Rajendra Prasad, Babu Subhas Chandra Bose and other Congress members in Calcutta, he had been made to increase the number of working days... and that Mr Ghandy should inform Mr Homi about this and ask him to take the matter up in good spirit (sic). Mr Homi's point was that he was going to be let down by the Management although the Labour Federation had supported the Management throughout this dispute, and had always maintained that there was no scope for increase in the number of working days in the Sheet Mill (29).

Deputy Commissioner NP Thadani, who made no secret of his partisan attitude (see below, ch 8.4), wrote urgently to Bari in Patna

I cannot... understand why Government who (sic) had postponed the grant of certificate for over a year could not postpone it for ten or 12 days. The production of the certificate at this juncture was most unfortunate as Homi is using it as a lever... (30).

Tatas had made a (tentative) political decision to accept Bari's mediation alongside that of Homi. The latter was a charismatic individual, the former the chosen vehicle of Congress and Rajendra Prasad. But prior circulation of the

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27. Searchlight, 26/3/38, and 30/3/38; and File 201/38, SDO's letter dtd 8/4/38. The newspaper claimed that 10,000 workers attended the rally. The SDO put the figure at 2000.

28. TSA. File L-84, letter dtd 3/4/38, from NP Thadani to JJ Ghandy.

29. File 201/38. ASP's diary dtd 6/4/38.

30. TSA. File L-84, letter dtd 3/4/38, from NP Thadani to Abdul Bari.

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information about the concessions would nullify the advantage to be gained if Bari had made the announcement. Thadani's letter to the GM contained a candid outline of the covert arrangements made by the controllers of labour. Regretting Bari's absence, he reminded the GM,

according to the understanding reached at the conference at the Director's Bungalow on the 30th March, it was decided that he would announce to the men 15 shifts a week to commence from Monday... Homi is making wild propaganda among the men that it was under pressure from the Jamshedpur Labour Federation that the Company decided upon reverting to 15 shifts. This is false, mischievous, and intolerable. I therefore request you to make the announcement yourself immediately. Yesterday I sent for Moitra, Moulana Abdul Bari's Lieutenant and made him clearly to understand (sic) that it was to their advantage that the Company... make the announcement... to more effectively check Homi's tactics and propaganda, as (he) has announced to hold (sic) a meeting at 5.30 pm today (31).

Homi did try and take credit for the concessions, and simultaneously announced the registration of the JLF-1936. A hostile crowd outside his enclosure was dispersed by the police. Bari, who arrived after Thadani had dashed off his letters, addressed another gathering that night, announced the same concessions, and asked workers to join the Congress (32). On the 4th, workers heard Bari denounce Johnson, Leyshon, Ghandy, Indra Singh, and Rakshit, as capitalists united in exploitation. He singled out Ghandy for having confided in Homi; and the police for being TISCO's stooges and under-estimating the crowds at his meetings (33). The Tata Workers Union, was launched, Bari being forthwith acclaimed as President. Michael John became its Secretary. JLA activists joined Bari, but his activities were to cause rifts within the town Congress (34).

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31. TSA. File L-84, letter dtd 3/4/38, from NP Thadani to JJ Ghandy.

32. File 201/38. ASP's diary dtd 6/4/38.

33. File 201/38. Proceedings of labour meetings dtd 4/4/38.

34. Moni Ghosh, Our Struggle, p. 43. Bari's claim that the Congress was "at the back of the whole show" reportedly proved detrimental. Some workers understood membership of the TWU as tantamount to joining the Congress, and local Congress leaders believed it their right to intervene in its affairs : MNRP, LRC-1 Bihar, BN Sarkar to MN Roy, 11/4/38.

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TISCO were loath to start dealing with another maverick. The TWU threatened a 'go-slow', and management countered by threatening to withdraw the production-bonus of two and a half month's salary (35). Bari insisted that the capitalists had ganged up to refuse recognition to his unions despite their 'recognition by Government'; ie, registration (36). (Registration conferred legitimacy and buttressed demands for recognition). If a government elected by workers and peasants could not ensure recognition, he wondered how it differed from the colonial government. The summer saw a surge in his popularity. A meeting on 29 May was attended by some 10,000 workers, who heard him denounce the "Parsi industry" for looting the nation, and the "white bureaucrats" trying to discredit the Congress. Referring to Natha Ram, he predicted another defeat for TISCO (37), and warned workers that the BLEC was being used to defer the fulfilment of their demands, illustrating this with reference to Kanpur, whose millowners had spurned the recommendations of the Labour Enquiry Committee. Early in June the situation was defused by Subhas Bose and SK Sinha. TISCO promised an increased bonus and agreed to consider other demands after the BLEC report was announced (38).

#### **8.4 A Responsible Congressman.**

A violent atmosphere now enveloped the unions and work-places of Chota Nagpur. Communal tension had erupted in Jamshedpur during Ram Navmi on 9 April (39). On 20 April, Mosaboni copper miners began a strike which lasted 83 days.

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35. FR-2, May 1938. Although the TISCO management had complained about 'listless working' in the early thirties, it is during the later phase that workers in Jamshedpur began applying the deliberate tactic known as the go-slow.

36. File 201/38. Proceedings of labour meeting dtd 22/5/38. The theory of the capitalists' combine was repeated by Vidya Bhushan Shukla, Assistant Secretary to the BLEC, in a letter to Rajendra Prasad on 14/6/38. See ch 8.5 below.

37. File 201/38. Report of the labour meeting dtd 29/5/38.

38. FR-1, June 1938. Four months later, when approached by workers from Tata's Malkera colliery, Bari turned them away on the ground that Tatas were working in accordance with his advice : File 379/39, Statement of Meeting of Katras PS, 4/10/38.

39. File 201/38. IGP's note dtd 10/4/38. Homi was prosecuted for instigating the tension, and acquitted on 1 December for want of evidence : Searchlight, 3/12/38. Details are not available.

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The JLF agitation at the Gua iron ore mines for a wage increase had spread to the Kenduadih and Jealgora collieries (40). In mid May the Tinsplate striker Mohammad Shafi, was murdered by a loyal employee, Mahtab Khan (41). There were violent clashes in Kumardhubi, where Parliamentary Secretary Jagat Narain Lal mediated an agreement. The management of the Loyabad power-house conceded to the formation of a JLF-1936 union. The Eagle Rolling Mills reopened on 23 May, but protests over job redundancies led to a renewed threat of closure (42). Protest simmered in the Foundry. The Tinsplate and Cable Company works were locked out on the 2nd and 9 May for 72 days and 8 months respectively. Police in Jamshedpur anticipated violence at all meetings, and officials complained that Bari's

wholesale condemnation of the police... is injudicious, especially in an industrial centre like Jamshedpur where the turbulent up-country element is apt to defy authority... Professor Abdul Bari is the Deputy Speaker and a member of the Congress Party, (and) any public utterance of his is regarded... as having the authority of government. The police too have that impression and will be apt to be hesitant about taking prompt action in future... Now that Mr Homi's Labour Federation has acquired the additional prestige of being a registered Union, and TISCO evidently intend to play it off against any rival organisation, there is bound to be labour trouble... in which the police will be called on to intervene... (43).

A complicating factor was the stance of the DC, NP Thadani, who addressed a gathering for communal harmony along with Bari and Chowkha Singh on 18 April (44). Bari blamed imperialism and capitalists for communalism, and Thadani

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40. FRs for April and May 1938. May 1938 was when the Bihari-Bengali controversy began over the question of domicile certificates for Bengalis, representation in services, etc.

41. FRs for May, 1938. Kedar Das claimed that the two were brothers, who had an altercation when Mahtab asked Shafi to give up his loyalty to Bari. After the stabbing, the company paid for Mahtab's legal expenses : interview in Patna, 26/4/80.

42. FRs for April and May 1938.

43. File 201/38. IGP'S Note dtd 10/4/38.

44. File 201/38. Statement of Meetings from 15/4 to 21/4/38.

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commended himself for preventing bloodshed on 9 April. He announced his determination to end goonda raj and asked workers to follow Bari (45). The meeting dispersed amidst slogans such as Deputy Commissioner Sahib ki jai, Bari Sahib ki jai, and Swatantra Bharat ki jai. This partisan display by an ICS officer symbolised the tectonic shifts in the structure of state hegemony (46). On 13 May, Bari denounced the badmash, shaitan, dhokhabaz JJ Ghandy, ("rascal, Satan, betrayer") who deserved to be thrown out of the country along with the Englishmen. "This company is full of Parsee loundas\* like Kutar", he continued, who wanted to drive him from Jamshedpur (47). Thadani was stumped. "It is nearly impossible for me to believe that you spoke the above at a mass meeting to TISCO labour... I have always given you credit for ABSOLUTE BONA FIDE (sic)", he wrote, adding,

Our supreme category must always remain the well-being and the welfare of Labour. If the above reproduction... is at all correct, then to my mind it spells not only your failure but a terrible struggle and a great set-back for Labour... It is my earnest request that you must confer with me at a very early date and agree to certain fundamental principles of conduct in successfully guiding Labour by avoiding tactical blunders and playing into the hands of its enemies (48).

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45. File 201/38. Statement of Meetings from 15/4 to 21/4/38. Bari also appealed for normal production in the Sheet Mill. Homi addressed a written complaint to government about the DC's partisan behaviour. The Chief Secretary noted : "From the CID report of the meeting it appears that Mr Thadani addressed Professor Bari's meeting and among other things, practically asked the audience to join Professor Bari's union. This was certainly stepping beyond the bounds of correct official conduct.." : Note dtd 28/4/38.

46. Khushi Ram recalled Thadani's popularity with the workers, who believed that he had been appointed by the Congress ministry to pressurise Tatas on their behalf. The struggle had become so fierce that, "even the higher officers of the company were afraid of entering the shop floor.. Bari would tell us quite openly.. why do you come to me after being beaten up, come after beating up" : Interview dtd 8/4/81.

47. File 201/38. Intelligence report, quoted in DC's letter to Bari dtd 17/5/38. \* Lounda is an offensive way of referring to a boy. Kutar was Superintendent of the Rolling Mills, and notorious from the days of JLF militancy. He was considered by workers to be an arch dala and fixer of goondas.

48. File 201/38. DC's letter to Bari dtd 17/5/38.

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It is not known what exchanges took place thereafter between the two on this issue. Bari's language, however, lost none of its exuberance. Politicians and officials often spoke of 'Labour' in the mode employed by Thadani. But the national movement had created a bridge between the literati (Bari's 'We', or hum), and the persons who comprised 'Labour'. With Bari, the flow of ideas and sentiments became intense and familiar. He referred contemptuously to high officials and Tata's executives (49), and denounced TISCO as "not a national industry, but pure and simple a Parsi industry" (50). Many managements and senior executives were English and/or European, and his denunciations of imperialism touched a nerve of racial resentment. He stirred class feelings when he reminded workers that an assault on a manager would elicit a different official reaction than the murder of Mohammad Shafi (51). His militant tone contrasted with his commitment to non-violence (52), and his earthy manner made workers flock to his meetings to express their anger with arrogant managements. The rapid growth in his following lent an autonomy to his political stance.

