

# **The Long Haul**

- **The Bombay Textile Workers Strike of 1982-83**

*by Rajni Bakshi*



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## ***Publisher's Preface***

The strike by the textile workers of Bombay (1982-3) was a momentous event. Its significance for the working class movement has perhaps not yet been adequately understood. This is in any way no simple task. The question will be debated by experts in analysis and action for quite some time.

A contribution towards this process is a compilation of facts about the strike. Rajni Bakshi in this book presents the facts. Based on interviews, discussions and secondary sources she reconstructs the events as they took place and attempts to get at the forces and factors that lay behind the events.

There would be no uniform agreement about her interpretations and conclusions. There would, however not be, we hope, any dispute over the facts and hence the book can become a basis for discussion.

It is only fair to add that the views expressed are of the author and do not reflect the opinions of BUILD Documentation, Centre.

**BUILD Documentation Collective**

## **Author's Note**

I first met textile workers in January 1982, to discuss not the strike but non-party political organisations in urban slums. It was immediately evident that for them the two were inseparable. The strike was an attempt to articulate and organise discontent with life in the mills and the larger socio-political reality through new and different means. It was easy, then, to share the sense of living in revolutionary times.

Over the next two years I regularly met with numerous textile workers, particularly the small group I first met in January 1982, and attempted to understand their hopes, aspirations and reasons for struggling. From July 1982 onwards the accounts of these meetings were regularly published in *The Telegraph*, along with assessments of how the strike was progressing. Yet when the strike effectively ended in June 1983 and I wrote the last of several lengthy reports on the strike, too many questions remained unanswered. Moreover, the human saga of the struggle, so cursorily covered in journalistic reports, seemed in danger of being forgotten by all but those who actually suffered. From this grew the need for a book that recorded this saga and assessed its implications.

Apart from utilising the notes on scores of interviews with workers and officials during the strike, I met with a cross-section of trade union leaders, mill owners and government officials to record how they viewed the strike in retrospect. I also consulted Dr. Samant's files containing correspondence and papers relating to the strike, and numerous books on trade unions and strikes in India.

This book is not intended to be a clinically objective view of the strike or the textile industry and those who control it. It is the story of a search and struggle to realise certain aspirations and is thus necessarily subjective. The first draft of this book was completed in mid-1984. But the process of finalising the manuscript and publishing it was delayed for a variety of reasons. In spite of the delay I hope that this account will, in some limited way, be of use to those who want to understand the struggle of Bombay's textile workers.

This book is a result of the inspiration, help, encouragement and opportunities provided by many people. I would like to thank:

- M.J.Akbar and Ajay Kumar for giving me the opportunity to write extensively on the strike in *The Telegraph*. And Olga Tellis, my senior colleague, who gave me leave of absence to write the book and encouraged my work.
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- Above all and most importantly, to Gulab Gajarmal, Khandeo and Lata Shelke, K.P.Kamble and countless other textile workers and their families who gave me their time and confidence. It was the warmth with which they welcomed me into their homes, the candour with which they shared details about their lives, dreams and aspirations which made it imperative that their story be told. If in my telling of it the account lacks anything in sincerity, depth, accuracy or fairness it is due to my own failings, for which I hope they will forgive me.

## Introduction

A small crowd had gathered under the window of S.A.Dange's house in Dadar. But the crowd was not there to see or hear the original radical leader of Bombay's textile workers and father of the communist movement in India. All attention was focussed on a battered old truck sparsely decorated with posters of a fist defiantly jutting out of a factory chimney. The veteran firebrand was out of sight and an indeterminate mood seemed to prevail. But then a group of drum-beating and dancing men joined the gathering around the truck and immediately changed the atmosphere.

The jubilation infused by these revellers peaked with the arrival of an air-conditioned white Fiat car with tinted glass windows. From the vehicle emerged a burly man. His smile was reticent but his manner was purposeful. All eyes shifted from the truck to this man, clad in white, striding slowly into the crowd. The cheering which started then reached a crescendo as the big, balding man hauled himself on to the truck. The balcony of Dange's flat was empty, the windows of his room, shut tight. Below, Dr. Datta Samant was in control. Soon he was leading the seemingly small gathering out of the small lane onto the broad Ambedkar road. The policemen, who had been gossiping in small groups at the street corner dispersed to fall into position and waited for the motley crowd to pass. First came the stragglers who had remained ahead of the truck. Behind the truck came a wide river of humanity which surpassed all expectations and bewildered even the cynics. Long after the truck, with Datta Samant triumphantly atop, had passed on to the main road this river continued to flow uninterrupted.

It was January 18, 1984, and the defeat which was a painful reality was nowhere in sight. The morcha wending its way through Dadar and Parel towards Byculla was like a victory march. When the truck stood at the crest of the Parel flyover I turned back to look at the river of heads submerging the three-lane road and no end was in sight. Spread throughout the one lakh strong procession were self-willed cheer leaders, chanting the praises of Samant and celebrating the determination of the textile workers. S.K.Limaye, who had over five decades of experience in organising labour stood at the end of this river, apart but not aloof. "Unprecedented and remarkable. After all this, so much enthusiasm," Limaye said with a sense of wonder and just a tinge of admiration.

Two years earlier, on a bright spring morning, I had first encountered the anger and superhuman determination of the textile workers in the dark hut of Lata Shelke. Lata's husband, who worked in a nearby textile mill, sat cross-legged on the metal wire bed, which was the only piece of furniture in the one-room home. He talked with emotionally charged conviction about his boycott of the mill where he had spent all his working life. His neighbour, the fiery K.P.Kamble, had walked in and the conversation had soon taken a dramatic turn with his heated, impassioned tirade against the seth log and neta log.

The blood ran hot then. The struggle had just begun. Hatred and contempt for the sangh ran through tens of thousands of workers like an invisible, seemingly invincible, thread uniting them and keeping them firmly entrenched behind the barricades. There was just a touch of romantic adventurism in the atmosphere. The long awaited, bada kranti was at hand. "Let us kill all the big-wigs of old thoughts," shouted Kamble to his friends, neighbours and sympathizers.

With the uniquely stark contrasts of the affluent metropolis of Bombay, where bizarre ostentation thrives on the edges of a vast industrial area of dismal poverty and squalor, Kamble's words carried hair-raising implications. Had time run out? Was the proverbial urban time bomb of rising frustrations ready to explode?

For Kamble and his fellow residents of Sidhartha Nagar, a slum near Worli Naka on the edge of Bombay's principal traffic artery, hitting back at the world outside, as Lata called it, would be easy. There on the six-lane road, zooming by in cars were the targets of the bada kranti. The mill owners were not hated in isolation but as a class. This kranti was intended to overwhelm all perpetrators of injustice – be it the local, mafia-supported MLA<sup>1</sup> or a smug boss of the recognised union who lived in a colony nearby.

I had gone to Sidhartha Nagar that day to study its neighbourhood association and understand its political intent. I came away feeling that I had encountered the edge of a devastating storm. Not only was the political awareness acute but it seemed already in the process of activating latent discontent and frustrations into a super powered force which threatened to sweep away everything in its path. Dramatic, possibly violent, changes seemed imminent. The strike of 2.3 lakh textile workers was to be a cataclysmic event set to alter the lives of millions. There was a sense of living in revolutionary times.

What now seems to have been naive romanticism was justified then by the obviously strong, deep rooted grass root militancy. A great mass movement, an experiment in popular participation was under way. The stage was wide and empty. Anything was possible.

In retrospect the stage appears never to have been empty. The colour and pattern of events as well as the role of various players were pre-determined. There is a danger here of viewing the struggle with religious fatalism. But any element of pre-determination, or the pre-ordained, was due not to supernatural forces beyond the control of men but the inherent characteristics and intent of crucial players in the drama. The greater powers of stage management of some, over others, set the pattern which kept the balance tilted in favour of the former.

In this context, the over 16-month long strike of over two lakh workers in 60 mills, the largest and longest such struggle in India, was subordinated to the fact that the worker's refusal to produce made no difference to the market. The thousands of crores lost by the owners were secondary to their relief and jubilation over the death of those mills which “deserved” to perish. The millions of man days lost were overlooked in the satisfaction of knowing that “surplus” labour had been eliminated without payment of any dues or compensation. The defeat of the strikers was celebrated by mill owners as a victory of their firm resolve in the face of an anarchist assault.

At Shram Shakti Bhavan in Delhi, where the government's labour policy is formulated, the bada kranti that had failed to materialise was seen as a minor skirmish. It was seen as a necessary safety valve device which released pressure and ensured preservation of the status quo. There was added satisfaction in the knowledge that this achievement had been aided by supposed opponents of the status quo. The left central trade unions, who had once proclaimed, this struggle of the textile workers as the Armageddon of the Indian working class, now preferred to play down its importance and significance. The culture of political expediency did not permit them to acknowledge the full dimensions of the struggle, which would compel

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<sup>1</sup> “Member of Legislative Assembly”, that is, someone elected to the State Legislature.



them to confront their role in its eventual failure and the historical implications of this missed opportunity.

For the “burly man of Ghatkopar”<sup>2</sup>, more commonly held responsible for the failure of the struggle, there was escape in rhetoric and the promise of further struggle. For the workers, who actually managed the strike, there was hope in the Doctor's promises. More significant, however, was the heightened perception of the deep foundations of the status quo and a firm conviction that economic demands could never be fully won without first winning the battle on a political front. The more articulate among them were back to seeking alternatives which could mobilize forces to counter criminal and gangster elements in the political and trade union leadership.

The rank and file went back to fighting for a living and looking for ways to get the best out of the status quo, re-establishing links with patrons and benefactors, often even at the cost of their self respect.

At a time when the ruling elite remains isolated from the happenings and voices at the grassroots what does the apparent failure of such a struggle imply? True, the Bombay textile strike was not a “burning issue” like the Punjab or Assam agitations. But it reflected certain basic maladies inherent in the industrial relations machinery and the attendant dilemma of industrial workers. Yet, to view the textile strike purely as a labour-industry dispute is to ignore its full dimensions and implications for the future.

In the realm of trade unions as in politics, there was a perception among the rank and file of having exhausted all options. The people of Sidhartha Nagar were disaffected not only with all political parties and struggling to fill the lacuna in different ways, but they were also exploring every possible avenue in the quest for more representative and competent trade unions. The recognised union having failed to perform its basic function, the workers had tried and found lacking the other established trade unions of different ideological hues. The strike was thus a protest and a reaction, against not just, the “unrepresentative and oppressive” recognised trade union but also the established central trade unions of both left and right which over the last four decades failed to provide adequate solutions to the workers' innumerable problems.