Bari's erstwhile comrades (53) in the Congress Socialist Party also turned their attention to Chota Nagpur. They held a Summer School at Sonapur (54), attended by leaders such as JP Narain, RM Lohia, MR Masani, Narendra Dev, Sajjad Zahir,

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49. Bari used familiar epithets for the powerful : Managing Director AR Dalal was Bhai Dalal Sahib, (the word dalal being a common pejorative amongst workers), the GM was J.J. Mr., the Governor was Hallett, etc. : File 201/38, Proceedings of meeting dtd 22/5/38, and File 12/38, Note by CS dtd 19/11/38. A retired ISWP worker, Sadhuram Sharma, stated that "Bari had a dirty habit, he used to abuse his political opponents, very often using words like haramzada. He did not abuse Communists in this way, though" : Interview with Sadhuram Sharma, dtd 8/4/81, in Jamshedpur.

50. File 201/38. Proceedings of meeting dtd 29/5/38. Bari returned to the nationalist theme later, when he took up the issue of foreman Balapuria intimidating a worker for coming to work in a Gandhi cap : SB report of labour meeting held on 13/11/38.

51. File 12/38. Proceedings of meeting dtd 22/5/38.

52. "He opined that under the circumstances he would have to rely on the maxim 'Might is Right', and hence, none should rely on others" : File 12/38, Proceedings of meeting on 22/5/38. In July, several Muslim Congressmen complained about Bari's "indecent and intolerable language" : Papiya Ghosh, 'The Making of the Congress Muslim Stereotype : Bihar, 1937-39'; IESHR, vol 28, no.4, 1991, p. 433. The Royists in Jamshedpur were at a loss. "Yes, Bari has become a problem, and I do not know what to do with Mitra", wrote MN Roy to T Parmanand. "What is behind this revolt of the Congress Muslims against him ? Can you do something to foment the revolt ?" : Letter dtd 14/7/38, MNRP, LRC-1 Bihar.

53. The entry on Abdul Bari in the Dictionary of National Biography, vol 1, states that Bari was chairman of the reception committee for the All India Socialist conference at Patna, which took place (FR-1, May 1934) in mid May. JN Mitra also records Bari's socialist initiatives during 1934. (See Mitra's letter to MN Roy, dtd 10/7/38, in Appendix 8.1). The GOI records

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Dinkar Mehta and BP Sinha. Masani visited Jamshedpur to establish socialist influence, but Bari's popularity thwarted him (55). By June a strike movement was developing in the coalfields, there was a strike at the Hume Pipe Company in Jamshedpur, and a march to Purulia over wage cuts by 1000 shellac workers from Jhalda (56). As disputes festered, radicals competed with each other, and new conflicts erupted, Bari became part of the tidal wave. He told a Tinsplate meeting on 21 June that the Congress was too weak to force change upon a conservative bureaucracy (57). This was too much for the Searchlight which produced an editorial entitled Prof. Bari's Attack on Congress Government ? :

Professor Bari is a responsible Congressman and deputed to Jamshedpur to look after labour to that capacity. If the observations twice imparted (sic) to him are even partially correct, he would do well to measure his words. He is associated with the Congress government and is a prominent figure in the Congress organisation and he must, therefore, be able to see that he cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hound at the same time... (58).

**8.5 "A lot of disturbance" - The Capitalist Combine.**

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state that Bari had resigned from the Bihar Socialist Party in December 1934, when it decided to merge with the AICSP : FR-2, December, 1934. Despite the parting of ways however, the intellectual impact was lasting, as is clear from his speeches.

54. FR-1, June 1938, and File 268/38.

55. FR-2, June 1938. "Bari was a fanatic", and obsessed with power, said Masani, aged 87, in an interview on 31/10/92, in Bombay. NK Sane noted the growth of Socialist influence in Jamshedpur (see also ch. 8.14 below), and the visits of Masani, Dinkar Mehta, and Basawan Singh. "Our Jamshedpur public is 'one-cylindrical'", he wrote to MN Roy, "They have only one inclination at one time". He stressed the advisability of joining hands with the CSP - "I think in public life you should enter into an organisation which you cannot destroy, particularly when there is hope of capturing it..": NK Sane to MN Roy, dtd 20/7/38, MNRP, LRC-1 Bihar.

56. FRs for June 1938.

57. Searchlight, 24/6/38.

58. Searchlight editorial, 22/6/38.

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It was the managements of the smaller companies in Singhbhum which took the concerted initiative against the unions which Bari had mentioned in his speeches. The combination expressed their alarm at the new recalcitrance of hitherto quiescent workforces, and their determination to quell this before the familiar pattern of labour relations underwent too drastic a change. The crises of the summer of 1938 stemmed chiefly from the employers' refusal to negotiate with the unions and their chosen leadership. As we have seen, this was the habitual response of managements to workers' assertiveness.

Thus, neither Bari's nor Homi's unions in the Indian Copper Corporations' Mines and Works had been recognised till May 1938. The JLF-1936 was on the wane "due to Mr Homi's vacillating tendency" (59). On 14 March 1938, Jagannath Prasad, Vice-President of the JLF branch at Mosaboni was dismissed, after which the activists opted for Bari's leadership, and embarked upon a militant course. A list of demands was submitted, and the DC began the customary mediation. Rumours about the dismissal of a tea boy and the assault on a worker by an English engineer on 20 April led to a temporary sit-in. In June there were attempts to sabotage the ropeway, and assaults on strike-breakers and police. The strikers chose earthy gestures of contempt - when two 'Madrasi' strikers spat at loyal workers, "the spit also fell on the person of the SI who... (was) directed to lodge a complaint before the Magistrate". Gurkha strikers urinated at a shaft entrance, resulting in a fight with the guard. Union Vice-President NC Pal warned the police that the Gurkhas and Madrasis would loot the bazaars if the union ceased supplying rations (60). The freshly released socialist Chandrika Prasad Singh, along with a company clerk, DS Jena, visited nearby villages, informing Adivasis about the strike and their forest rights, and enlisting Congress volunteers. Questions of racial oppression were raised at Mosaboni. The Medical Officer, ("born of a European father and has got worst mentality than the real Sahibs"), was condemned for neglecting sick strikers and the Premier criticised for not visiting Mosaboni (61).

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59. BLEC. vol 3-B, Book-1, pp. 422-426; & vol 3-C, pp. 88-97.

60. File 110-V/38. Report of the Board of Conciliation; File 110-II/38, Singhbhum SP's Reports 34 & 35, dtd 29/6, and 3/7/38. "The Gurkhas were heavily drunk and were mutually fighting resulting in injuries on both of them" : (SP's Report 35, dtd 3/7/38).

61. File 110-II/38. Singhbhum SP's Report no. 34, dtd 29/6/38; CID reports dtd 27/6/38 & 8/7/38. The speaker was NC Pal, a Vice President of the CCWU.



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On 20 April the workers of Tinsplate began a go-slow to demand a profit-sharing bonus. After a brief closure and a reopening, the demand was not accepted and there was another go-slow. Production collapsed and a lock-out began on 2 May (62). The Indian Cable Company, with 760 workers, had a 33% turnover between 1936 and 1938 (63). After the Cable Workers Union was revived in 1937, management had begun dismissing activists. In April 1938 it decided on one-hour hartals. Dismissals followed for insubordination and sleeping on duty, and there were three cases of strike-induced reinstatement. One such lightening strike was on 6 May. A lock-out began on the 9th. On 9 June it was announced that the plant would remain shut for 6 months. Parliamentary Secretaries KB Sahay and Jagat Narain Lal made a futile visit to the city on 21 May. The officials discerned an employers' combination behind the closures (64). So did Vidya Bhushan Shukla, Assistant Secretary to the BLEC :

The lockout in the Tinsplate Company here... was declared about a month and a half ago. About 60% of the workers have left for their homes and now the management with the help of Mr Homi wants to restart the works. They have employed a number of goondas... If the works are allowed to start, it would mean a lot of disturbance... The strike situation at Musaboni also is not improving and the Indian Copper Corporation which is managed by purely foreign capital, and is manned by foreigners... has got a number of big persons as shareholders and it is one of the reasons why the management... is not at all inclined to arrive at any agreement... Almost all the European employers are determined to crush any organisation of the workers, especially Prof. Bari is, at present, their target. In spite of the Congress Government, I am sorry to say, the European managements are getting all sorts of help in order to crush the worker's movement. It is the manager of the Tinsplate Company, Mr Leyshon, who is leading the organised employers. I am glad to say that the Tatas and other Indian concerns are at present keeping aloof... In case the Tinsplate Company starts its work, there are all possibilities of disturbance and it would be advisable for the Government to issue notice on the management of the Tinsplate Company under Section 144 as had been done by the Madras Government who served notice on Papnashan (sic) Mills in Madura in similar circumstances (65).

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62. FR-1, May 1938, and File 9-VI/38, "Report of the Board of Conciliation..", (Tinsplate Company).

63. BLEC, vol 3-B, Book 1, pp. 429-431.

64. Searchlight, 5/4, 1/6, and 29/6/38; BLEC, vol 3-C, p. 98; and FRs for May 1938.

65. RPP, NAI. File 1-S-38, VB Shukla to Rajendra Prasad, dtd 14/6/38.

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Shukla was referring to the dispute involving the Harvey millowners and the union led by Varadarajulu Naidu. After refusing to deal with him, the management had hired fresh hands. On 26 March 1938, it announced a decision to persist with reductions, and to discharge 3000 new hands. Fearing the consequences, the Government of Madras under Rajagopalachari, and Labour minister VV Giri imposed ban orders in the area, forcing the management to settle with Naidu (66). The Bihar ministry did not go so far as this, but Shukla's views indicated the stance it would adopt towards European managements.

**8.6 The Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee.**

The Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee (BLEC) was constituted on 17 March 1938, with Dr Rajendra Prasad as Chairman, and Abdul Bari, Jagat Narain Lal, HB Chandra (all MLA's), Dr Radhakamal Mukharji, MP Gandhi, and Professor RK Saran, as members. (RR Bakhale was appointed Deputy Chairman on 2 December 1938, and AM Hayman, OBE, MLA joined as a member on 19 February 1939). It was formally appointed on 17 May. Barely two weeks later, on 31 May Rajendra Prasad resigned, pleading ill-health (67). It may have been the intensity of the ongoing workers' upsurge that caused his indisposition. Upon learning of it secretary RK Saran wrote :

The essence of our work is not the speed with which it is accomplished, but the confidence which it inspires... you are probably aware that in many places labour agitation has been abandoned in expectation of the recommendations of the Committee. I am sure that your resignation will cause it to flare up...(68).

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66. See Eamon Murphy, Unions in Conflict : A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres, 1918-1939; Delhi 1981, Chapter 9. "It is a sad comment on the relations between State and Labour in India that Section 144 Cr.P.C. has been applied against the employers only once in the long history of industrial disputes in this country" : Radhakamal Mukerjee, The Indian Working Class, p. 322.

67. BLEC, vol 1, p. 1; and RPP, NAI, File 2-L-38. Letter dtd 31/5/38, Rajendra Prasad to Secretary, GOB.

68. RPP, NAI. File 2-L-38, Letter dtd 13/6/38.

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The BLEC was indeed, functioning as an elevated conciliation board. Apart from raising workers' hopes of immediate betterment, it had also provided managers with a handy breakwater for the storm. Thus TISCO's JJ Ghandy, in a leaflet for his workmen, laid great stress upon Bari's membership of the committee, and urged them to await its proposals (69). In the coalfields too, Congress activist Mukutdhari Singh had begun "sustaining workers with the belief that their troubles would be over with the publication of the report" (70). But its legitimacy depended largely upon the chairman. Bihar's Finance and Labour affairs Minister Anugraha Narayan Sinha appealed to him :

if your resignation is accepted... this will have a bad impact upon the general public, and especially upon the capitalists. Those who have been waiting patiently, on your account, for its sittings, will be demoralised. The labour situation is worsening daily. Professor Bari has, at this time accumulated considerable power, and he wants to use it against our principles. To some extent he has already begun to do so. It would appear that bringing about strikes has become his sole preoccupation. And the English companies also don't seem to want to change their points of view... tension is growing daily... Tinplate company, which had refused to consider a Conciliation Board, has at last accepted it. Today we are speaking to Bari Sahib about this. If there is a compromise there will be peace, otherwise struggles will increase. Swamiji (Sahajanand Saraswati-DS) is bent upon driving the people towards violence... Our people run away from hard work... In such circumstances if you withdraw your name our difficulties get compounded... Even if you do not participate... your remaining the chairman is essential... Your absence from it will have an adverse effect upon public confidence... (71).

The Labour Minister's appreciation of the labour upsurge was clearly more conservative than that of VB Shukla. But his accent upon the symbolic importance of the Committee, and of Rajendra Prasad's role in it was politically insightful, and after some efforts at finding another chairman, Prasad was prevailed upon to continue.

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69. TFL. "A Message to the Workmen..."; dtd 22/5/38, by the GM, TISCO.

70. RPP, NAI. File 1-L-39. Letter in Hindi from Mukutdhari Singh to Rajendra Prasad, 6/11/39. See ch 9.11 below.

71. RPP, NAI. File 1-L-39, Undated letter in Hindi by AN Sinha to Rajendra Prasad. The letter was written in early June 1938, and has been wrongly placed in the 1939 collection.

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**8.7 Negotiations and Settlements.**

Although the Congress unions did manifest a sympathetic edge towards the managements of the Indian-owned Wire Products factory and the Tatanagar Foundry, the latter were as resistant to change as the European managements. Thus, the Bari-led union at Tatanagar Foundry had reiterated its demands only to be confronted with 1300 discharges in June on account of a shortage of raw material. The dischargees were placated by Bari's associates and VB Shukla. In late June there was a lightening strike when a contractor assaulted a worker; and once more, the union calmed the situation. Rakshit then outraged his workers by publicly deploring the insensitivity of labour leaders to the plight of the Tinsplate and Cable Company workers (72). On 10 September, workers were locked out after they struck to resist the hiring of an outsider instead of an unemployed ex-striker (73). A week later an understanding was arrived at regarding an immediate 10% increment; conciliation; and an assurance of recognition. An agreement about security of service, bonus, general increment, a grievances machinery, and Provident Fund was signed by Rakshit and Bari in December, but never implemented. "I am not prepared to introduce anything unless I get better service", said Rakshit to the BLEC some weeks later (74).

At Tinsplate the violence continued after Shafi's murder. On 16 June, Director Townsend met the Premier, agreed to a Labour Officer for Jamshedpur, and to accept the Board's decisions. When picketters began to carry arms, management

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72. BLEC, vol 3-C, p. 162; FR-1, July 1938, & Searchlight, 28/6, 29/6, and 19/7/38.

73. Searchlight, 1/9/38, Advance, 31/8/38; File 385/38 : DC's DO dtd 17/9/38. Searchlight, dtd 15/9, and 18/9/38; Statesman, 16/9/38.

74. File 385/38. Terms of Settlement, Tatanagar Foundry, dtd 16/9/38; and SK Das, Secretary to the Board of Conciliations, to CS, dtd 14/12/38; and BLEC, vol 4-B, pp. 239, 245. The report commended the "reasonable and accomodating spirit displayed" by Rakshit and Abdul Bari. By 1939, 1100 more Foundry workers had lost their jobs, and Rakshit was to break fresh ground in the political handling of labour disputes. See ch 9.9 below.

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asked for an immediate announcement (75). But Bari was quenching the bitter memories of 1929. He asked the workers not to rejoin. The premier conferred with him (76), and the Chief Secretary advised the management :

The person who has most influence with the men is Professor Bari... the Company should enter into some relations with him for this purpose and should agree to deal with him regarding any such incidents that may occur (77).

The management wanted Feroze Khan to abstain from union activity (78), but agreed to reinstate Ashrafi Ram and to employ a relative of Shafi's. A communique was issued on 7 July, announcing formal conciliation, and the assurance of no victimisation. There was no mention of the strikers of 1929. On 17 September, Justice Fazl Ali was appointed as the Board, which was also seized of the disputes in the Copper Corporation (79).

At Mosaboni, the dismissal of "about 100 Madrasis including all labour leaders" at the outset of the strike prompted Thadani to describe the Manager as being "inspired by Zid and the desire to starve Labour into submission". Workers refused to compromise on the victimisation issue. On 9 June the Director wired Thadani : "will not deal... with any union of

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75. FRs for May and June 1938; File 9-VI/38. Two letters from Managing Agents to the Prime Minister's Secretary, both dtd 20/6/38; Letter from Managing Agents dtd 24/6/38.

76. File 9-VI/38. Extract from Hindustan Standard dtd 30/6/38, Telegram from Managing Agents to the Chief Secretary, dtd 30/6/38, and Srikrishna Sinha's note dtd 1/7/38. The Chief Secretary asked the Premier if he would "clear up the situation", and the latter obtained an assurance that "he (Bari) will advise the workers to join the workshop no sooner the communique issued".

77. File 9-VI/38. Chief Secretary to Townend, dtd 14/7/38. The Managing Agents responded : "I am afraid we cannot agree to this. It is true that he has proved in practice that he is able to influence the workers, but we cannot agree that his influence is for their good, and it certainly has not been to the good of the Company" : letter to Chief Secretary, dtd 15/7/38.

78. File 9-VI/38. Letter from Managing Agents to the Chief Secretary dtd 30/6/38. The management insisted that Firoze Khan accept liability of instant dismissal "if he is himself insubordinate or encourages insubordination or disaffection in others".

79. File 9-VI/38. Government of Bihar Resolution dtd 17/9/38.

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which Abdul Bari is officer... some of worst characters chiefly madrasee will not be re-employed... we should prefer to close down..." (80). Dempster felt that conciliation with workers "imbued with revolutionary ideas" would increase indiscipline (81). On 6 July Dempster and Bari met with the Premier. A Board of Conciliation and a loan to the strikers were agreed upon (82), and on 11 July Bari asked the copper miners to resume work.

A feature of industrial disputes during the thirties had been the involvement of district officers in mediation. This phenomenon persisted through 1938, but with a significant change : the state had become a composite mediator. Under provincial autonomy the pattern of conflict resolution involved ministerial influence over the unions and the ICS assuming an advisory stance vis-a-vis English managements.

### **8.8 Resistance in Respectable Collieries.**

Compelling miners to overload a tub... is a common form of unfair dealing... (and an) indirect method of further reducing the wages... We have no doubt that the more important and respectable collieries will never countenance these practices : Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee (83).

With pent-up discontent in the coalfields surfacing in 1938, factional politics among unionists quickened. Satya Bimal Sen 'captured' the TCLA (with a membership of 3123), (84), and set up the East Indian Coal Company Mazdoor Sangha, at

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80. File 110-II/38. DC's letters dtd 29/6; and 20/6/38.

81. File 110-II/38. GM to DC dtd 23/6/38; and DC's letter to Dempster dtd 29/6/38. "The Indian employee must be protected... from being used as a stepping stone to power... by any possible labour agitator who would fill his limited intellect with pernicious lies" : GM to DC dtd 1/7/38.

82. BLEC, vol 3-C, p. 92; Vol 4-C, p. 167; File 110-II/38 : Chief Secretary's Memo, dtd 10/7/38; and Special Magistrate to DC, dtd 11/7/38.

83. BLEC, vol 1, p. 207. Miners working for one of the foremost companies did indeed raise the matter of tubs : see Appendix 8.2. The notion of the 'respectable' colliery says more about prevalent social values than about working conditions in the coal seams.

84. File 379/39. Memorandum on Agitators from CID to Chief Secretary, dtd 27/10/38; BLEC, vol 1, paragraph 444.

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Jealgora, with Subhas Bose as President. In a visit to Dhanbad on 28 May 1938, Subhas tried to reconcile the quarrelling unionists. Satya Bimal also hosted AITUC Vice-President, ML Sarkar (85). Mukutdhari Singh, deputed by Rajendra Prasad to work in the coalbelt, arrived in Jharia in June, much to the irritation of Bari (86), who had been invited by Imamul Hai Khan and KK Sarkar to help counter Satya Bimal Sen. On July 11, a strike was declared at Jealgora, involving 2000 miners (87).

The Jharia Coalfields Worker's Union (JCWU), floated in May 1938, by Pramotha Nath Ghosh (the ex-Andamanite), KK Sarkar, and IH Khan, was an alliance of activists from some 15 collieries in Loyabad, who chose Bari as their President. He visited the area on 3 July (88), and 13 August, when he met dismissed employees of Bird & Co.'s Badruchak colliery, whose management refused him an interview. In a later visit (to pacify communal friction in Jharia), he dubbed Satya Bimal and Shiba Kali dalals, and spoke about forming a single miners' union. These developments took place against a background of regional contentions over the future of Manbhum and Singhbhum (89).

On 22 September the JCWU warned R Fenwick, Bird's Chief Mining Engineer (CME) that his refusal to negotiate with Bari might lead to a strike with no guarantee of "full control over" the workers. Agitation for a wage increase and the

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85. File 379/39. Note : "Jharia Coalfield Labour", appended to DO from Bihar SB to Chief Secretary dtd 13/10/38; Memorandum on Agitators dtd 27/10/38. Mukutdhari Singh, in Bhuli Bisri Kariyan, vol 2, p. 21, recounts his delivery of a letter from Rajendra Prasad to Bose, asking him to stay out of the squabbles of the Jharia unionists. Bose asked Mukutdhari to tell Prasad that he understood his responsibilities. Mukutdhari acknowledged Satya Bimal's influence in two or three collieries. Of PC Bose and Shiba Kali Bose, he remarked that "they were unable to even so much as call a small meeting of workers in the collieries and cokeplants."

86. Mukutdhari Singh, Bhuli Bisri Kariyan, vol 2, p. 16.

87. FR-1, July 1938.

88. He may have been countering Homi, who had followers in the Sijua power house, and who had wanted to unionise Bird & Co.'s miners in sympathy with striking workers in Bird's Kumardhubi Iron Works : File 379/39. Note entitled "Jharia Coalfield Labour", appended to DO from Bihar SB to Chief Secretary dtd 13/10/38.

89. Mukutdhari Singh refers to the attempt by the Bengalis of Jharia to eliminate all Hindi/Urdu medium teaching from the town : Bhuli Bisri Kariyan, vol 2, p. 19. The conflict was over the future of Manbhum. Orissa became a province on 1/4/36; but the future of certain princely states adjacent to Singhbhum was undecided.