The result was a popular upsurge, managed almost entirely by the workers themselves, and merely spearheaded by Dr. Datta Samant. This popular tendency at the grassroots and its articulation was not limited to Bombay or even to the trade union sphere. It was then a political reality of vast geographical spread in India. That the sporadic activation of this tendency can be swiftly suppressed does not undermine its importance for the future. Whether each show-down builds up to an Armageddon is another matter and not particularly relevant to the task on hand.

It is important to study and understand the attitudes, perceptions, and the role of the different players, especially those whose acts ran contrary to their professed goals and larger aims. Thus, in the context of the textile strike, the role of the left trade unions is of vital importance and offers clues to the major hurdles in the path of more effective articulation of the popular

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<sup>2</sup> Ghatkopar is an eastern suburb of Bombay and then the constituency Dr. Samant represented in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly.

tendency which seeks more representative and just forms of organisation, administration and government.

The strike was widely projected by the government and industry as an extended wildcat strike organised by Dr. Datta Samant with his Mephistophelean abilities to mislead workers by conjuring up images of unrealistic benefits. It is always more convenient and simple to reduce such an issue to a single personality and dismiss it accordingly. But Samant, the man, is different from Samant the phenomenon. That phenomenon did not create the textile strike. The unrest and resultant upsurge among the textile workers were, instead, manifestations of the factors which generated the Samant phenomenon. The textile strike was, in many ways, the inevitable climax of the Samant phenomenon.

The mammoth morcha of January 18, 1984, illustrated that the spark of anger first ignited over two years earlier was still alive and fire simmered just below the surface. But, away from the euphoria of the morchas, had the unprecedentedly long strike been futile or had it prepared ground for the long cherished bada kranti?

## CHAPTER 1: Assessing the Odds

On October 26, 1981, when the first waves of a new excitement were beginning to sweep through the mill area of Bombay, an unsuspecting Purshotam Narayan Samant arrived in Bombay by the morning train from Gwalior. For this slightly built, balding man with sharp eyes it was a home coming. A decade earlier he had left his family behind in Bombay and gone to work as a technical officer at a textile mill in Gwalior.

Now at the age of 51, P.N.Samant had decided to live in Bombay and accept the job he had been offered at Apollo Mills. Before doing that, he was looking forward to a quiet period of rest. While his younger brother Datta had been making headlines and going to prison as the fire-breathing labour leader of the Bombay-Thane industrial belt, P.N., or *Dada* as he soon came to widely be known, had been doing his bit in Gwalior. Diametrically opposite to Datta in his personality and background, *Dada* did however have a closer knowledge of the ways of *mill maliks* (mill owners), trade unions and the working class struggle. Not for the first time in his life *Dada's* active involvement with trade union had got him thrown out of his job.

A veteran trade union worker, P.N.Samant had played an important role in Bombay during the first railway strike of 1960. Displaying the same daring and drive with which his younger brother earned notoriety a decade later, P.N.Samant had quietly slipped through a cordon of armed guards whose job was to prevent strike leaders from getting near the trains which were being operated by non-strikers. Standing on the platform, P.N.Samant made a fiery speech and, for a while, prevented the “black legs”<sup>3</sup> from running the trains. The five-day all-India strike fizzled out without securing any benefits, despite support from employees of the Central Government and the Post and Telegraph Department. In a consequent wave of retaliatory action by the government, P.N.Samant found himself on the street without a job. In the following two decades he worked at various supervisory levels in textile mills and tried with only limited success to avoid union activity.

By 1980 P.N.Samant was working as a technical officer at Jiyajee Rao Cotton Mills, a Birla enterprise in Gwalior, and involved in helping workers fight against the management policy of deducting large portions of the salary as fines. One thing led to another and soon P.N.Samant had formed a union to oppose the recognized union which was affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). A year later Samant had managed to get the fines refunded to the workers but once again he was on the street, without a job. But Samant had maintained his links with the mills in Bombay, where he first worked as a textile technician. Thus, when he had to leave Gwalior there was a job waiting for him at Apollo Mills in Bombay. However, younger brother Datta and his new band of followers had other plans.

Soon after P.N.Samant reached home on October 26, Datta came over for what was not just family or social visit. Dr. Samant had just addressed his first gate meeting of textile workers.

Briefly, *Doctor*, as he was widely called, related the events of the past few days to his brother and described how this had led him to the threshold of the textile industry. Without hearing

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<sup>3</sup> Strike-breakers.

any of the details from Samant or the other union officials and workers who had accompanied him, *Dada* said: “Don't take up textiles, you'll fail miserably.”

Anyone familiar with the history of labour struggles in the Bombay textile mills since the birth of unions, and particularly over the last four decades, would immediately understand why P.N.Samant was so emphatically certain about his brother's imminent failure. Probably the single most significant reason for the senior Samant's scepticism was a knowledge of how the odds have always been firmly stacked against the textile workers and even the strongest upsurge stifled. Consequently it is all the more remarkable that despite seemingly crippling set-backs, the textile workers, “*girni-kamgar*” in Marathi, have repeatedly risen to battle against these odds.

The earliest trade unions in India were formed in the textile industry. The relatively articulate Bombay textile worker was once regarded as the vanguard of the Indian labour movement. But the concept and practice of work stoppage by workers as a mode of protest in Bombay's textile mills predates the formation of unions and any legislation regulating the collective bargaining process. In 1923 the workers themselves set up a union with the encouragement of the Governor of Bombay, Sir George Lloyd. It was called the “*Girni Kamgar Mahamandal*” [“Great Association of Mill-Workers”]. But strikes in the textile mills predated even this union. This was largely due to the tradition of indigenous shop-floor level organisation among the workers. Despite the Mill Owners Association's (MOA) firm policy to dismiss any worker who struck work, intimidated other workers or conspired with them in the factory, the workers continued to collect in unions and assert themselves. V.B.Karnik noted in his book *Strikes in India*: “If in spite of all this opposition and threats of dire consequences, workers resorted to strikes it only shows how unbearable the conditions must have been which compelled them to take recourse to that step.”

There is no complete record of the total number of work stoppages that have occurred in the mills but the first prolonged general strike in the Bombay textile mills took place in 1928. Led by the then budding young communist trade unionist S.A.Dange, the strike lasted six months. This record remained unbroken till the 1982 strike. Earlier in 1924, there had been a two month long strike on the bonus issue, which had failed. There was another work stoppage in 1925 but that was more of a lock-out than a strike. In that case the mill owners, in an effort to have a certain excise duty abolished, imposed an 11.5% wage cut and refused to withdraw it till the government conceded the industry's demands. When the government agreed to abolish the excise duty the mill owners withdrew the wage cut and workers returned to the mills.

Shortly after this, in 1926, the Bombay Textile Labour Union was established under the leadership of N.M.Joshi. Though N.M.Joshi's BTLU was the first city-wide union, it was dominated by moderates and did not truly reflect, or articulate, the innate radical character of the textile workers. Even the communists, when they first entered the textile industry, found themselves overwhelmed by the worker's own initiative. “The strike was not our creation, but we were the creation of the strike. An organisation had not brought about the general strike of 1928, but the strike had brought forth an organisation”<sup>4</sup> S.A.Dange told the court during his trial in the Meerut Conspiracy case in 1931. In more ways than one the 1982 strike seemed to repeat history. In both cases the strike was total. Both times the mill owners categorically refused to negotiate with the “upstarts”. In 1928 it was the communists and in 1982 it was Datta Samant, who were regarded as a deadly menace.

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<sup>4</sup> S.A.Dange, *Selected works* (3)

Even in 1926 the seventeen demands put forward by the joint strike committee were flatly rejected by the MOA<sup>5</sup>. In both strikes, separated by half a century, the differences between the two sides were too wide to be bridged and large quantities of unsold stocks made the mill owners more determined to hold firm. But the 1928 strike ended more amicably than the 1982 strike. The basic issues in 1928 were the lowering of wages and a rationalisation scheme. Finally, the mill owners agreed not to extend the rationalisation to new mills, to undo the wage cuts and submit the union's charter of demands to a commission of enquiry. The communists, who had just entered the textile industry with their Girni Kamgar Union, held daily meetings during the strike and thus gathered strength. Apart from providing information about the latest developments in the strike these meetings educated workers on the theory and history of the working class struggle. Thus, G.K.Lieten writes: "The GKU had become a powerful workers-based body and became within a few months after the strike, the only effective union left in the field... the most distinct feature was the sense of unity and self-control it generated among the workers". At a demonstration held the day after the strike ended, workers pledged to prepare for a well organised strike in the future. This sense of victory and jubilation was not lost on the mill owners.

The owner of Bombay Dyeing, Ness Wadia, wrote to Dange: "Men are to be advised that they must give up their idea that they are masters in the mills... (mill owners have) once and for all determined that we will exact discipline and stop the men going on lightning strikes."<sup>6</sup> In pursuance of this policy, mill owners prohibited labour union officials and their agents from entering the mill compounds and gradually an atmosphere of confrontation was generated. The dismissal of a mill committee member in Wadia's Spring Mill finally triggered off another strike in April 1929. According to Karnik this strike "was provoked by mill owners in order to give a crippling blow to the GKU"<sup>7</sup>

The ensuing course of events followed a pattern which was to be repeated over the next few decades. The mill owners withheld wages of the last month that the workers had been in the mills prior to the strike. New hands were recruited to frighten the striking workers who were then cornered into making the difficult choice between class interest and individual interest. But the most significant factor, which would remain common to such struggles over the next half century and find its high point in 1982, was the role of the Congress party. Lieten writes: "More important therefore in the final unsuccessful petering out of the strike was the massive repression and attitude of the Congress and the Indian bourgeoisie."<sup>8</sup> Just as in 1982-83 the mill owners and supportive political leaders would call for a war on the Samant menace as the main issue of the strike, ignoring the demands and true issues involved, in 1929 the political elite supported actions taken by the MOA to cope with the communist "menace."<sup>9</sup>

The strategy of this segment was to treat the strike not as a genuine industrial dispute but as a power-grabbing tactic of the communists in 1929, and Samant half a century later. With the GKU membership exceeding the Congress party's membership in Bombay city by almost 500% the Congress finally set up a textile union in an attempt to counter the influence of the communists. Thus Lieten concludes that the Congress: "was bent on, and to a great extent

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<sup>5</sup> "The Bombay Textile Strike of 1929" by George K.Lieten; *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*; **Annual** Number April 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Lieten.

<sup>7</sup> V.B.Karnik quoted in Lieten's article.

<sup>8</sup> Lieten.