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reinstatement of dischargees had lasted five months. Fenwick banned meetings, stated that "we do not recognise any union", and offered to discuss grievances individually (90). On 26 September 1938, 2200 miners struck work : they had complained in July that the new manager "beats us for nothing... and holds us to contempt as a dog" (91). At Badruchak, women with broomsticks and handis snatched safety lamps from workers and obstructed the pump khalasis' descent into the pits. At nearby Katras colliery, picketters defied ban orders. The following day the manager reported an attempt to sabotage the pumps. The strike was complete, and four Anglo-Indian assistants were requisitioned to operate the pumps (92).

Rai Bahadur NN Ray, the ADC, attributed it all to "rabid labour agitators", disaffected supervisors and dismissed workers (93). Inamul Hai Khan (94) told Ray that the strike had been called by Chatterjee and Sarkar without Bari's 'permission'. The workers refused to speak about their grievances. The official telephoned the Professor and then told the strikers that their

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90. File 379/39, Letter from KK Sarkar to the CME, Bird & Co., dtd Jharia, 22/9/38, and appended to the report of the ADC, (Dhanbad) NN Ray, dtd 28/9/38; Strike Report 1, dtd 26/9/38; Letter from the CME to NN Ray, dtd 28/9/38.

91. File 379/39. Strike Report 1, dtd 26/9/38, and Report of the ADC, NN Ray, dtd 28/9/38. In letters to the CME, dtd 20/5 and 30/7/38, the haziri (time rated) workers and the coalcutters of Badruchak had drawn attention to the great heat in the colliery, asked for a general increment and complained against the new manager, Morrison. Of the 16 dischargees most were haziri workers, two were babus, and one was an Anglo-Indian supervisor. Ten had been found sleeping on duty : ADC to Chief Secretary dtd 30/9/38.

92. File 379/39. Strike Report 2, dtd 27/9/38, and ADC's letter to Commissioner, dtd 26/10/38. Pump operation was crucial to prevent flooding. At Badruchak, 4000 gallons of water per hour needed to be pumped out.

93. File 379/39. Report of the ADC, (Dhanbad), NN Ray, dtd 28/9/38. The officer's disdain for the labour movement was blatant : IH Khan was "in quest of fresh fields and pastures..."; and "the dismissal of some workers... gave the labour agitators a good excuse for creating troubles" : Report; and letter to Chief Secretary dtd 30/9/38. Ray, who was ex-officio Inspector of Mines and Factories, and Chairman of the Mines Board of Health, told the BLEC that the workers of Jharia were not fit to elect representatives to the Health Board. About the unrest in 1938, he said that, "The reason is that the Trade Unions are not run on proper lines and so there is frequency of strikes" : BLEC, vol 4-A; pp. 177, 190.

94. File 379/39. The Memorandum on Agitators dtd 27/10/38, refers to Imamul as "a prominent and irresponsible agitator of the Indian Colliery Union". Mukutdhari Singh in Bhuli Bisri Kariyan, vol 2, pp. 22-25, relates how Imamul used him to obtain rice on credit. After Independence, Imamul presided over the Mines Board of Health and the Water Board for years, and became a prominent 'floor-crosser' in Bihar politics.



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leader was opposed to violence and to any interference with the pumps. His exhortations were futile, and the pickets were then forcibly removed. On the 29th, the company closed down Badruchak, pending an inquiry into the sabotage. Willing workers were offered work in other pits (95).

On 4 October, a list of demands (see Appendix 8.2) was given to the ADC. The lists (96) at Badruchak and Mudidih, (where a sympathy strike broke out on 17 October) were similar, and though framed by a babu leadership, they did focus on outstanding grievances, such as depressed living conditions and the summary dismissals effected by the corrupt supervisory staff. Reinstatements of victimised workers and union recognition were prominent demands. Others related to service conditions : a 30% general increment, bonus, leave rules, holidays with pay, increments and promotions according to seniority, free primary education for workers' children, old age pension (97), maternity benefits, medical facilities, water supply and housing, etc. Working conditions were emphasised : payment for overtime, the provision of assistants, weekly payments on Saturdays, an end to the bribery and maltreatment by supervisors (described as 'obduracy'), an adequate supply of tubs and kerosene oil, work for unemployed women workers, and a proper daily wage for the time-rated (hazira) coolies. The management's habit of cheating the trammers cum trolley-men, who were paid on a piece basis, but often made to work unpaid as haulage attendants, was highlighted.

In a display of inter-racial solidarity, Karamchand Thapar of the ICOA criticised the strike :

if, in spite of all this concern for the welfare of labour, trouble is fomented we have a legitimate grievance... Messrs Bird & Co.'s group... has passed through such a prolonged strike... I can say with confidence that the cause was not

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95. File 379/39. Report of the ADC, NN Ray, dtd 28/9/38; ADC's letter, dtd 30/9/38. The union criticised the police for making "several lathi charges", injuring strikers, and assaulting women and children in the dhowras; Report no. 3, dtd 29/9/38.

96. File 379/39. Appended to the reports of the ADC, dtd 9/10/38, and 18/10/38.

97. At Mudidih this demand was touchingly worded : "Such arrangements should be made at the time of retiring from service so that the rest of life may be spent without trouble."

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sufficient for the action taken and the consequent misery inflicted on the labour... Strikes should not be so lightly resorted to as they have been of late... (98).

Affecting the role of victim, the owners averred that 'labour' did not act. Some third party 'fomented' action, and 'inflicted' misery all round. However, the Badruchak strike had taken even the union leadership by surprise, and the sympathy actions undertaken by other miners showed that Bari's cadre were reacting to a militant mood, marking a new phase in the labour movement in the coalfields. This was evident in the list of category grievances, and for once, in the explicit protest against the exactions of the middlemen.

**8.9 The Political Repercussions of Language.**

The anxiety that Badruchak caused the ministry was induced less by Bari's verbal enthusiasms than by the nature of the workers' responses to him. On 4 October he promised the miners a daily wage of Rs.1/8 annas if they held out (99). From his tone, and that of other speakers who asked him to act through the government, it was apparent that popular perceptions of state power had changed. Bari threatened strikes in all of Birds' seven collieries; denounced 'the ulloo ADC', and predicted the doom of all bureaucrats, brown as well as white. He criticised government for tolerating najaiz, badmash, be-imaan officers, who were probably in the pay of the managements. He would see them dismissed (100). The audience dispersed with shouts of Gandhiji ki jai, Abdul Bari ki jai, and Lal Jhande ki jai\*. On the 5th picketters armed with lathis obstructed the repair of winding gear and beat up blacklegs. Local Congress leaders felt obliged to protest about police excesses (101).

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98. Searchlight, 22/12/38.

99. File 379/39. Report of the ADC, NN Ray, dtd 9/10/38, with summary of speeches. The meeting took place in the compound of Williams, the discharged Anglo-Indian overman.

100. File 379/39. Statement of Meeting of Katras PS, 4/10/38.

101. File 379/39. Report of the ADC, dtd 9/10/38. \*"Victory to the Red Flag".

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The Government's alarm (102) prompted the Chief Secretary to speak to a partner of Birds, who argued that the dismissals expressed a concern with safety, that the demand for increments was "cutting the ground from under the feet of the Labour Inquiry Commission" and that he was not prepared to negotiate with Bari :

Professor Bari appears to have created the impression... that his word cannot be relied upon, and that he precipitates strikes... his temperament is so excitable that he is unreliable... he is an impossible man to negotiate with... All over the world it is the recognised principle of mining trade unions that safety men must not be taken out on strike, but... an attempt has been made to take out the safety men first. This happened at Kumardhubi where Homi tried to bring out the staff at the Loyabad power house which would have stopped the pumping of 30 mines... Mr Robert's point is that it is a public danger to have labour leaders of the type of Messrs Bari and Homi engaged in labour agitation in the coalfields...

A leader was considered most dangerous when he displayed the characteristics of those whom he was supposed to lead :

The coal mining population is excitable and is drawn partly from up-country and partly from even more excitable aboriginals. It is extremely easy to stir them up and not easy to pacify them. Tactics of labour agitation which in Jamshedpur may result merely in the stoppage of work... are likely to have much more far-reaching consequences in Jharia... Professor Bari has declared that he is aiming at creating a union under his own leadership to cover the whole field. This sweeping campaign is dangerous. The organisation of labour into unions, if it is not to be attended with great danger, should proceed slowly and carefully; and I feel that Professor Bari is not the proper man to do this. He is too much lacking in balance and moderation and too easily carried over by emotion. If he goes on, he is bound, sooner rather than later, to provoke a real crisis (103).

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102. File 379/39. "The ADC thinks that the strike would have ended on the 5th but for Mr Bari's meeting" : Chief Secretary RE Russell's note dtd 9/10/38.

103. File 379/39. Chief Secretary RE Russell's note dtd 9/10/38.

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The ADC sought legal redress for Bari's "vile abuses". Witnesses' statements were recorded (104), but the case was not prosecuted (105). Russell considered a ban on strikes by safety-staff, the appointment of a Labour Officer, and keeping a closer watch on Bari :

In view of the rather extreme speeches that Professor Bari delivers at times and the controversy that frequently arises with him as to what he has or has not said I suggested to HM this morning that it would be advisable in future to have his speeches reported by CID reporters. If HM approves I shall wire the instructions to DIG, CID. (106).

At the height of the stalemate at the Cable Company, the ICS had no difficulty in convincing Bari's comrades to order verbatim reports of his speeches, with AN Sinha noting that it was "as much in the interest of Govt. as that of Mr Bari to know what he actually has spoken" (107). Bari's rhetoric, meanwhile, grew more radical. Speaking to a large gathering in Jamshedpur on 16 October he praised Russia's invincibility in the face of German threats, due to her "correct ideology and true leadership". Russell asked if he was "becoming infected with the communist virus". AN Sinha responded :

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104. File 379/39. Enclosures to letter of the ADC to Chief Secretary dtd 9/10/38. One witness, the contractor's agent Tulsi Ram Sachchar stated : "I was very sorry on hearing the speech specially the attack on Government, police and local officers, who were lowered in my estimation. Had it been elsewhere and had I not been afraid of being molested (sic), I would have protested and said that a gentleman... should not use such language which I could not use against a coolie." The phrase "lowered in my estimation", was borrowed from the Penal Code and inserted to fit a prosecution case. Sachchar clearly held all officials in great esteem, even after Bari's speech. His contempt for 'coolies' was implied.

105. File 379/39. Notes by RE Russell and AN Sinha, dtd 12/10/38, and Chief Secretary's letter to the ADC, dtd 13-14/10/38. AN Sinha felt that the case "will create a good deal of sensation... We should wait and see how Mr Bari behaves in future... If he is bent upon creating trouble, we shall have to consider what steps we shall have to take to restrain him from crossing limits".

106. File 379/39. Chief Secretary RE Russell's note dtd 9/10/38.

107. File 379/39. Chief Secretary, RE Russell, to IGP, and DIG, (CID), dtd 10/10/38, and 11/10/38; AN Sinha's orders dtd 10/10/38 : "Speeches of Messrs Asit Chatterji, KK Sarkar, Satya Bimal Sen, and PN Ghose may also be reported... Bombay Trade Disputes Act may be obtained...".