<sup>9</sup> Lieten.

succeeded in beating back the advance of the independent working class movement of which the 1929 textile mill strike was the culmination.”<sup>10</sup>

After 1929 the textile unions remained weak. Dick Kooiman wrote in the *Economic and Political Weekly*: “without shared economic grievances the workers' strike actions reverted to their traditional and particularistic character. On the Communist side, existing organisations broke up and ideological hair splitting led to further disruptions.”<sup>11</sup> Several competing groups attempted to unite the workers and call for a strike but none were successful until 1933-34 when the mill owners imposed large-scale wage reductions. A united front of several left-wing labour politicians, even from the Congress and Socialist fold, called for a strike. But the 1934 strike failed and the temporary united front of the left wing leaders did not result in lasting solidarity.

However, the mill owner's and the government's efforts to control even the scattered communists and other “disruptive” elements in the textile trade unions continued. In 1934 the Bombay Trade Disputes Conciliation bill was submitted to the Bombay Legislative Council. R.D.Bell, general and home member said in the council: “I wish to make it quite clear that this is not a covert effort on the part of the government, it is a perfectly open effort, it is a deliberate attempt on the part of government to exclude these extremist labour leaders and communists from intermeddling in the affairs of the textile industry of Bombay city.”<sup>12</sup> Subsequently the number and duration of strikes till 1940 was lower than in the 1920s and most struggles were lost by the workers. Thus Kooiman concludes: “By the 1934 Act the government aimed at giving statutory regulations for labour interests to be represented by certified spokesmen and labour disputes to be fought out within officially prescribed limits.” Just how closely the show came to be managed by the government is illustrated in the role of the labour officer who was appointed under this act and “appropriated duties that rightfully belonged to the trade union. Unions that sought his assistance in getting the workers' grievances redressed soon discovered that his embrace was a deadly one despised as a government union, the workers left it. But a union that fought him (labour officer) with all its might, like the GKU hardly fared any better. The labour officer proved much better qualified to negotiate with the employers and to settle disputes in favour of the workers preventing the union from building strength... To sum up, the labour officer was more successful in undermining the new leaders (unionists) than in eliminating the old ones (jobbers). The result was retardation in the growth of an organised working class movement which, at least in the case of the communist unions, was the explicit intention of the government.”<sup>13</sup>

The stage was thus set for the enactment of the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act (BID Act) of 1938 which further sought to control the militant element, especially as represented by the communist led unions, and for all practical purposes outlawed strikes. It also represented the growing trade union aspirations of the Indian National Congress which was in turn supported by the industrialists. Despite the communists' exhortations to all trade unions to boycott the Act, the workers made ample use of its machinery of conciliation and settlement. Four years later the Congress rose to its peak with the Quit India Movement while the communists suffered a fatal set-back due to their decision to support the British war effort. This considerably diminished their following in the textile mills. The Congress, making the most

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<sup>10</sup> Lieten.

<sup>11</sup> “Labour Legislation and Working Class Movement - Case of the Bombay Labour Office, 1934-37”, by Dick Kooiman; *EPW*; Special Number.

<sup>12</sup> Kooiman.

<sup>13</sup> Kooiman.

of this opportunity set up its own textile union, the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS) in 1945.

Under the BID Act the RMMS, with the status of approved union had access to official records inside the mills which gave it an advantage over the communists, who were left picketing outside the mill gates.<sup>14</sup> The BID Act was a comfortable arrangement for the mill owners and the government since it ensured peaceful and cordial handling of “labour problems” It thus became necessary to preserve this status quo. The result was the Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act of 1946<sup>15</sup> which bore all the essential features of the BID Act but went a step further and made the recognised union the sole bargaining agent thus giving the RMMS monopoly control over the textile workers. Recognition was to be determined not by secret ballot but by membership dues, to be examined by the Registrar of Unions with vast discretionary powers in the final decision. It created a legal structure whereby the only possible legal strike would have to be called after the failure of conciliation but before the matter was referred to adjudication. A failure to follow the prescribed procedure would lead to automatic derecognition of the recognised union.

As the workers emerged from the Congress sway after 1945, the socialist trade unions gathered strength in Bombay and workers responded to their call for organisation on a class basis. The Mill Mazdoor Sabha, an affiliate of the central trade union Hind Mazdoor Sabha, was formed and in 1950 called a strike under the leadership of Ashok Mehta. The two-month long strike was based on the bonus issue and proved unsuccessful. The police opened fire and lathi-charged workers offering satyagraha on several occasions and 12 workers died in this struggle.

Ashok Mehta, who in 1982 was a retired man living at a rose farm in the outskirts of Delhi, recalled the strike with regret and unhappiness. “One should not launch a strike unless one knows how to get out of it, but I am a great democrat and the workers insisted on a strike. The workers remained in the city, didn't go to their villages and the strike went off well but there was no way of winding it up with some gains”. Though bonus was the principle issue, like most struggles of the textile workers this strike followed a course set by the prevalent political forces. Mehta believes that the upcoming first general election was a major consideration in the government's firm refusal to settle the strike with any credit or benefits going to the Socialists.

“The Congress was not willing to strengthen our hands, so the strike didn't succeed. It was not a strike launched for a show of strength. It was a democratic decision of the workers and my failure was in not having sufficient workers trained enough to know how to launch a strike, run it and call it off. After that, some of my key workers went back to the communists and some retired and returned to the villages. They were a fine group of workers but their immaturity and mine led to these mistakes.” Among the mistakes which Mehta recalls was the failure to give priority to the question of recognition. Though it was one of the issues, Mehta says that to the younger leadership it was not the paramount issue. In retrospect Mehta would come to consider this a grave error and believe that if they had persevered, the government would have found it awkward to deny recognition.

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<sup>14</sup> “The Tenth Month – Bombay's Historic Textile Strike”, Factsheet 1, Centre for Education and Documentation.

<sup>15</sup> For further details refer to “The Tenth Month – a Fact Sheet of the Centre for Education & Documentation”, Bombay.

This strike exposed a fundamental flaw in the BIR Act which gives certain rights to the “representative” union without providing a sound basis for determining recognition. From the perspective of the government this could not be construed a “flaw”, for the Act was moulded to ensure continued power to the RMMS. It could be argued that if this were the case, why had the Congress governments allowed unions in other BIR regulated industries, such as BEST, to successfully challenge the recognized union? But none of the other industries were considered a strategic sector like the textile mills. The general attitude and policy was such that the Bombay High Court, in 1950, turned down a plea by striking workers that their fundamental right was being violated by the order prohibiting them from picketing at mill gates. The High Court rejected this on the grounds that the fundamental rights of loyal workers were violated by picketing. In *Strikes in India*, V.B.Karnik described the BIR Act as “the most advanced piece of legislation on industrial relations. Apart from creating an elaborate machinery for the settlement of industrial disputes it also established Labour Courts to deal with individual grievances and breaches of awards, agreements and usages. It also created representative and approved unions which were given certain powers including the power to collect union dues and post notices. The most important feature of the Act was that unions were made the sole bargaining agents in the local area. Under this Act employers were also compelled to follow the course of conciliation and arbitration before making changes in working conditions. Many features the BIR Act were later incorporated in the industrial Disputes Act<sup>16</sup> of 1947.”

But the greatest fallacy of the BIR Act was that under its provisions there was almost no way that workers could go on a legal strike. A legal strike can be called only when the government falls to refer a dispute to an industrial Court or Wage Board. Noted Karnik: “The declared intention of the Act was to obviate strikes”.

It was with this letter of the law in mind that MOA Chairman Hareshchandra Maganlal could say that: “The industrial peace and harmony witnessed by our industry has been largely due to the BIR Act which, through the instrumentality of a representative union, has been facilitating collective bargaining arrangements on behalf of all the workmen in the industry.”<sup>17</sup>

In making this statement Maganlal was ignoring historical facts. There has been at least one major strike in the textile mills every decade and brief work stoppages on the bonus issue are an annual affair. In keeping the recognized and pliable union in power the BIR Act has created only an illusion, on paper, of “industrial peace”. It is the instrument used to curb any workers' organisation, internal or external, which arises to challenge the RMMS.

In retrospect the 1950 strike also seems to have followed a pattern which repeats itself with macabre regularity. Frustrated workers flock to a union to fight the RMMS, the Congress party adopts its ever rigid stand<sup>18</sup> and the most heroic of struggles is stifled. According to Karnik, the 1950 strike illustrated that a strike could not get a law changed. Perhaps this is what influenced the left trade unions to try a different strategy next time. In 1956 the opposition parties united on the Samayukta Maharashtra issue and were supported in their fight by the textile workers, 105 of whom died fighting for the cause. In 1960 this united force

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<sup>16</sup> A Central legislation.

<sup>17</sup> Speech by H.Manganlal, Chairman of the Mill Owners Association (MOA) at the MOA's 107<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting on 23rd July, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> The Congress was historically committed to a position supportive of the mill owners. In 1931 Dange recorded the “negative” role played by the Indian National Congress and Gandhi in the first major textile strike in 1928.



came together under the banner of the Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union and began an enrolment drive which was received by the workers with overwhelming enthusiasm.

The front which included the CPI, the Socialist Party, the Republican Party of India, the Peasants and Workers Party and the Lal Nishan Paksha launched a major drive to win recognition. Without calling a strike this front began collecting membership fees outside the mill gates even though the RMMS continued to collect its pauvti, perforce, from workers inside the mills. After collecting proof of a sufficient membership the united group filed an application for recognition before the Labour Commissioner. To the surprise of the mill owners and the government the Commissioner ruled in favour of the Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union. This was subsequently challenged in the industrial court, by the RMMS. The MGKU eventually lost the case in appeal.

By 1962, only the communists and the Lal Nishan remained in the MGKU and in 1968 even Lal Nishan left to form the Kapad Kamgar Sangathana. The communists, by then, had begun to once again lose their hold. In 1966 Dange had called a strike and withdrawn it after 12 days on an assurance of a fair deal, from Chief Minister Vasant Rao Naik. The socialists, namely S.M.Joshi and George Fernandes from the outset attacked this strike as “unnecessary, frivolous and bogus.” The strike was called off on the Chief Minister's assurance that the government would “make the employers pay bonus for 1964 expeditiously... oppose the employer's demand submitted to the industrial court for reduction in dearness allowance, see that no worker is victimised because of the strike and the question of women and *badli* workers would be settled through further negotiations.”

The communists published a pamphlet to hail their own achievement and criticised “pseudo-friends and enemies” of the workers who had denounced the strike and its withdrawal. But the strike in fact did not get any of the benefits the communists then claimed it would. Yashwant Chavan, of the Lal Nishan which was still with the MGKU at the time and was a party to the decision to withdraw the 1966 strike, now says that the workers got nothing out of that strike. A period of further disintegration in the left trade unions followed and in 1970 the split in the communist party created CITU which established its own Lal Bauta Union among textile workers. The 42-day strike of 1974 was thus led largely by Dange. Dange lost what little hold he had, when he abruptly called off the strike at a time when other trade unions were preparing a one day token strike in support of the textile workers. The workers, who were clamouring for certain basic changes were deeply disappointed and years later remembered this as Dange's “betrayal of 1974”. The Rs. 4 per month wage increase gained by that strike was remembered as an insult to the workers solidarity and their 42-day struggle.