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I think Professor Bari when on legs (sic) does not know what he is talking about but he is probably following the example of other labour leaders...(108).

**8.10 Political Cross Currents in Badruchak.**

The wave of unrest in the collieries manifested long-suppressed discontent among the miners. Yet, when workers at Bird's Standard colliery gave notice of a strike, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) noted :

It is the key men almost entirely and not the miners, who are responsible for the current situation, and that is what makes it so serious, and indicates the possibility of communist activity being responsible for the trouble. But other aspects also have to be taken into account in gauging the causes (109).

The CID for their part, discounted the 'red' factor :

The revolutionaries and the communists are intimately connected ... it will be difficult for them to do anything without our knowing all about it... the attempt of the Bengal revolutionaries-cum-communists, to capture the coalfields, has so far failed. The Professor has been able to turn them out of Jamshedpur, at least for a time, and is, in all probability going to take over absolute control of the coalfield labour organisations if Homi will let him. Subhas Chandra Bose's men, Satya Bimal Sen and Ashit Chatterji, a suspected emissary of the Bengal group, are now back numbers. Neither Imamul Hai Khan, who has organised the present strikes, nor Prof. Bari has much to do with the Bengal group. Both of them are far too self-centred to accept guidance from Bengal or other communists (110).

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108. Report in Advance 20/10/38. File 201/38, Notes by RE Russell and AN Sinha, dtd 20/10/38.

109. File 379/39. CT Brett's DO dtd 18/10/38, with enclosures.

110. File 379/39. DO from Bihar SB to Chief Secretary dtd 15/10/39.

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Actually, with the prolongation of the strike, KK Sarkar had attempted to gain AITUC support, which was refused on the ground that the JCWU was not an affiliate of the AITUC (111). The police did comment on factionalism, and intrigues by contractors and firms hostile to Bird & Co., but in the main, pinned responsibility on Bari, who had brought radical ex-convicts like Hazara Singh and Shamdeo Narayan into his circle of activists (112). (They were probably gaining political 'entry' into the labour movement in Chota Nagpur, and must have known of the hostility to Bari in the local Congress). In Jharia, IH Khan, one of Bari's 'key-men', was reported to be

working at cross purposes with Babu Matukdhari (sic) Singh, who from all accounts seems to be doing excellent and much needed work here in the interests of labour. In consequence socialists are gaining ground in the coalfield (113).

There was also conjecture that the Tatas had intervened through Homi. When the strike began, the Loyabad power house, which had a JLF-1936 union, was put under guard. But its employees were thought to be unsympathetic to the miners (114), and officials hoped that union rivalry would help to keep it functioning. TISCO depended on Bird for part of their coke supply, and the hoped-for sympathy strike failed on account of Homi's opposition (115). The easy identification of Homi with Tata's interests was of significance.

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111. File 379/39. SB report dtd 23/10/39.

112. File 379/39. Strike Report 7, dtd 19/10/38. Hazara Singh was a Punjab externee, and Shamdeo Narayan a recently released Bihar political prisoner.

113. File 379/39. CT Brett's DO dtd 18/10/38. The Dhanbad police at this stage characterised Mukutdhari as "the Congress worker appointed by Government.." : Strike Report 6, dtd 16/10/38.

114. File 379/39. Report no 3, dtd 29/9/38.

115. File 379/39. CT Brett's DO dtd 18/10/39 : "Therefore it is not in Tata's interest to foster trouble in Bird & Co.'s concerns... there is nothing to show that Homi has had a hand in the present strike.

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Bari's comrades worked hard among the workers of Bird's other pits. Money was brought in from Jamshedpur. Hazara and Shamdeo visited nearby villages, and became prime movers in the lightening strikes which began on the 17th in Loyabad and Mudidih. At Mudidih, the strikers, (550 in a total of 1050) submitted a demands list, but linked resumption to the re-opening of Badruchak (116). At Loyabad, scene of the explosion of 1936 (see ch 5.3), more than half the workforce of 2400 was on strike. In both places, the strikers obstructed safety men (117). Miners waving red flags defied ban orders at the pickets at Loyabad on 18 October, and arrests were made to stop them moving towards the power house. As funds for rations ran short the leaders began seeking a way out (118). Shiva Kali Bose and BB Sarkar met the contractor HP Banerji and received Rs 200/- with exhortations to extend the strike to Bird's other collieries. Shiva Kali also attempted negotiations with Fenwick through the ADC (119), who arranged for the intervention of Mukutdhari. The latter was to play a key role in the settlement, something he fails to mention in his account of the strike (120). Notices of closure were suspended, and Bird transferred the manager, bowing to one of the striker's demands (121). Mukutdhari advised resumption since the strike was without notice, and this suggestion soured his relations with the strike leaders (122).

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116. File 379/39. Letter of the ADC, to Chief Secretary dtd 18/10/38. Imamul was attempting to initiate a strike at Sendra colliery. The miners wanted a month's rations before they would strike : SB Report dtd 14/10/38; Strike Report 7 dtd 19/10/38.

117. File 379/39. Strike Report 7, dtd 19/10/38, and Dhanbad CID to Chief Secretary dtd 18/10/38. The work of isolating the fire which followed the explosion of February 1936 was still going on. Workers in the affected pit received double wages. The company gave out that any cessation of work would endanger the entire coalfield.

118. File 379/39. Letter of the ADC, NN Ray, dtd 18/10/38, and Strike Report 7, dtd 19/10/38; DO from Bihar SB to Chief Secretary dtd 13/10/38.

119. File 379/39. SB Report dtd 12/10/38; and IGP, CT Brett's DO dtd 18/10/38. According to Brett, Bannerji wanted to protect his business prospects by demonstrating his clout in the region.

120. File 379/39. Strike Report 6, dtd 16/10/38; and Mukutdhari Singh, Bhuli Bisri Kariyan, vol 2, pp. 22-25.

121. File 379/39. Strike Report 6, dtd 16/10/38.

122. File 379/39. Letter of the ADC to Chief Secretary dtd 18/10/38.

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**8.11 A Policy of Reason in the Cable Company.**

The stalemate in Badruchak coincided with the growing tension in the Cable Company. The management suddenly announced a re-opening from 15 August, but withdrew after vigorous picketting (123). Page still refused to negotiate, or agree to conciliation with Bari :

The Company could not afford to be bled as Tatas are being bled and if the trouble continued they would have to close down... other sites would be more convenient and profitable (124).

On 19 October, the works manager took 40 hands into the premises. Demonstrations began, which included workers from Tinplate and other factories (125). On the night of 21 October a man who brought food for a guard was murdered. Picketters waved tricolours and red flags during the Governor's visit on 28 October. On the 31st the company offered to consider "alleged grievances" (126), but refused to deal with outsiders. The gesture did not elicit a response. On 10 November, six months after the lock-out began, Bari delivered an emotional speech (127), warning the Congress to pressurise the English management or face the worker's anger. (See Appendix 8.5). Discerning an opportunity to win ministerial sympathy, Page wrote to AN Sinha :

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123. File 12/38. Secretary, CWU, to Prime Minister of Bihar, dtd 8/8/38, and Commissioner's DO dtd 15/8/38.

124. File 12/38. Note by Chief Secretary dtd 18/10/38, reporting a conversation with Page.

125. File 12/38. Strike Reports 1 & 2, dtd 19/10, and 20/10/38.

126. File 12/38. Strike Reports dtd 22/10; and 1/11/38.

127. File 12/38. SB report dtd 14/11/38.



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Professor Bari in a speech which he made on the morning of the 10th instant on our maidan, said some very derogatory things about the Bihar Congress Ministry and officials. This seems to be in very bad taste, and, from my knowledge, unquestionably unjustified (128).

On 15 November the strikers damaged company and police vehicles. Weapons, 'night-soil' and stones were being used in encounters, and a strike of sweepers planned. Much animosity was directed at Saram Singh, a brutish foreman (129). Negotiations still foundered on the question of recognition. The ASP, B Roy, and the SDO, JI Blackburn, worked out a formula for recognition, and though the union still demanded the removal of Saram Singh and black-leg labour (130), they did secure a promise to refrain from victimisation. But the management still resisted conciliation. On 5 December the activist Medina Khan sat on hunger strike, and the union wrote to Mahatma Gandhi. Johnson announced fresh recruitment (131), and Bari spoke of starting another cable factory. At this stage there were 137 new hands working in a total workforce of 286. Thadani, angered by Page's "zid and overbearing conceit", wanted to impose ban orders on the Company (132). Succumbing to Bari's snide and angry speeches the Premier proposed to withdraw police units escorting loyal workers (133). The bureaucrats were negotiating a comfortable retreat for Page :

HM (AN Sinha - DS) had given some such assurance that Government would take measures to prevent unfair exploitation of the employers... Mr Page evidently assumes that the Ministry can bring influence to bear upon... Mr

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128. File 12/38. Letter from GB Page to AN Sinha dtd 12/11/38. He omitted to mention that Bari said even worse things about him (Page), and Englishmen in general.

129. File 12/38. Strike Reports dtd 17/11 & 28/11/38; and Report of Cable Company Strike Meeting, Golmuri Police Station, dtd 26/11/38.

130. File 12/38. Strike Report dtd 2/12/38; SDO's DO dtd 8/12/38.

131. File 12/38. Strike Reports dtd 5/12 and 7/12/38. JN Mitra, Vice President CWU, to Mahatma Gandhi, dtd 5/12/38.

132. File 12/38. Strike Report dtd 14/12/38, and DC's DO to Commissioner dtd 12/12/38. The suggestion that Section 144 be used to pressurise factory managements, did not find favour with senior officials.

133. File 12/38. SK Sinha's note dtd 8/12/38.

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Bari to pursue a policy of reason. Incidentally that would be a very good thing; as Mr Bari is not always reasonable in his demands or his promises to the workers (134).

Medina Khan broke his fast after eleven days, upon receiving assurances of government intervention (135). On December 23 the Company accepted conciliation, and the 'strike' ended on the last day in 1938. The management agreed to recognise the union; discharge all but 75 new hands (the new set of dischargees now began manning pickets until they were given two months wages), make an advance payment to the workers, and refer points of dispute to a Board (136).

**8.12 Transparent Transgressions.**

The speeches delivered by Abdul Bari in 1938 give us an insight into the political conflicts within the Congress as well as prevalent radical nationalist discourse (137). Radical slogans such as Lal Jhande ki jai, Mazdur Dal ki jai, Mazdur Bhaiyon ki jai, Mahatma Gandhi ki jai, Bari Sahib ki jai, Bharat Janani ki jai, and Inquilab zindabad were common at his meetings, which were conducted in hortative style. He would explain to the miners the difference between dynamic and astatic unity. The latter he would liken to an assembly of corpses, and the former to the sticks of dynamite with which miners were familiar : "Agar astatic unity hogi to tamam mare hue honge... zinda sangathan paida karen aisa sangathan ke agar ap ek pahar se larn ke lie jayenge to dynamite ka ek gola hoga...". Subjecthood belonged to his own kind : "ham logon ki jamaet". It could be ascribed to the workers, as a kind of bestowal : "Hamne Jamshedpur ke mazduron mein jagriti paida ki", "sabse zeada zaruri chiz hai ki ham log ap logon ke dil mein consciousness (sic) paida karen yani bhao paida karen". 'We' would embolden them to confront the authorities : "azadi se jaise ke hum chalte hain aisahi hamare mazdur log chalen...". All this was a

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134. File 12/38. Chief Secretary's note dtd 27/12/38.