This left the field open for a variety of trade unions to make inroads into the textile mills and in 1979 the Hind Mazdoor Sabha tried to re-establish itself by forming the Girni Kamgar Sabha (GKS). The threatened indefinite strike did not however materialise because George Fernandes, as Union Industries Minister, arrived at a settlement through Chief Minister Sharad Pawar that the mill owners would give a Rs. 42 monthly increase to the workers.

As the union supported by the ruling party (Janata), the Girni Kamgar Sabha accepted the award and opposed further agitation on the grounds that their demands had been met. Since all the basic issues had been side-tracked, the Sarva Shramik Sangh opposed this agreement and decided that a major agitation was needed to press for basic demands such as change in the D.A. and derecognition of RMMS, scrapping of the BIR Act etc. Yashwant Chavan, recognizing that the discontent already had deep roots, set about working among the girni

kamgar in anticipation of a major show down. The Shramik workers, as the Sarva Shramik Sangh activists are popularly known, had no illusions about a grand campaign that would make sweeping gains. They were acting on the fundamental premise that to wrest any rights and benefits from the mill owners for the textile workers, a constant and periodically intensified struggle was required. Dange, for all his other differences with the Shramik group, held a similar view. He said in late 1983: "The textile workers have the experience to know that unless every once in a while they struggle in a very hard way and determined way the backlog of demands is never settled. That's why you find in Bombay, every two or three years, one general strike."

The older workers, conscious of how heavily the odds are stacked against them, accept the inevitability of defeat as well as the need to struggle as being in itself, a means of survival. Veteran trade unionists similarly acknowledge that the textile workers' situation is symptomatic of the working class' position within the current status quo and cannot be significantly altered without a major political upheaval. In the words of Lenin: "The spontaneous working-class movement is trade unionism... and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie."<sup>19</sup>

But P.N.Samant was not thinking of Lenin's writings when he warned his brother about the fatal trap a struggle in the textile mills could prove to be. Dada was probably not even thinking about the working class struggle or the prospects for textile workers in the near future. Dada was thinking of Samant. "You will fail miserably", he had told his younger brother. Having a historical perspective of struggles in the textile industry, Dada was not only aware of how and why the odds were against the workers but he was also familiar with Samant's trade union background. What Samant probably feared silently, Dada was quick to articulate. The tactics and strategies which worked wonders in the capital-intensive multi-national industrial belt of Thane Belapur, would not necessarily have similar effects in this archaic industry with even more outdated labour laws.

But to most of the valiant soldiers collecting behind the battle lines, these arguments were either alien or irrelevant. Any awareness of how heavily the odds were stacked against them was relegated to the background. Like Shelke, Kamble and their neighbours in Sidhartha Nagar, most of whom were textile workers, a quarter of a million men and women made ready to charge on to the battle field. The soft smile on Lata Shelke's face belied the strength of her personality. Remarkably young and attractive for a mother of five children, Lata seemed to do more than echo what was said around her. She did not share the fiery militancy of Kamble but displayed a quiet determination of her own and articulately explained why she stood behind her husband in his decision to strike. "There comes a time" Lata would say, "when you just have to fight (ladnaihich padega)". Devoid of any ideological inculcation or formal education, Lata had nevertheless a heightened sense of class consciousness and dealt with the strike from this perspective. Shelke's decision not to go to work thus became a fight not just against the owners of his mill and the recognized union but against the whole order which these institutions represented. No matter how overwhelming that world had seemed from her hut in Sidhartha Nagar or from the kitchen of the seth Log for whom she once cooked, it seemed conquerable with the united strength of over two and half lakh kamgar Log (working class people). Far away from the impersonal and statistics dominated world of those who would set the odds of this battle, Lata was on the threshold of an intense personal experience. The inner resources she would draw upon through the trying times ahead

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<sup>19</sup> *Lenin on Trade Unions*, Progress Publishers.

emanated not from any ideology or strategy but from an almost emotional conviction which grew out of her own perceptions of life over the two decades she had been married to a *girni kamgar*.

On the other hand, when P.N.Samant predicted doom for Samant on the textile front he spoke with the knowledge of history. But nothing in his experience or ideological training had prepared him for the force which hundreds of Latas would constitute. "Doctor", as Samant was commonly called by workers and union associates, was too euphoric about the response he was receiving from textile workers to heed his elder brother's advise. He had seen the grit writ large on the thousands of faces looking up at him as he spoke to them for the first time. His juniors, who had been meeting textile workers for several weeks to gauge their mood, further confirmed what Samant saw before him. There was no going back, he told his Dada. He had given his word to the workers that he would be "taking the mills". Dada's words of caution were countered by Samant's demand that the elder brother forget about his new job at Apollo Mills and take his rightful place on the other side of the barricades. For better or worse, the Armageddon of Samant's life and that of 2.5 lakh workers who had chosen to put him at the head of their march had begun.

## CHAPTER 2: Why Samant?

On October 20th, five days before P.N.Samant's arrival in Bombay, the city's textile workers had observed a sit down strike. The day before that, on October 19<sup>th</sup>, the Bombay Mill owners Association (MOA) had announced a bonus of 17.33% and less for different mills.<sup>20</sup> Even the RMMS had promised to get the workers 20% bonus that year but it maintained a characteristic silence on the announcement of a 17.33% bonus. It was the CPI-affiliated Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union which quickly issued the threat of an indefinite general strike. Thus Ankush Sitaram Salaskar found himself virtually gheraoed by fellow workers on October 20 when he entered the folding department of Standard Mills where he'd worked for over two decades. Though Salaskar had followed his mentor S.A.Dange out of the CPI when the latter had walked out in 1981, the workers still identified Salaskar as a CPI man.<sup>21</sup> What was Salaskar going to do about the low bonus, workers asked that morning? The sharp-eyed Salaskar, who had spent much of his working life waving red flags at the mill gates, had just begun to announce plans for a one day token strike when the head of the department arrived on the scene. Probably unaware of the already volatile atmosphere, the officer made the mistake of commanding workers to clean up because the seth was coming for an inspection. "If he does not pay proper bonus there will be no cleaning, folding, or any other work," Salaskar shouted. Spontaneously and immediately the workers began chanting: "bandh, bandh, bandh ...". The pebble that would trigger off a landslide had moved out of place and started rolling down-hill.

The emotionally charged and agitated folding department workers, led by Salaskar, marched to the finishing department where more workers enthusiastically joined what soon became a morcha through the mill compound. Wending its way through all the departments, gradually gathering strength, the entire work force of the morning shift, gathered outside the manager's office and sat there in a dharna. The seriousness of the workers' intention was reflected in the way they shut down their respective departments. The machines were not simply abandoned. The workers, under strict instructions from Salaskar and others not to damage machines, carefully covered them with cloth and left with a determination not to return empty handed.

At the back of these workers' mind was an agreement recently made between the management and workers of "Empire Dyeing", a textile processing unit. Dr. Samant had won handsome gains of Rs.200 per month for the workers of the unit and hopes had soared in the *chawls* and *kholis* of textile workers all over the city. Salaskar had sensed the arrival of the Samant wave in the mills. The rank and file, for whom Samant was a giant with messianic and magical qualities, were convinced that only Doctor could do anything for them. But they were curious to know the reaction of a Lal Bauvta man, like Salaskar, to the possible entry of Samant into the textile mills. Salaskar, whose opinion carried weight, chose his words carefully and said to any worker who asked him: "Doctor is a big leader who never retreats without getting demands met. We must think well about this and be prepared (to strike) for over six months.

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<sup>20</sup> Under the agreement arrived at between the MOA and the RMMS, nine mills were to pay 17.33%, four mills 1.5%, three mills 14.5%, one mill 14%, with the remaining paying between the statutory minimum bonus of 8.33% and 12.5%.

<sup>21</sup> "The Datta Samant Phenomenon", by Sundeep Pendse; *EPW*, April 18 and 25, 1981.

So you must decide if you can survive and tolerate this. But if you want it I will be at the forefront of calling Samant.”

When the manager of Standard Mills refused to even acknowledge the dharna outside his office, and did not talk to the workers all day, their determination was further strengthened. But the leaders of different unions inside the mill, which included the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sabha affiliate and the Shiv Sena union, decided by consensus that pending the adoption of an agitational strategy, workers should return to work the next day. The next morning the manager finally addressed the workers and said the matter of bonus was out of his control and the owner, who could answer their questions, was out of town. Salaskar was taking his weekly off that day and had spent the morning on some personal errands. When he returned home at about 10.30 a.m. some of his fellow workers were waiting there to inform him that work at the mill had not been resumed, as decided by the union leaders at the mill, and that some workers were on their way to Dr. Samant's office in Ghatkopar.

Salaskar rushed to the mill to find that the manager had agreed to meet a delegation of union leaders. Since the manager's basic position on the bonus remained unchanged, Salaskar came to the point and told him that workers were already headed for Samant in a morcha. The Manager's response to what he perceived as a threat was predictable. Let them go to Doctor or anyone else, the manager said, there will be no increase in the bonus. By the time the delegation came out of its futile meeting with the manager, the workers had returned from Ghatkopar to tell their comrades that the Doctor had been out but Vanita bhabhi, Samant's wife who was then a Congress(I) Municipal Corporator, had asked them to return at night. So a second party made ready to set out for Ghatkopar, and this time they were insistent on taking Salaskar along. They may not have been certain of his ideological position on Samant but they trusted and relied on his long experience as a local leader. Salaskar's credibility as a fierce agitator was unquestioned and he felt obliged to explain the full implications of their move. To the gathering of eager young faces, most of them badli workers, Salaskar had this to say: “You must fight for a year, or even two, so think deeply about it. I'll be there with you all the way. But let it not be as in the past when I stood at the mill gate with a red flag and you pushed me aside to go in”.

With promises to unitedly face the *agni pareeksha* (trial by fire), the workers arrived at the cottage like structure at Pant Nagar in Ghatkopar. What was once Dr. Samant's dispensary, had been converted to serve as both his home and union office. A tiny room was set aside, from the small house, as Samant's office. Over the years the room had been endowed with an air-conditioner and a glass spring door, both contributed by workers. The door opened on to a covered patio where workers gathered while waiting to meet Doctor. Just outside the door sat Samant's steno-typist. At the inner end of the patio, next to P.N.Samant's desk, stood busts of Gandhi and Kasturba. On the wall behind the statues were pictures of Nehru and Indira Gandhi, remnants of Samant's INTUC days. When asked why he had continued to let the portrait of Indira hang there Samant would laugh and reply, “She is the country's Prime Minister, isn't she?”