135. File 12/38. Strike Report dtd 3/1/39. "We may have to revise our attitude if Mr Page remains adamant", noted the Premier on 14/12/38.

136. File 12/38. Managing Director to Chief Secretary dtd 23/12/38; Chief Secretary's note dtd 7/1/39; and Strike Report dtd 3/1/39.

137. Unless otherwise stated, the extracts are from verbatim reports in Roman Hindi of speeches at the meeting at Chhatabad, PS Katras, 25/10/38; and at Madnadih, PS Kenduadih, on 20/11/38 : File 379/39. Emphases have been added. For fuller extracts see Appendices 8.4 and 8.6.

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means of attaching their strength to his project : "jab in chizon ko nikal denge to duniya men koi takat nahin jo hame daba sakegi". When officials and capitalists spoke of strikes being fomented, they worked with the same assumptions about subjecthood as did Professor Bari.

Bari sounded at times as if he were talking 'tactically' about the working class with other Congress leaders. In one speech, he clubbed the workers together with the princely states (reasaten) : "mazdur kisan aur jo choti choti reasaten hain in logon mein agar kam na karenge to ham logon ki angrezon ko bhi nikalne mein der hogi... yahan ke jo kisan mazdur hain, jo such much musibat mein hain, unki bhalai karenge to vuh hamara sath denge tab unki madad se ham angrezon ko nikalenge". The nationalist project was 'ours', the peasants and workers would stand by 'us' and help us if we did something for them. This view coincided with that of the officials, who believed that the nationalists intervened in labour movements with an ulterior motive. Bari also attempted to educate his listeners in the classical version of economic nationalism, deindustrialisation, and the high wages of English workers.

On October 25, at one of Bari's meetings, PN Bose referred to the Tinplate strike : "Company Bari Saheb ke samne sir jhukaya, sab mang bhi man liya...". This image of an arrogant management bowing its head before the leader would have carried deep resonances for his audience. Bari could assume the tone of a street fighter : "Ham Hindustan ke tamam takaton ko challenge dete hain ke vuh akar hamara mukabla karen"; and even asked the workers to help him grab the Chairman of Bird & Co. by the neck : "nahin to ek strike se ham Edward Benthall ki gardan nahin daba sakte hain...". He had an affectionate mien towards his deprived fellow Indians, "hamen tumhare sath muhabbat hai", expecting them to do as he instructed them to "Ap log ghar jayen, aur jab ham apko kahenge to us bat per apko razi hona hoga...". His aristocratic demeanour and obsession with domination and subjugation was never so evident as in his strange assertion that an international worker's organisation could have enslaved the western countries (and Japan). This was the language of repressed authoritarianism : "Agar dunia bhar ke mazduron ka sangathan hota to England, Amrica, Germany aur Japan ko ghulam banate...". At a public meeting on 13 November Bari revealed something of his political temperament : a condolence resolution for Kamal Ataturk hailed the "builder of modern Turkey" (138).

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138. The resolution referred to Ataturk as the "gallant soldier and saviour of modern Turkey". File 201/38 : Special Branch report of the labour meeting dtd 13/11/38.

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The link between the 'we' and the 'you' lay in the sympathy Bari evinced for the workers' tribulations : "Hum tumhari taklif ko jante hain, tumhare uper jo zulm hai ham jante hain...", including the crucial issue of peremptory dismissals : "zarasi bat per dismiss hona"; and in the contempt he showed for their enemies and oppressors : "ham dikhana chhahte hain ki vo kia chiz hain...". It was also evoked by his capacity for plain speaking and his complete lack of deference about the Congress : "lathi charge karne wale congress govt. ke numainde hain... Aj aise aise officer unke pas hain jo indiscriminate lathi charge karte hain, ya to Governor bahut mazbut hai ya yeh government bahut mazbut hai". His criticisms were clearly of a kin with those of the socialists, with their stress on the humanist aims of the freedom struggle : "is desh men ham garibon ki khidmat aur sewa karne ke lie congress men hain, na ki Gandhi, Rajendra babu aur Sri Krishna babu ki izzat karne ae hain...". In battle with an English management, he could be withering : "yeh fauj aur police kisne bheja, kya angrez ne bheja ? kya yeh abhi tak malik hain ? Aur ham ghulam hain ?". Even when he asked the miners to wait for the BLEC's report, a subversive gesture was included. If no justice was forthcoming, they would have to launch a bitter struggle "Enquiry Committee hamare hak dilayegi to ham khushi se khud kam per jayenge... agar na kare to aisi halat men ham sochenge ke ham... lard ker apna hak len...".

Bari referred to the mighty without any honorific, as in 'Hallett' (the Governor). He abused his opponents in crude colloquialisms such as Parsi lounda and haramzada, and spoke of managerial obstreperousness thus : (referring to Page), "agar wah 8 anna, 6 anna majdur ko increase dene ke lie tayyar hon to ham uska paikhana ki balti uthane ke lie tayyar hain..." (139). His speeches were undoubtedly very moving. Some of the angriest ones were delivered after lathi charges, episodes which must have added to the workers' familiarity with violence as a natural accompaniment of work. Bari asked them to give up the fear of officials and policemen and capitalists. If we can defeat the English, of what worth are the rest of them ? he asked. Only an appreciation of the privations and humiliation that accompanied work in the mines and factories can help us imagine the emotions the miners must have experienced upon hearing a leader of his stature denounce their oppressors in language they might have used themselves.

**8.13 "Unt ke muh mein jira" (140).**

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139. Speech on 10/11/38, to Cable Company Workers union meeting : File 12/38, SB report dtd 14/11/38.

140. A literal rendering of which would be, "A cumin seed in the mouth of a camel", connoting niggardly recompense. From a speech on 25/10/38, referring to the remuneration that miners obtained from coal companies : File 379/39.

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In the third week of October the attendance at Loyabad colliery was almost normal, and some workers were in their villages for the Durga Pujas. Fenwick had agreed to arbitration for some of the discharges, although he was unrelenting about the seven pump khalasis who left the pits just before the strike began (141). At the other three collieries the strike was complete. KN Sengupta and Mukutdhari Singh were endeavouring to find a solution (142). The administration was defensive about allegations of brutality, and complained to the owners of the newspaper, the Indian Nation, about published stories of police atrocities put out by the JCWU (143). Meanwhile the physical plight of the miners deteriorated, driving many of them back to the pits. Of the painful experience of strike breaking, the only direct account we have is from Newari Bhuini, whose son, Topia Bhuian of Mudidih colliery was a strike breaker. She complained on 7 December that her dhowra was entered by a striker, Janki Bhuian, his mother and sister, who abused and attempted to manhandle Topia for having begun work. Newari defended her son : "we were starving" (144).

Notwithstanding Bari's fighting speech on 25 October and some progress in negotiations, the management hired blacklegs on the 28th, and two days later picketters were lathi-charged. Ten constables and seven strikers were injured. On 3 November it was reported that Badruchak was being closed (145). A 500-strong meeting took place on the 6th, at Katras. There were red flags and denunciations of capitalism. Other slogans heard were, Kamayega so khayega, iskelie jo kuchh ho, Samrajyabad ka nash ho, and Duniya ke mazduron, ek ho jao \*. (146). Speakers sarcastically juxtaposed non-violence with lathi-charges. Jang Bahadur wondered how the Jharia Congress Committee, currently spying on workers' meetings, would

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141. File 379/39. Letter of the ADC, NN Ray, to Chief Secretary dtd 23/10/38.

142. File 379/39. Strike Report 8 dtd 22/10/38.

143. File 379/39. Chief Secretary's correspondence with Danby (General Manager, Darbhanga Estate) 4/11/38 to 11/11/38.

144. File 379/39. FIR for criminal trespass dtd 7/12/38.

145. File 379/39. Strike Report 9, dtd 28/10, and 10, dtd 1/11/38; and ADC, NN Ray, to Chief Secretary dtd 3/11/38.

146. File 379/39. SB report of meeting, dtd 6/11/38. \* "Only those who toil shall eat, no matter what it takes"; "Down with Imperialism"; and "Workers of the World Unite".

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face repression when the Congress was banned again. Once the Federation scheme was inaugurated, the ministries would have to resign, he predicted, and then it would be the workers of Jharia who would wear Gandhi caps to protest (147). Despite the brave talk the strikers were in dire straits. On 12 November, eight Badruchak strikers were sentenced to three months on riot charges (148).

On 19 November, Bari asked Mukutdhari and Atul Chandra Ghosh, of the Manbhum DCC, to help find a settlement. He attended the pickets at Katras on the 21st, as more miners were resuming work. Three activists were arrested for campaigning in the dhowras. On the 24th the ADC noted that Bari had succeeded in prolonging the strike (149). On the 28th the new Chief Mining Engineer, Tarlton announced terms in which re-instatement was neither automatic nor extendable to those implicated in police cases. About 100 resumed work at Mudidih that day (150). On 4 December, Bari delivered an 'inflammatory' speech (which was not recorded), in which he told the strikers to wait another fortnight, during which he would ask Rajendra Prasad to get the government to intervene. If this failed, he would personally march with them and set fire to every colliery of Bird & Co. This enthused the strikers, and on the 5th there was vigorous picketting, including "abuse of a nature likely to arouse religious feelings - eg. that Muhammadan strike-breakers should eat pork and Hindus, beef". On the 14th, loyal workers travelling in lorries were stoned (151).

Finally, at a mass meeting on 25 December Mukutdhari Singh, Jang Bahadur, and Shyamdeo Narayan announced that terms had been agreed upon. There would be no victimisation, the rates in all of Bird's collieries were to be unified, a minimum wage was fixed for trolley-men, discharge cases would be reconsidered, and the Company would move the

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147. File 379/39. CID report of meeting, dtd 6/11/38.

148. File 379/39. ASP's diary, dtd 15/11/38; and Strike Report 11, dtd 15/11/38.

149. File 379/39. ASP's diary, dtd 22/11/38; ADC, (Dhanbad), NN Ray to Chief Secretary dtd 24/11/38. Bari is also reported to have phoned Jawaharlal Nehru.

150. File 379/39. Tarlton's "Terms of Settlement.."; and Strike Report 12, dtd 1/12/38.

151. File 379/39. ADC, NN Ray to Chief Secretary dtd 5/12/38; ASP's diary dtd 8/12/38; Strike Report 13, dtd 16/12/38.

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government for a withdrawal of police cases (152). Of the demands about service and working conditions, the tub shortage, corruption, a general increment, leave rules and overtime there was not a word (153). Once the workers had been put on the defensive, victimisation became the bone of contention, and they were willing to compromise on most other matters. The concession made to the trolley-men demonstrated the significant position within the workforce of this section of the miners.

The Rai Bahadur ADC did his best to 'uphold the law' in the case of those who had defied his authority. Following further intercessions by Mukutdhari Singh (154), sentences on 6 persons were remitted in September 1939. If Bari had functioned as the lightning rod of the miners' anger, Mukutdhari helped minimise their losses, and the mediation of each extended the domain of nationalist politics.