When the Standard Mill workers arrived Samant was not in. He came five hours later and repeated to the workers more or less what Salaskar had told them all day and went an unexpected step further. He reached for the phone on his narrow semicircular desk and called Vasant Hoshing and Bhai Bhosle, the RMMS leaders. Samant planned to tell the men, who were once fellow INTUC associates, that they should talk to these workers and provide for their needs. But neither Hoshing nor Bhosale was at home and Doctor left messages that they

should call him. Samant would have then sent the workers away with the prediction that they would starve and lose their jobs if they stuck with him, when Salaskar intervened. "Doctor, these people love you," Salaskar said, "we've come the second time in one day. It is the desire of the mazdoor bhai that you come and save us from the atrocities of the RMMS." Though accustomed to being treated as a hero and hearing such pleas from local leaders of workers in a vast variety of industrial units, Samant now looked more closely at the man leading this unprecedented delegation from the nerve centre of Bombay industry.

"Haven't we met before?" Samant asked Salaskar. Salaskar smiled and reminded Samant that they were lathi-charged together ten years ago. This brought back memories to Salaskar of a time when Samant was a minor leader, not a hero yet, and they had been comrades in arms for a brief period. Those were the days when Samant was still more of a doctor than a union leader – an organiser more than an agitator. How far this burly, smiling, young man from a small village in Ratnagiri, had travelled. How did the son of a low income farmer in the coastal village of Deobagh near the town of Malwan, who came to Bombay only to be a doctor, wind up with the image of a workers messiah and trade union "goon"? Why were over 2 lakh textile workers, for decades regarded as the vanguard of the Indian working class, willing and eager to place their hopes and aspirations in his hands? As a young man just out of school, Datta Samant had been described by, his own family as a "negligent fellow with no alms". He came to Bombay in defiance of his father and managed to put himself through medical college, with some financial assistance from a charitable institution of his community. Samant's description of his early days in the metropolis was interestingly similar to the stories an equally fiery George Fernandes had told journalists a decade earlier. For in 1979 Samant told a reporter from Sunday magazine: "Those were difficult days for me. I used to go without food on many days. I saw people living on footpaths. People, many with ill-gotten wealth, were living in great luxury and hard-working and innocent workers were leading an animal existence. Till now I have not been able to get reconciled to these gross disparities".

While the same experience led George Fernandes into the fold of socialist trade unions and eventually party politics, Samant continued down the conventional path for a longer while and remained a physician. But Samant was never just a physician. Long before he began organising the quarry workers, who were almost bonded labourers, Samant was fighting for slum dwellers and residents of the Housing Board around his dispensary in Ghatkopar in: the early 1960s. From here Samant would walk two miles in the hot sun to the Asalpha slum village where he attended to sick people and organised residents against the slum lords. He went from chawl to chawl organising committees of residents and helping them to find out the standard rent which he then arranged to deposit in court. This naturally earned him enemies. P.N.Samant recalls that Dr. Samant's popularity first began to grow when a local Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee official filed a false criminal case against him alleging that Samant had thrown the Congressman's Gandhi cap from his head and tried to assault him. The grounds for an image of violent goondaism which was later to gather monstrous proportions, thus began to be prepared. The seeds of a reputation as an irreverent disrupter of the status quo had been sowed. During the 1961 war with China Vadilal Gandhi, a veteran Congress MLA, had called a meeting of citizens in the Ghatkopar area to collect funds for the war effort. Though no representative of the Housing Board tenants was invited, Samant turned up at the meeting determined to represent the tenants. Having managed to get himself on stage Samant launched a frontal attack on Vadilal telling the gathering how the Congressman had made lakhs in the last one week alone, as the biggest hoarder of kerosene, and was now donating Rs. 25,000 of his black money to the war effort. The infuriated Vadilal who was also

a member of the Housing Board then issued a show cause notice to Samant demanding to know why his tenancy the dispensary should not be revoked. Acharya Atre promptly published this sequence of events in his Sangh Maratha and laid a part of the foundations on which the edifice of popular strength would later be built.

Through his involvement with the Housing Board residents of Ghatkopar, Samant came into contact with the quarry workers of Powai and Chandivili who worked for 12 hours a day and earned only about Rs.2 or Rs.3 daily. Samant formed the Maharashtra Khan Kamgar Union and despite brutal attacks from goondas, organised the workers and led them through a 40-day lock-out in about 50 quarries. Eventually the quarry workers' wages went up 10, an average of Rs.30 per day. It was the support of these workers and the Housing Board residents, of whose association he had become president as early as 1961, that Samant was elected to the Maharashtra Assembly in 1967.

In 1966 George Fernandes approached Samant with the offer of a Socialist Party ticket in the assembly elections. Samant, who by then was also a well-to-do car-owning physician accepted the offer of support but stood for elections as an independent.

He fought the election with his own money and contributions from Housing Board residents, according to P.N.Samant. A decade and a half later Fernandes would deny that he played any significant role in the creation of Samant who in late 1981 seemed like a giant and near-mythical hero. Fernandes would only recall Samant's good work among the quarry workers where his (Fernandes') own Bombay Labour Union was active and of the long dialogue it took to persuade Samant to join the socialists. Samant went into the election expecting defeat but emerged victorious with a margin of 14,000 votes. Acharya Atre's publicity had gone a long way to building his popularity. Now the Congressmen were sitting up and taking a closer look at this young leader from Ghatkopar.

Rising with this popular base Samant won the support of workers in the Godrej factory at Vikhroli. By 1971 the workers elected Samant their leader in place of Prabhakar Kunte and Tooshar Pawar of INTUC. Just as he began to get caught in this whirlwind of activity in 1971, he wrote to his dada in Gwalior telling him about the growing trade union work. P.N.Samant wrote back with the advice that Datta should abandon trade unions while he could or he would have to give up his medical practise, and have little time left to himself. "Trade unions," P.N. wrote, "are worse than politics and you can serve the nation in many other ways." But Samant had already come too far to revert to being just a physician. By 1971 Y.B. Chavan himself was wooing Samant towards the Congress with the offer of an election ticket. Having taken over the INTUC affiliated Association of Engineering Workers, Samant accepted the offer and joined the Congress at a large public meeting in the presence of Chavari. With the support of the ruling party at the state and centre behind him, together with an ace legal brain and political tactician like Rajni Patel to fight for him, Samant was all set to rise as a promising trade union leader of the INTUC fold. But a different role was in store for him. Notoriety first came with the violent riot at the Godrej plant in Vikhroli in 1972, which left several dead.

In September that year Samant's Association of Engineering Workers was in conflict with the Shiv Sena at that Godrej plant. Gadegaonkar, a Shiv Sena worker, had allegedly been attacked by Samant's men and so Shiv Sena leader, Manohar Joshi came to see him on the company ground where the workers lived. At the same time workers were coming out of the factory after the day's work, and on hearing of Joshi's presence many gathered outside the house he

was visiting. Despite police efforts to disperse the crowd it continued to grow. At this point, according to P.N.Samant, one of Samant's supporters was beaten up by the police in full view of the workers. This incensed Samant's supporters and soon violence erupted between workers and police, and among the workers themselves. The situation was further aggravated by a sub inspector who charged into the crowd with a gun in his hand. When it was all over this police officer, along with a police wireless operator and several others lay dead. The police officer who died was a nephew of Shalinitai Patil, even then an ambitious Congress woman and wife of Vasantdada Patil. Exactly a decade later the same Shalinitai was a major political personality in her own right and her husband was the Chief Minister who adopted a hard line against Samant that helped to finally break a textile strike of unprecedented length.

Amid the public outcry which followed the Vikhroli riot, Samant was arrested and denied bail. Though the incident identified him, among Bombay's middle class, as “dangerous” and “menacing”, it also went a long way to further boost his rising popularity among the workers. Sandeep Pendse noted in his analysis of the Samant phenomenon: “The responsibility for the violence (at the Vikhroli riot) was sought to be pinned on Samant and his followers. In a great show of unity, the workers of north east Bombay launched an agitation against the government's policies of intimidation and terrorism. The communist-led unions were the leading sponsors of this action. The Shiv Sena had been opposed before, but this was an incident of great significance in which its terror had been fought back vehemently and it (Shiv Sena) had been at the receiving end.”

After his release from jail Samant rapidly increased his trade union base as workers who sought to challenge established unions flocked to him. For the next one decade Samant consolidated this image of militant heroism among the workers and along with the support, or at times just acquiescence, of the government he soared to heights unknown to any individual trade unionist anywhere in India. By the mid-70's Samant claimed to have the support of over 3 lakh workers. This made him an anathema to the industrialists and a “problem” of gigantic proportions for the authorities. In spite of being a Congress MLA, Samant was jailed under MISA during the Emergency along with other trade unionists and opposition leaders. At a time when labour unrest was being dealt with by rough and ready means the INTUC concentrated on legal procedures and negotiations. In this context Samant was an embarrassment that could be conveniently handled during the Emergency when no questions could be asked publicly. In 1977, when the Emergency ended, Samant was released from jail and INTUC policy was dramatically reversed following the defeat of the Congress(I) in the Lok Sabha general elections. INTUC leaders no longer resisted the workers' militant mood and struggles. Pendse suggests that the Congress was perhaps at this stage “in favour of destabilizing the economic and political balance.”<sup>22</sup> Thus Samant was allowed to come back into full form with a vengeance. Writes Pendse; “For the INTUC, Samant was a very useful second string to the bow. In numerous ways, including probably control of industrialists, he was vital in a phase when worker militancy was threatening to become generalised and political power was not stabilized”

But a force like Samant could not be contained at will, or by command. By 1979 any utility Samant may have had for INTUC was lost when he became a liability for the central trade union's relations with industrialists. Early in January 1979 N.P.Godrej, his daughter-in-Law and her mother were stabbed by a worker in their home within hours of a Godrej workers meeting where Samant had made an allegedly inflammatory speech exhorting the workers to

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<sup>22</sup> Pendse.



violence. Samant was arrested and accused of attempted murder (he was eventually acquitted by the Bombay High Court in this case). Industrialists went in delegations to the Chief Minister demanding immediate action to improve the industrial relations situation in the state and curb elements like Samant. Thus the INTUC and Congress party policy towards Samant underwent a dramatic reversal. This was obvious when later that year the Congress(I) refused Samant a ticket for the Lok Sabha election, despite intensive efforts by him, due to direct pressure from industrialists. January 1980 the Congress(I) came to power with an overwhelming majority in the Lok Sabha. Soon after that, in April, Samant's Association of Engineering Workers was disaffiliated by the INTUC. Though there had been constant criticism of Samant's militant style the actual reason given for disaffiliation was non-payment of subscription by Samant to the central body. This did not alter Samant's course and by mid-1980, when the Congress(I) also won the State Assembly elections in Maharashtra, he was identified as the single most potent threat to the industrial peace of Maharashtra and possibly even Gujarat. In anticipation of Samant's arrival on their territory the Gujarat government issued instructions preventing his entry into the state.