**8.14 Labour and Political Conflict within the Congress.**

After Badruchak, Abdul Bari appeared to realise that it was difficult to build hegemonic unions in Jharia and Jamshedpur at the same time. The Bihar Congress wanted to establish order in the collieries, and the local unit made efforts to get Bari, Mukutdhari and Atul Ghosh of the DCC arrive at a modus operandi. However, after a 'Central Labour Board' was formed at Dhanbad in November 1938, at a meeting which excluded Mukutdhari while making him Joint Secretary, the die was cast. Mukutdhari dissociated himself, and Searchlight attacked Bari for constituting a Board with "notorious anti-Congressites" :

Professor Abdul Bari's connection with labour organisation is by no means an individual matter. He derives his authority... from the Congress and yet his conduct at Jharia amounts to his joining hands with anti-Congressites to oust Babu Mukutdhari Singh from the Jharia coalfields. The whole question of labour organisation in Chota Nagpur

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152. File 379/39. Strike Report 14, dtd 2/1/39.

153. The management's terms announced on the 28th November mentioned union recognition, but hedged : "When it has been in existence for one year and it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Company that it has been properly run...". The leaders did not announce this 'concession' at the 25th December meeting : File 379/39. Tarlton's Notice dtd 28/11/38.

154. File 379/39. Letters from Mukutdhari Singh to Prime Minister dtd 1/2/39 and 26/3/39.

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vis-a-vis the Congress should be examined... and if it is found that there are people whose action amounts to kicking at the Congress after having utilised it for acquiring prominence, they must be convinced that they cannot trifle with the Congress. Be it Professor Bari or anyone else, no one, as long as he is in the Congress can be allowed to work on his own (155).

If the Searchlight found it necessary to warn Bari to be circumspect, Vidyabhushan Shukla appreciated his initiative in the battle against the combined European managements. One reason for the radical tone in his speeches was the fierce competition in the latter half of 1938 between Bari and the CSP for control over the trade union movement. In July, after their Summer School, the CSP had deputed Dinkar Mehta and Basawan Singh to Jamshedpur, and Dr Satya Narain Singh and Jogendra Sukul to Giridih (156). The reopening of the Mosaboni mines and Tinplate that month strengthened Bari's position, whereas by August, the socialists had only a forty-member sweeper's union in Jamshedpur to show for their pains. Bari then became president of the new union at ISWP, his fifth (157). In September the socialists formed unions among ekka and motor drivers in Gaya, Chhapra, Arrah, and Dhanbad. Not to be outdone, Bari addressed the Jharia Motor Driver's union on 5 September, advocating a general strike to expel the British. In October 1938, Bhagat Singh's associate Batukeshwar Dutt joined the Socialists, and had an enthusiastic reception in Jamshedpur (158). The struggle was to intensify the following year.

Abdul Bari was clearly building a power base within the labour movement. MN Roy lamented that "through Bari, the entire labour movement is dominated not only by the Congress bosses, but by the Ministry" (159), a view that glossed over the deep rifts within the Congress over Bari's style of work. In marked contrast to other Congress unionists, Bari caused a

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155. Searchlight, 1/12/38.

156. FR's for July 1938.

157. FR-1, August 1938. Satya Narayan Singh and Jogendra Sukul were active at Bermo, Hazaribagh.

158. FRs for September 1938; FR-1, October 1938.

159. MNRP. Letter dtd 9/9/38, MN Roy to JN Mitra.



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resolution deprecating the Bombay Trade Disputes Act to be passed in a well-attended meeting in mid-October (160). On 30 October, he brought membership forms to a meeting, stating that if the 5 lakh workers in Bihar joined the Congress, the government would be under their thumb (161). In November, with tension building up in Golmuri, Mosaboni and Badruchak, Bari made severe attacks on the ministry. On 12 November, as the Copper Corporation Directors stalled their acceptance of the settlement, he told the miners that if a compromise were not forthcoming, he would take on the Congress leaders and the state on their behalf (162). On 13 November, he spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the betrayal of truth and non-violence by Gandhi's followers. Denouncing the firings upon workers in Bombay, he wondered what would happen after the Mahatma died :

peaceful jalus par goliyan chalti hain, to pher aakhir Mahatma Gandhi ka satya aur ahimsa kahan hai, unke bare se bare chele unki zindagi mein yeh kar rahe hain, to unke marne ke bad kya karenge, hamko samajh men nahin aati hai...\* (163).

After his speech at Katras on 4 December, Bari's opponents tried desperately to undermine his position. The Singhbhum DCC wrote to the BPCC on 5 December :

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160. Report on the meeting of 16/10/38, in Advance, dtd 20/10/38. Mukutdhari Singh and the Kumardhubi Workers' Union, suggested that "some legislation on the lines of the recent Bombay Trade Disputes Act", be introduced in Bihar : BLEC, vol 3-C, pp. 159; 228.

161. File 201/38. SB report of the meeting of the GTWU, dtd 30/10/38. As a matter of fact, Bari was not straying far from the political strategy chalked out by Nehru, who in an article entitled 'The Congress and Labour and Peasant Organisations' (written on June 28, 1937), had suggested that Congressmen take the initiative to organise workers' unions to struggle for their immediate economic interests, and also encourage them to become primary members of the Congress. See Jawaharlal Nehru, Selected Works, vol 8, 1976, pp. 417-425.

162. File 110-II/38. CID Report dtd 13/11/38; and Searchlight, 16/11/38.

163. File 201/38 : SB report of the labour meeting dtd 13/11/38. \* "If peaceful demonstrations may be fired upon, where have Mahatma Gandhi's truth and non-violence disappeared to ? If, in his lifetime, his biggest acolytes can do this, I can't imagine what will happen after he is gone...". As things transpired, Abdul Bari lost his life before the Mahatma (in a shooting incident at a customs checkpost), in March 1947. See SP Sen (ed), Dictionary of National Biography, vol 1, entry on Abdul Bari.

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Particularly after the mass contact resolution of the Congress, the Jamshedpur Committee has been applying itself vigorously ...to save the labour getting out of the Congress, like the kisan movement... But the PCC sent Prof. Bari to take up the labour work... and he is doing it not only without consulting the local Congress Committee, but also preaching against it. Not only that, he is being guided by Congressmen of yesterday and opportunists.. they have already done serious... damage to the prestige of the Congress... (164).

In January 1939, the DCC complained that notions of "class or group affiliation (were) not evidently permissible under the Congress constitution"; and that "increasing the number somehow or the other is not the aim. But this is what we practically have in Singhbhum - a Bari Congress Committee" (165). Moni Ghosh, who was active in the TWU, had another version of the tension. The local Congress Committee had a "step-motherly attitude towards the Union", and was anti-labour. Bari realised that this would endanger the workers' attachment to the party and,

it was, therefore agreed that the Union workers should capture the local Congress. The inevitable happened. In the election, the local Congress won one seat only and all the other constituencies went to the Union workers. Bari became the President of the DCC and Moni Ghosh was elected as the General Secretary... the Union and the Congress Committee worked together till 1951 (166).

#### **8.15 Happy Terminations ?**

In the winter of 1938 Justice Fazl Ali submitted his Conciliation awards. In Mosaboni he asked for a pay-raise of one anna for workers earning less than Rs 1/8 annas a day, for cases of dismissal to be referred to the Labour Commissioner, and for schemes for PF, Maternity benefit, paid leave and a profit-sharing bonus to be implemented after a year. A settlement was

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164. AICCP. File P-6. Letter dtd 5/12/38 from GG Pagay, General Secretary, Singhbhum DCC, to the General Secretary, BPCC, with note : "Difficulties in Congress Work in the District of Singhbhum".

165. AICCP. File P-6. Note : Objections in Respect of the Election of Delegates to the Tripuri Session from Singhbhum District, forwarded on 17/1/39, by GG Pagay, to the BPCC.

166. Moni Ghosh, Our Struggle, p. 46.

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signed on 17 November 1938 (167). The Labour Commissioner kept two under-trial cases pending; and recommended re-instatement for the rest (168). He upheld the discharge of Jagannath Prasad, who had defiantly absented himself and Madurai, a member of the timber-gang, who had refused to clear debris on the ground that it was not his job. Thus the men who asserted themselves against management were the ones whose dismissals were held justifiable. Several workers were convicted in the riot cases. At the appeal stage KB Sahay recommended withdrawal, and the Premier concurred (169).

The broader dimensions of the awards were unmistakeable. The plants were English-owned, and their superior staff English. In Mosaboni, working conditions were especially harsh. The workers' anger had welled up at a time of political changes. Trades unions were a novel experience for most of them and they had no qualms about discarding leaders they found ineffective. Bari, with his strong position in the political hierarchy, had articulated their basic concerns. It made a difference too, that there were other sympathetic Indians in authority : there is little doubt that it was the elected ministry which made possible the withdrawal of police cases. Despite the conservative bent of certain Congressmen therefore, the national situation as a whole worked in favour of the strikers.

The settlement at Tinplate, signed on 24 October 1938 carried more poignant implications. The company agreed to recognise the union, arrange for a grievance Committee with a role for a Labour Commissioner, and reinstate Feroze Khan, Ashrafi Ram, Mehar Singh and Nihal Singh. The demands for PF and bonus were granted, with other grievances to be considered after the BLEC's report. The Board observed that "the main hitch in the way of conciliation was a psychological one..." (170). By January 1939, the government had ordered the withdrawal of criminal cases, including the one against Price and Russell for obstructing a procession in December 1937 (171).

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167. File 110-V/38. Report of the Board of Conciliation.

168. File 110-V/38. Report of the Labour Commissioner, SK Das, dtd 30/1/39.

169. File 110-II/38. Note by SK Sinha dtd 15/8/39.

170. File 9-VI/38. Report of the Board of Conciliation... (Tinplate).

171. File 9-VI/38. Chief Secretary to Commissioner, dtd 31/1/39.

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That this consummation would be interpreted as the culmination of the struggle of 1929, was understandable, given Bari's involvement in the earlier strike. **"Tinplate Dispute Ends. Happy Termination of 10 Years Fight. Professor Bari Thanks Conciliation Board"**, was how the Amrita Bazar Patrika described the settlement on 3 November 1938. Searchlight wrote, "the Tinplate dispute had already extended over a period of ten years and in the course of these years the attitude of the parties had hardened... and their determination to fight to the finish had intensified hundred-fold" (172). The continuity actually lay in the radical literati's ideological consciousness. Bari was waging a war to extirpate English colonialism - the workers' movement was an appropriate weapon for that purpose. But the strikers of 1929 had had motivations of their own. After the strike collapsed, most of them lost their jobs, and many of those who fought the strike of 1937-38 were the strike-breakers of 1929. This latter struggle too, was waged for better service and working conditions in a political climate which undoubtedly influenced the workers. But the representation of its success as a culmination of the 1929 strike appeared a cruel irony to the ones who had been replaced a decade ago. Some of them expressed their distaste in letters to Subhas Bose and Rajendra Prasad in December 1938 (See Appendix 8.7). They reminded the leaders not only of Bari's, but of their own role at the time :

Your poor petitioners... were on strike in the year 1929 and which continued for 14 months under the general guidance of Prof. Bari... leaders including the President of the Indian National Congress and the Chairman of the Enquiry Committee were pleased to pass a couple of miserable days with us and request(ed) the workers not to yield to the company... some of the strikers... joined the work leaving many of their friends behind... about 1000 workers lost their jobs... assurance was given to us that when the Congress will be in power... "we will see that not a single worker who have not been taken in, will remain unemployed by the company"... The reappointment of the said strikers ought to have been the first and foremost condition of the terms of the recent settlement... the present Tinplate Workers' Union was kept alive to shine so gloriously solely by the untiring energy and dogged perseverance of your petitioners... the ultimate result is that they are the worst sufferers... (173).