The mounting tension culminated in Samant's arrest under the National Security Act in June 1981. He was picked up, on orders from the Police Commissioner of Thane, as he approached Shivaji Park to address a workers' rally. Rajni Patel, the eminent lawyer and one-time Congress power lord, defended Samant. Patel had fallen out with Mrs. Gandhi after 1977 and stayed out of the Congress(I) after it returned to power in 1980. He was in London undergoing medical treatment at the time of Samant's arrest and flew back just to handle the case.

Patel made a convincing case before the Bombay High Court to show that the Government had no evidence to back up the allegations, against Samant, of involvement in several violent incidents between 1979 and 1981. The Court ruled on July 28, 1981 that no nexus between those incidents and Samant had been established and ordered the trade union leader to be released immediately. But just as Samant emerged from the prison gate he was rearrested, this time under the orders of the Commissioner of Police for Bombay. In a petition filed to challenge his re-arrest, Samant's wife Vanita stressed that there were no specific grounds given for her husband's arrest. When Samant asked for the grounds of his second arrest, he was told that the grounds were not yet ready. In other words, Samant was re-arrested with a blank charge sheet. The grounds for arrest, when finally furnished proved just as untenable as before. The second detention was also declared invalid by the Bombay High Court and Samant emerged from jail triumphant and more formidable than ever before.

The more Samant thrived under the protective legal and political support of Patel, the more dangerous and threatening he seemed to the establishment. Another protégé of Patel's, the then leader of the opposition in the Maharashtra Assembly Sharad Pawar also contributed to this fear by allying himself with Samant. This association gave Samant's agitational tactics a political dimension and provided Pawar with issues and events through which to make his presence felt as a major opposition political force in Maharashtra.

By mid-1981 Samant's popularity could be gauged not only from the defensive attitude of the government and industrialists but also from the reactions of older established trade unionists on whose domain the Doctor was habitually and frequently conducting assaults. On June 30, 1981 the *Times of India* reported the dilemma of union chiefs on whether to make a major issue of Samant's arrest under NSA or to let it go with token press statements of protest against the "repressive, anti-labour policies of the Congress(I) government". The fat began

crackling in the fire when Chief Minister A.R.Antulay publicly claimed that he had been asked by the other trade unionists to control Samant's violent activities. The then Labour Minister N.M.Tidke had just announced that in 1980-81 Samant had been involved in 11 cases of murder, 65 cases of rioting, 40 of assault and 203 of intimidation and obstruction<sup>23</sup>. Apart from hotly denying that they asked for Samant's arrest, the Trade Union Joint Action Committee (TUJAC) finally got its act together and called for a rally on 18th July to protest against Samant's arrest. But these were face-saving devices that fooled no one, least of all the workers.

Wherever there was already discontent and disillusionment among the rank and file, with other trade unions, this increased further and the tidal wave of "Samantism" began to swell. At a morcha to the Assembly Hall, organised by TUJAC following his release from jail in 1981, Samant arrived late, after attending the Assembly session. The morcha had, as usual, been halted at Kala Ghoda where it was converted into a rally. The other trade unionists had begun addressing the crowd of over 25,000 workers when Samant arrived from the rear and began to walk through the squatting crowd towards the truck which served as a platform for the speakers. As soon as Samant's presence was felt workers at the rear rose to their feet and began cheering. When the entire gathering became aware of his arrival the loud and emotional chanting lifted the mood of the occasion to an almost hysterical pitch. On the truck, where the other trade unionists were forced to wait for this mass celebration to subside before continuing their speeches, all faces were grim.

In his speech that evening Samant ridiculed government and industrialists alike, with special reference to Sharayu Daftary who as president of the Indian Merchant's Chamber had led a highly publicized move to counter Samant's power and bring about "industrial peace" in Bombay. Neither Samant's tone nor the workers' response was lost on the government. Whether the workers perceived it or not, Samant himself was very conscious of the battle lines being drawn.

At the time when Samant was frequently moved in and out of jail, his activities and personality became the objects of press attention and public curiosity on an unprecedented scale. In the finely furnished homes of Bombay's elite, who lived along the sea-facing west side of the city, "the Samant menace" had become a compulsive conversation topic over evening cocktails and at other social gatherings. The small scale industrialist would relate his tale of horror about how Samant was threatening to drive him out of business. Others would join in with sympathies and the affirmation that Samant was one of the many destructive forces let loose in this "useless" country where nothing ever worked. The more knowledgeable and shrewd at such gatherings would hold forth on how the "menace" was a creation of the Congress party, and question the wisdom of jailing him. Once Samant's involvement in the *Indian Express* employees union became public knowledge, these sessions of the industrial-intellectual elite acquired an even more impassioned, angry and vigorous tone. The Frankenstein was now even endangering freedom of the press by directly attacking its bastion *The Indian Express*. The underlying premise during all such conversations and discussions was that a sub-intelligent proletariat with a herd mentality was being swayed by a bully with false promises of petty gains.

Much of this anger was fuelled by the fact that in 1981 alone 26,175 workers had united under Samant's leadership and entered into confrontations with managements which led to either

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<sup>23</sup> Olga Tellis in *Business Standard*; July 12, 1981.

strikes or lock-outs. The State of Maharashtra had recorded a loss of 13,47,331 man-days on account of these workers in 115 units. That only 38 of these disputes ended successfully for the workers merely baffled the elite but produced no genuine urge in its ranks to seek answers to the riddle. Thus the vast majority settled for the most convenient conclusion that Samant's vast following and involvement in numerous strikes and lock-outs was due to his effective use of violent tactics and the efficient maintenance of goondas. It would have been futile to state at such gatherings, that there was no trade union mafia in Bombay to conduct terror operations on an organised scale comparable to Dhanbad in Bihar. Since the state government statements, on the floor of the assembly, concentrated on Samant's violence and not that of the managements, his image as a dangerous violator of the law was further strengthened.

But Samant's rise to power was neither the result of worker's gullibility nor a series of violent events. The "fiery trade unionist", as the press had by then labelled him, was the product of prevalent conditions of the trade union scene in Bombay symptomatic of some basic ailments. The tactics which managements considered outrageous and irresponsible were a source of strength for Samant since this attracted workers to his fold. As Pendse has noted: "In an atmosphere of total distrust of and disgust with capitalist norms and modes, variously imposed on the legal and trade union machinery, a flouting of bourgeois respectability and responsibility held great attraction for the workers... The working class had to become and to experience becoming unencumbered of fetters acquired in a different period. The emergency had tellingly brought this awareness. Samant rose to play this historical role, however inadequately, however distortedly. His outrageous irresponsibility was a reflection of the aspirations and feelings of the workers themselves. That is why he was appreciated and followed by the workers and not ridiculed."<sup>24</sup>

This mood was the product of not just happenings on the trade union scene in isolation but of the political upheaval which had shaken the country in the last half decade. The electorate had voted the Janata Party into power in 1977 and congratulated themselves on a victory over the authoritarian, three-decade hold of the Congress Party. The inability of the Janata to run a government, or even hold themselves together, produced a wave of resentment and disillusionment which not only put Indira Gandhi back in office but, also rendered damage to the people's faith in the electoral process as a possible means of redressing their grievances.

This deep-rooted and widespread feeling found release in many local and non-party political forms of organisation in several spheres and in many varied ways. In the trade union sphere it found its manifestation in the disregard for and flouting of established legal procedures of industrial relations and the search for independent "heroes". Samant was one of the answers. Pendse wrote: "Datta Samant became the genuine spearhead, representative spokesman and natural expression of this stage, with the working class in a militant, assertive mood but without any cohesive apparatus and operating in a context of political uncertainty and instability. In his style and methodology, he was the representative of an interregnum."<sup>25</sup>

Thus by 1977 Samant had become the principal foe of unrepresentative and unpopular unions and was perceived by the workers as a new hope. His position as a challenger of these unpopular, though recognized, unions was strengthened by his willingness to use counter-violence against those who terrorised the workers on behalf of non-militant and pro-management unions. Radha Iyer, labour lawyer and columnist, noted in mid-1980 that "the

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<sup>24</sup> Pendse.

<sup>25</sup> Pendse.

Samant phenomenon is to be attributed directly to the failure of the established trade unionists and employers to solve problem quickly and expeditiously and the failure of the legal system.

Together these factors have blocked all outlets for the workers to ventilate their grievances and sort out issues in a meaningful way. This strangulation of the workers from all sides created the crisis of trade unionism and Dr. Samant became the rallying point for retaliation against it.”<sup>26</sup>

Even the left trade unions, considered by managements to be “responsible” because they followed the rules and norms of the legal machinery, failed to articulate and explain these emerging tendencies. The vacuum thus created, by the failure of the left trade unions, was filled by Samant. A total disenchantment with the legal machinery was perhaps the single most important factor for heightening the militant mood. In 1980, over one lakh cases lay pending before the industrial tribunals and labour courts with no possibility of the backlog being cleared in the near future. In its September 7<sup>th</sup> issue that year, *Sunday* magazine quoted an activist from Samants unions as saying: “We don't need more labour courts. They are traps for workers. Let them burn them down the existing ones also.” The man who violated most legal norms, ignored court injunctions and signed agreements, and tore up balance sheets proclaiming them to be “management's lies” was tailor-made for this situation. Laws, Samant found, could be bypassed with impunity if sufficient strength could be mustered on the shop floor and at the factory gates. The workers were painfully conscious of the manner in which managements used the industrial relations machinery to deny or delay justice. Brewing disputes were usually referred to conciliation and no strike could legally take place before the conciliation procedure was exhausted.

Calico Chemicals, where Samant fought along battle in 1980, provided a good illustration of the manner in which the legal system could be used to subvert a union's efforts to wrest benefits from the management. The worker's charter of demands was first presented in 1964, at a time when the legal machinery had relatively more credibility. The award of the industrial tribunal was granted in 1971. The company appealed against this order in the Bombay High Court. Having lost the case there, the company went in further appeal to a division bench of the High Court and eventually to the Supreme Court. In the intervening period of about 17 years there was no revision of wage structure or pay scales. Samant entered the picture when the management's appeal was pending in the Supreme Court and led the workers on a strike that lasted over a year. Samant's style was to enter apparently no-win situations, demand a lump sum packet of benefits for workers and hold out indefinitely in a battle to the end.