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172. Searchlight, 3/11/38.

173. RPP, NAI. File 1-L-39, letter of ex-employees of Tinplate Company to the "Chairman, BLEC", undated, circa December 1938, with a copy sent to Subhas Chandra Bose; "President, Indian National Congress" dated 21/12/38. The letter was signed partly in Hindi and partly in English by eight workers, Lala Ram, Maha Singh, Hakim Singh, Derha Ram, RC Prasad, and three others, in Jamshedpur.

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Many of the men re-employed in 1929 had not yet reached their original wage levels. The GTWU demanded continuity of service for the re-employed strikers (of 1929), and suggested that the management find "some more effective method to re-employ" those who were still unemployed. The reference to continuity was an admission that many of the workers whom Bari was leading in 1938 were the ones he had been cursing in 1929 (174). The allusion to 1929 was an afterthought - there was no mention of it during the negotiations. Professor Bari remained the 'victor' of Tinplate, but the victims of his 'victory' were disgusted enough to protest the perversity of the historical process.

**8.16 Jamshedpurs's 'Goondalism' problem.**

As an industrial centre, it (Jamshedpur) has few parallels in the world... In the matter of labour conditions, on the whole, the Tatas are an exemplar... (175).

After the violence in Golmuri in May 1938, the administration made lists of "dangerous persons" and persons requiring protection; and drew up measures to protect Abdul Bari's life (176). The first list included : "Homi's Followers who are addicted to Violence and Dalalism"; "Communal agitators", (Hindu and Muslim) ; "Company's Known Goondas-TISCO" ; "Company's Known Goondas-Tinplate" ; and "List of Persons who can be classed as Goondas or Dalals" (177). Dalals earned high wages, enjoyed easy access to housing and pocket expenses for liquor, kept an eye on workers and were involved in

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174. "During and after the (1929) strike, quite a lot of these strikers were taken back to jobs. They were however, treated as fresh employees with previous service broken. We demand that services of those old workers appointed during and after the strike be regarded as continuous." (Emphases added): BLEC, vol 3-C, p. 76.

175. Searchlight, 4/11/38.

176. File 235-III/38. Notes by KB Sahay and SK Sinha, dtd 25/5 and 29/5/38; and 'List of persons requiring special protection'. Apart from Bari, the list included Feroz Khan, "an active union worker, apprehends harm from Mahtab Khan's friends"; "Babus of the office of the Cable Company"; and Mr Nanavati, Asst Superintendant, TISCO : "Sheet Mill workers, mostly goondas, are specially annoyed with him".

177. File 235-III/38. "List of Jamshedpur goondas and dalals", forwarded by the ASP, Special Branch, dtd 16/6/38.

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intimidation (178). The lists are an indictment of the foremost managements in Jamshedpur, and tell a story about the politics generated around its labour movement.

Fifteen of 'Homi's followers', re-employed in 1937, were part of a group of about 85 who had been discharged during Homi's incarceration (179). The 'communal agitators' included seven workers, five from TISCO. Two were JLF activists - and were Hindu communalists. "Muslim Leaguers who work in Tisco and helped Homi" were being identified. The 12 'Known Goondas - TISCO', were all Sikhs, involved, along with 19 others, in disrupting Mangal Singh's JLF meeting in 1934. The comment on them was : "Case withdrawn. Company indirectly responsible. All are active now." Tinsplate's seven 'Known Goondas' were "all under Mahtab Khan", Shafi's killer. The 'goondas and dalals' in TISCO contained seventeen names of men stated to be Punjabi followers of Santa Singh alias Makhan Singh ;

a notorious dalal of Tisco... who got these men employed as a reward for his dalalism and help in time of need. Santa Singh joined Homi and helped him indirectly to capture the Metal Worker's Union. Now these men are working against Homi and joined Tata (Workers') Union. Took prominent part in breaking Homi's meeting on 3/4/38 (180).

TISCO's 'goondas and dalals', Sheet Mill workers, had been followers of Homi who had "fought against Company's special force in 1935". They were now described as of "desperate character", and "a terror to the workers". The 'special force' was linked to Giri and Naidu's MWU. One of the witnesses at the BLEC, a steel worker of 17 years' standing and who had been a member of the JLA, the JLF and the MWU, stated that about 150 members of the Metal Workers' Union had been part of the company's special force in the early 1930's (181).

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178. BLEC. vol 4-C, pp. 93-98, evidence rendered in March 1939 by furnace workers.

179. BLEC. vol 4-C, pp. 51; 72.

180. File 235-III/38. "List of Jamshedpur goondas and dalals", forwarded by the ASP. Special Branch, dtd 16/6/38.

181. BLEC. vol 4-C, p. 72.

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In a JLF meeting on 11 December 1938, Homi blamed TISCO, Bari and the bureaucracy for implicating him in a communal episode on 9 April, for which he had been under trial. The whole truth may not be known, but the report did link him with communal activists (182). (In fairness to Homi, it must be said that apart from this case, there is no record of his having indulged in any kind of communal politics. His following was, till the end, composed of workers whose religious and regional identities covered a wide spectrum, and his protestations therefore, may well have been justified). Seven men in the Tinsplate list had been blacklegs in 1929, and had recently deserted Homi for Bari's camp. The Sylhetti Ekadas Mian (on the protection list), was a Muslim Leaguer, a company spy and said to have participated in communal troubles (183). Eight dalals had recently joined Bari. The "majority of the Punjabis drink and commit violence", concluded the report. For its part, the TWU accused the management of disrupting meetings in the thirties, and cited the incident of 20 September 1931. They recognised the part played by TISCO in financing and pursuing the cases against Homi, and the goondaism employed by management to curb the activity of both the JLA and the JLF :

Another meeting held by the Federation men under police protection was tried to be broken up by the goondas, a number of whom were chased, arrested, and hauled up... Mysteriously, however, the case against these goondas was dropped while some of the Company's high officers were transferred from Jamshedpur (184).

According to the DC, labour leaders as well as capitalists were "abusing the government", due to the delay in forming a Conciliation Board at the Tatanagar Foundry :

The labour was... getting the suspicion that the Government was delaying matters only to help the capitalists... Capitalists on the other hand, think that the Government is afraid of labour... Goondaism seems to be on the

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182. Searchlight, 3/12/38. He was acquitted on 1 December. "Six Muslims also have been let off" wrote the correspondent.

183. Ekadas Mian may have been the "leading Sylhetti striker" in Golmuri in 1929. See above, ch 3.9, fn 146.

184. BLEC. vol 3-C, p. 50. It also referred to the Metal Worker's Union as "a subsidised labour organisation", which, "in spite of the Company's blessings, failed to attract the workers."

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increase in Jamshedpur and both the Labour and the Capitalists appear secretly to be resorting to goondaism... (185).

The matter was not all that simple. That India was poised for big changes must have been apparent to the workers in 1938-39. The surge in their expectations, which rapidly gained organisational form, was part of this historic upheaval, and Jamshedpur was a focal point in the process. Workers had elected Natha Ram to defy Tatas, and later rallied behind a leader with political stature. Managements which had hitherto steered a course between the bureaucracy and the national movement felt the need for a unified response to militancy but were confused about what it could be. Hitherto they had done fairly well with dismissals and the use of strong-arm tactics. As they emerged from the depression of the mid-thirties however, the workers began resisting shop-floor autocracy, creating a veritable crisis in personnel relations in industry.

The advent of quasi-democratic politics generated new methods of conflict management. The ministry initiated industrial conciliation, but needed to make the owners amenable. The appointment of the BLEC with its undefined promise of imminent relief, provided an overarching ideological influence. Leverage within the labour movement was the task of Bari's unions. However, the latter's authoritarian temperament, bitter vocabulary, and susceptibility to the radical instincts of the workers, made the task of managing class conflict so difficult as to prompt serious consideration of a Bombay-style law to stem the tide. {Bari was the only member of the BLEC who objected to its suggested ban on stay-in strikes (186).} The political situation was fluid, and the culture of industrial relations steeped in violence. Two years were not enough for it to change drastically. And 'goondaism' remained the crutch of owners faced with rebellious workers. Speaking to the BLEC in May 1939, the Chief Secretary suggested that there was rarely any peaceful picketting. Citing the example of Sikh picketters coming to the Tinplate pickets armed with kirpans, he continued :

Both sides keep a number of persons of the goonda type... and these goondas have recourse to intimidation and violence. The more active partisans of each side are described as dalals and goondas by the other side (Laughter). There are incidentally a good many undesirable elements in a large labour population drawn from all over India,

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185. File 385/38. Rameshwar Singh's DO dtd 17/9/38. He assumed office on 11 September 1938.

186. BLEC. vol 1, Report. "'Stay-in' strikes, inasmuch as they are fraught with risk to the plant and to the workers should be prohibited by law. Professor Abdul Bari would not prohibit 'Stay-in' strikes, or for that matter any strike by law" : pp. 266-267.



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such as that of Jamshedpur, and some are found on the side of the company and some on the other side (187).  
(Emphasis added).

The official may have been used the singular term, 'the company', inadvertently. However, the variegated evidence of workers, union activists and officials points to the conclusion that the one consistent strand in TISCO's strategy for dealing with the worker's movement was dalali and physical intimidation. In mid-1938, Bari referred to Gandhi's expressed concern that affairs in Jamshedpur seemed always to be settled at the point of lathis (188). He also recalled Bose's experience of TISCO's "perfection in goondaism". Some of its big officials, he claimed, were the leaders of goondas, and had trained the lesser companies in this practice.

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187. BLEC, vol 4-A, p. 4. RE Russell's evidence, dtd 30/5/39. Occasions when committee members were amused were represented as 'Laughter', or, 'Loud Laughter'. (Some texts suggest that 'snickering' might have been more appropriate). Endemic violence in Jamshedpur was apparently a subject of mild hilarity for the committee.

188. File 201/38. Precis Report of the labour meeting dtd 29/5/38. The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, (GOI Publications Division, 1974), vol 57, p 460, quotes Gandhi in a meeting in the city on 4/5/34 : "It was a disgrace that barbarous methods were employed.. he had heard that ex-labourers were employed in this nefarious traffic. It was a shame if this was the case".

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**Links to Two Book Reviews of Dilip Simeon. The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism. Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur 1928–1939. Manohar, New Delhi 1995. xix, 398 pp.**

[1] Review by Vijay Prashad in [International Review of Social History](#) , [Volume 41](#) , [Issue 3](#) , December 1996 , pp. 434 - 435  
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[2] Review by Sumit Sarkar in The Indian Economic & Social History Review, Vol 34, Issue 3, 1997 <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946469703400316>

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