Samant did not always win but workers nevertheless came to view him as a saviour of sorts. This was one of the reasons that Samant could persuade workers to hold out, for long-drawn-out struggles, without providing any monetary relief. That he managed to do so without the cover of any ideological identification or association was probably another indication of the extent of worker's deviation from the established trade unions with their clearly defined ideology and party affiliations. Samant rarely took a class view of society and offered simplistic solutions to the country's problems, such as making the government more efficient and dynamic. These characteristics earned him the label of “headless militant” from the leftists. But this did not bother Samant who, in 1979, admitted to a journalist that he had little interest in books and wanted only to be remembered by the people as a hero after his death. The unprecedented loyalty and support he eventually got from the textile workers came close

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<sup>26</sup> “The Samant Factor” by Radha Iyer; *Business Standard*; September 15, 1980.

to fulfilling this ambition. Even G.V.Chitnis, general secretary of the Maharashtra AITUC, who was sharply critical of the way Samant handled the textile strike, acknowledged that no trade union leader in Bombay over the last 50 years had enjoyed such support and popularity.

But the very characteristics which contributed to his success also made him a lone-ranger, shunning all efforts by other trade unions to draw him into a united front. The national conference of trade unions held in Bombay in June 1981 did not find Samant in its midst because he turned down the invitation. Though he had been dissatisfied by INTUC in 1980 Samant's stand on Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party remained ambiguous for several years. Many rival trade unions used Samant's absence at such joint front meetings as evidence of his remaining sympathetic to the Congress(I) and accused him of still harbouring ambitions of re-entering the party. Samant in turn remained doubtful about the established trade unions and did not trust them. His methods and style of operation continued to be regularly attacked by these unions. And Samant's track record, viewed statistically, was indeed not commendable.

It was characteristic of Samant to lead workers headlong into a strike or lock-out but follow it up with little action from his side. The initiative then inevitably slipped back into the management's hands often leaving the workers as passive victims. For all his messianic image Samant was also no democrat. Within his union, with its lack of systematic organisation, the decisions were made by a small group of people. Thus out of 115 work stoppages in which Samant was involved in 1981, he was successful in only 38 and unsuccessful in 77. Of the 26,125 workers involved, only 9,621 workers returned to work with benefits and 16,504 resumed work without any gains. And in 21 cases of successful struggles, the workers made combined gains of Rs. 1,723,519 but lost Rs. 4,638,788 during the work stoppages.<sup>27</sup> But to predict the imminent downfall of Samant on the basis of these figures would have been a complete misreading of the situation. The Bombay worker's militancy could not be understood from an accountant's viewpoint. All the defeats notwithstanding, one victory (as in Empire Dyeing) could trigger off an avalanche of support from workers in tens of units.

This led Dange to dismiss Samant as an "anarchosyndicalist", that is, one who believes that with the capture of every factory and workshop one by one, State power will eventually fall automatically into the hands of the proletariat. Others, like Pendse, argued that Samant has chained workers to the prevalent consciousness and bypassed the true issues which constitute the crisis of the trade union movement such as a rigid acceptance of official norms and channels, as insensitivity to shop-floor attitudes and aspirations and a lack of professional competence regarding monetary issues.

Whatever the long term impact of the Samant phenomenon, in late 1981, he stood at the crest of a giant wave which threatened to engulf all that stood before it. At that stage it was easy for many to believe that it could overcome and conquer all. Most of the established trade unions watched his approaching wave with a mixture of apprehension and hope. They feared the implications, for their own organisations, of Samant's solidifying his hold over a strategically vital work force like the textile workers. But most veteran trade unionists were certain that textiles would be Samant's Waterloo and hopefully mark the decline of such "disruptive" forces in the realm of trade unions. Prabhakar More, of the Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat, was among those who later proclaimed the textile strike unnecessary. Others argued, in October '83, that had Samant withdrawn the strike in the eight mills which began in October

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<sup>27</sup> Government of Maharashtra figures published in BUILD Newsletter, August 1982.

'81 he might possibly have reached a settlement with Antulay, “but then Samant would not have been Samant.”

Publicly, all the left trade unions adopted a supportive position, once the strike was called. Dange set the tone when he said at a meeting of the Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union activists, in December 1981, that he welcomed Samant on the scene. Some of Samant's strikes are correct, Dange said, and these should be supported by the communists: “Where his strike is incorrect we must not oppose him.” But Dange found it difficult to convince his own colleagues of this, though some of his rank and file later fought in the strike shoulder to shoulder with Samant. Press reports of this speech brought Samant to Dange's house for the one and only meeting between the one-time firebrand and the man who now staked claim to that “title”. Dange later had only a sketchy recollection of the meeting and he found Samant “a normal man, nothing special.” Dange gave no advice and Samant left with the promise to return. But he never came again. Much later, while in retreat, some of the MGKU activists regarded this as a crucial juncture where the struggle went wrong and said that if Dange and Samant could have come together, history may have taken a different course.

But at the end of '81 Samant was the only hero for the workers and Dange was remembered with contempt for his Rs.4 settlement of 1974. With his accurate reading of the textile worker's mood Samant attacked the Lal Bauvta union in one of his first big rallies and specifically ridiculed Dange's settlement of 1974. In comparison to this the National Campaign Committee's<sup>28</sup> proclamation (at the June '81 conference in Bombay) of total confrontation with the Central government and its anti-labour laws and policies, meant little to the rank and file. From the grassroots the only obvious fighter against the vested interests at that point in time was Samant. The other unions appeared to be indulging in a purely notional “total confrontation”. In the worker's chawls and kholis it seemed that Armageddon was at hand and Samant the only possible leader for the army of the good. He had warned them that it would be a struggle onto death and they had pledged to follow faithfully. Just how many perceived the literal and not figurative meaning of Samant's words will never be known. But follow they did and marched eventually to the accurately predicted end.

If the reasons for defeat were already built into the structure of the textile industry, Samant realised that a struggle led by him would meet with still stronger opposition from the establishment. He was also already over-committed in numerous industrial units all over the state and reluctant to take on a challenge of the magnitude of the textile industry. On October 27, 1981 Samant said in an interview: “The Standard Mill workers, however, stuck to their request and refused to leave my place till I gave my consent. I finally agreed when they told me that the workers themselves would take the responsibility of any struggle and only wanted me to be their spokesman.”<sup>29</sup> What was meant to be a gate meeting of Standard Mill workers on October 25 became a massive rally with thousands of workers from the eight mills, which had been on strike for five days then, crowding the lanes around the gate. After a rousing reception from the workers Samant spoke and assured, his ardent listeners that the struggle would not stop at a demand for higher bonus but would continue to a fight for better wages, permanency for the badli workers and derecognition of the RMMS.

Within days after this meeting, workers from one mill after another followed in the footsteps of their Standard Mill comrades and headed for Ghatkopar. Within a week of Samant's first

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<sup>28</sup> A front of non-INTUC Central trade unions.

<sup>29</sup> “The Tenth Month”.

gate meeting at Standard Mill the Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union, newly formed by Samant, had applied to the Registrar of Trade Unions for recognition with an initial membership of 15,000.

With this the seemingly ever-growing giant rose to new heights. The workers rejoiced, for bada-kranti was at hand. The establishment eagerly looked forward to defeating Samant at what they hoped would be his Waterloo. Both were wrong.

## CHAPTER 3: Why fight?

*“It shows a complete lack of understanding of the forces that had brought about and kept on the strike, when it is said that the prolonged nature and stubbornness of the fight were exclusively or in a large measure due. to the Workers' and Peasants' Party and Communists who devoted their energies to it. The strike was an inevitable outcome of the objective conditions existing in the industry at the time and the series of historical developments that had taken place in previous years in the textile industry of Bombay.”*

- S.A.Dange on the textile strike of 1928<sup>30</sup>

An almost identical statement could be attributed to Samant exactly half a century after Dange made this statement during his trial in the Meerut conspiracy case, in December 1931. It was inherent in the structure of the city itself that the life and struggles of Bombay textile workers would always be misunderstood or misinterpreted by the other half which also lives on the narrow island city of Bombay. This great divide was noted even by a moderate trade unionist like N.M.Joshi as early as 1919: “Neither the Government nor the mill owners nor the educated people even seem to be cognizant of the existence of the large number of the factory workers living under conditions which ought never to be tolerated not only in the interests of the workmen but in the interests of the general public. The greatest pity is that we become conscious of the existence of the mill hands around us when they go on strike threatening to bring disastrous consequences not only on themselves but on the industry in which they are engaged and on the general public as well.”<sup>31</sup>

This virtually total isolation of the classes from each other grew partly out of Bombay's unique geography. When the Europeans first arrived at what is now Bombay, it was just a collection of small islands. Over the years, large land reclamation schemes converted the islands into a narrow peninsula jutting into the Arabian Sea, running parallel to the main land. This produced one of the best and largest natural harbours in the world and contributed directly to the growth of Mumbai as a major centre of trade, commerce and eventually: industry. The eastern shores of this peninsula thus came to be dominated by the docks and other harbour facilities such as godowns. The western shoreline, which offers a resplendent view of the Arabian Sea, became prime real estate on which the elite and later the middle class, built its homes. The textile mills came up in the latter half of the 19th century and soon occupied most of the central corridor of the peninsula. Many of the big mills had compounds that sprawled over several acres of land. Several of these industrial units evolved into tiny townships, with the workers' chawls located either inside or just outside the mill compound. A social and commercial infrastructure catering to the workers grew up alongside, in what became an isolated pocket of humanity labelled the “mill area”. In the latter half of the 20th century this was a world of squalor, with over-crowded, dilapidated chawls, filth-covered lanes and pathetically vulnerable pavement dwellers. If the misery of this world was not in itself disturbing enough one had only to cross the tracks of the Western Railway, running north-south across the city, and experience the almost bizarre contrasts of the parallel world.

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<sup>30</sup> Dange.

<sup>31</sup> *Strikes in India*, by V.B. Karnik.



There, along the western sea-shore, lay the pride of Indian cities. From the magnificent sweep of Marine Drive, the glittering high-rise “palaces” of Malabar Hill, past the chic shopping centres of Warden Road, down to the elegant bungalows of Worli Seaface, neat middle class abodes of Shivaji Park, film star bungalows of Pali Hill and on to the ever expanding suburbs, this was another self-sufficient world. Its social, commercial and cultural linkages were all within this narrow geographical range and protected against contact with the other world which constituted about two-thirds of the city's area and population.

The creation of these parallel and isolated worlds, in such close physical proximity, seems to have been inevitable given the geography of the city/and socio-economic development. But over the last few decades the contrasts sharpened and the isolation deepened. Viewed from the window of a high-rise apartment building on the periphery of the two worlds, the mill area appears to be covered by a dull grey cloud through which the tall chimneys of the factories are faintly visible. Beneath this haze of smog are rows of chawls where the windows and other fittings are crumbling and fetid heaps of garbage rot in the alleys. Each room may sparkle with cleanliness and a visible sense of pride in making the smallest of places a good home, but the passages outside are dark, damp and depressing. The stairs are usually unsafe and in disrepair. The common latrines almost never have an adequate water supply. Not much has changed here for decades, except the advent of fly-overs over the decade of the 1970s. But the fly-overs are only intrusions of the affluent world in the “mill area”, merely linking the business centre of South Bombay with the northern suburbs.

For those who use the fly-overs as speedy links through alien territory, there are in their own realm, bigger and fancier store lending new dimensions to ostentation and conspicuous consumption. Ensnared amid these illusions of ever growing prosperity, the ruling elite's isolation from the reality of the country at large was inevitable. But it even blinded them to the living conditions and compulsions of a major chunk of their own city's population.

The textile worker, conscious of this and the disposition of the seth log has long accepted the need for frequent agitations. In the words of Dange: “The workers have experience that unless every once in a while they struggle in a very hard way – the backlog of demands is never settled.” The frequent strikes in the textile industry are due not only to the textile workers' experience in organisation and high level of articulation but the fact that wages and benefits have simply failed to keep pace with time. The living conditions of textile workers in Bombay were deplorable to begin with. This is clear from the recorded evidence of a lady doctor appointed by the government to investigate conditions of women industrial workers in Bombay as far back as 1922. She wrote: “In the outside chawl I have several times verified the overcrowding of rooms. In one, on the second floor of a chawl, measuring some 15 x 12 feet I found six families living. Six separate ovens on the floor proved this statement. On enquiry I ascertained that the actual number of adults and children living in this room was 30... The atmosphere at night of that room filled with smoke from six ovens and other impurities might handicap any woman or infant both before and after delivery.”

This situation had not changed even half a century later and in 1982 most workers were still living in dingy chawls where 15 to 30 men shared a room about 10 feet by 10 feet in size. That beds are used in rotation by workers on different shifts has for long been a “quaint” feature of Bombay, often related to outsiders when attempting to illustrate the bizarre quality of life in the country's prime metropolis. Many workers leave their families behind in their villages and eat their meals at the homes of women who make a living by providing them with food for a monthly fee. In effect, many such workers have no home in the city. This

instability combined with the unhealthy, tension-filled working conditions has led to a very high rate of absenteeism. Often bemoaned by the mill-owners as one of their worst problems, absenteeism is a phenomenon common to most workers, regardless of their living conditions. While managers of mills have always argued that absenteeism is due to the worker's laziness, it is actually a product of the often hazardous working conditions in the mills and the toll they take on a man's health.

The initial stages of the cloth-making process are the worst from the workers' perspective. The air in the blow room is perpetually laden with fine cotton dust. It is in the blow room that the tightly packed bales of raw cotton are put through various stages of threshing and prepared for the spindles. Even in the five minutes it takes to walk through this department and observe the various stages, a visitor can feel the cotton dust settling irritatingly at the bottom of the throat.

Workers who spend the best years of their lives in that environment with the cotton fibre and dust clinging to their bodies and settling on their lungs, inevitably suffer from a vast variety of respiratory diseases. The rate of such disease is, according to one estimate, three times higher among textile workers than in any other industry of Bombay.

Further down the production line are the various other processes such as weaving, starching and bleaching. Each in turn creates deafening noise and scorching heat from the steam. Though these conditions are inevitable in the process of manufacturing textiles, workers suffer more due to the lack of adequate ventilation and safety devices, which mill executives stubbornly claim to have improved over the years. The high temperature and humidity leads not only to various bronchial problems but also to thermal stress and rheumatism. Frequent break downs of old rusty machines take an additional toll on workers' health which has not yet been quantified. Given the nature and conditions of work and the pace of activity, spilling and inhalation of chemicals is unavoidable. Apart from the general health hazards, the increasing rate of accidents has for long been a major concern of the workers. The Central Institute of Labour estimates that the accident rate in the textile industry is double than that in other industries. In 1971, for example, 154.60 textile workers out of every 1,000 were involved in accidents, whereas the figure for other industries was 75.85 workers in every 1,000. Between 1974-75 and 1978-79 the number of accidents increased by over 77% and about 55% of these accidents were caused by unsafe working conditions.

Despite these staggering statistics less than 1% of the textile industry's annual production is reinvested in improvement of working conditions.<sup>32</sup> A World Bank report on the state of the textile industry noted that: "The majority of mills with old equipment can only be described as industrial slums. By Western European standards of mill house keeping, the machinery is operated in conditions of almost abominable squalor." The 1975 report went on to note that in 20 of the 22 mills visited by the Bank team, the conditions were poor – with broken floors, poor lighting, dirty walls and all amenities in a dilapidated condition.

The continuing deterioration of working conditions, together with the failure of wages to keep pace with inflation and the increasing work load, over the last one decade, contributed directly to creating the situation which produced Samant. Statistics show a rise in wages since 1974, but this was due to increases in dearness allowance (D.A.), which was linked to the consumer price index. There was no revision of the basic wage. A study of the "revised standard rates"

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<sup>32</sup> *New Phase in Textile Unionism* by Amrita Chhachhi and Paul Kurien; EPW; February 20, 1982.

along with the system of D.A. calculation reveals a sophisticated methodology by which mill owners gave with one hand only to take away with the other. Thus Rs. 282.52 emerged as the revised basic wage with a two slab system of calculating D.A. for workers earning below or above Rs.400 and a ceiling of Rs.700 on the D.A. This meant that only the lowest paid workers were protected against escalations in the cost of living. Consequently, the older and skilled workers suffered an erosion in their purchasing power and earned progressively less every year.

Even the compliant RMMS noted in its submission to the Tripartite Committee, set up by the Central Government: “Till a few years back a certain level of parity was maintained between various categories of workmen as also between workmen and staff. During the recent past such parity had been disturbed to a great extent because uniform dearness allowance has formed a substantial part of the pay/wage packet. This narrowing of differentials was caused by the fact that the same amount of D.A. was made applicable to all categories notwithstanding the higher skill and responsibility of certain categories of workmen. Absence of adequate incentive does not encourage many people to strive for better skilled jobs since the total emoluments are not much. This anomaly was attempted to be corrected by the union in the Tripartite session, but the success achieved in this regard has been totally inadequate... The demand of the RMMS is, therefore, not for some *ad hoc* increase in the basic wages, but for a new structure of wages for all categories of employees depending on the skills and responsibilities of each category.”

The worsening of the textile workers wage was recognized even by the state government representative on the Tripartite. Committee appointed by the Central Government in 1982. Wrote Mr. D.G. Kale in his report to the Committee: “It may be pointed out that during the last four years workers had to contend with 3 to 4 very sharp peaks in the rise of the index which correspond to sharp adverse effects on the economic health of all workers. This special hardship arising out of the rate of change of the index is quite distant from the general hardship of cultivated index rise. It must be remembered that the rise is reflected in increased D.A. after a gap of two months which are required for price collection and computation of the index. The extraordinarily sharp rise is sufficient to destroy the workers' domestic budget within these two months and send them into the arms of money lenders. Under the existing system of D.A. there is no ameliorative action possible for this special hardship, which seems to be correlated to the general unrest among workers.”

Workers in the higher wage categories were at an even greater disadvantage because of the double linked D.A. system which the RMMS prides itself for. Under this system, adopted in 1973, the D.A. was linked with both the index and the old basic wage, but not the actual wage of workers in higher categories. When the price index soared, the rise for the higher bracket of workers was not correspondingly adequate. It was thus recommended to the Tripartite Committee, by the Maharashtra Government representative, that the felt necessity of the times would call for recognition of such hardships and consideration of the question of the extent to which mitigating action could be taken.

The fact that D.A. constituted the bulk of the wage while the basic wage remained low, proved particularly damaging to workers who were paid on apiece rate basis. Apart from the fact that the existing system of calculating wages was incomprehensible to most workers, it also placed the onus of production on them. When the yarn quality was extremely poor, weavers would often find it difficult to complete even the minimum quota of cloth and, as a consequence, suffered a reduction in wages. Since the wages of all the other workers in the

auto-loom section were calculated on the basis of the weaver's output (as a percentage of the weaver's output), the earnings of all the workers plummeted due to reasons beyond their control.<sup>33</sup>

Under a 1970 agreement, only workers who worked regularly for 240 days were entitled to an annual increment – which is 1% of the revised basic wage. Moreover only those workers who had worked continuously for 240 days for five years in a row, were eligible for the increments. Given the restrictions on leave, bad health and work fatigue, few workers were able to fulfil these requirements. Moreover, wages have little correlation to changes in productivity. The introduction of the seven-day-week in 1973 led to a 16.67% increase in production. Workers, however, got only a 4% wage increase of which only about 1.75% actually came to them. “There is no objective system by which wages are determined and they lack any relationship to the savings made by the mill owners through modernisation, or due to work intensity or increase in workload,” Amrita Chhachhi and Paul Kurian concluded in their survey of the wage structure.<sup>34</sup>

The modernisation and mechanisation of the mills, which occurred over the last 35 years, resulted in a reduction of the average number of workers employed in the mills. Where there were 1,97,000 workers in 1961, the figure dropped to just over 1,65,000 workers in 1980 – a drop of over 32,000 or about 16% in 20 years.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand the number of spindles in these mills went up from 32.35 lakhs to 34.35 lakhs. The new machines also increased the speed and amount of work. When one weaver operated four looms there was a 50% increase in production but the weaver retained some control over his work pace and could rest between yarn breakages. With the increase in loom assignments to 16 or 22 looms per weaver his pace came to be determined entirely by the machines. In some mills, the managements thus tried to increase the work pace of ancillary workers. Consequently, a battery filler who was supposed to carry and load up to 3,500 pirns a day was also required to help the weaver, without any change in his designation or substantial rise in his salary.

Such an increase in workload led to a tremendous increase in tension and work fatigue. But instead of taking this up as an issue, the RMMS signed agreements to further increase the intensity of work.<sup>36</sup> This, in turn resulted in higher rates of absenteeism. A study by the National Productivity Council noted the loss of production in the Bombay textile mills due to strikes was one per cent, while that due to absenteeism was about five per cent.

The only two wage increases wrested by the workers from tight-fisted managements in the last decade were won by non-recognized unions but the agreement was always signed by the RMMS. While workers in the relatively smaller textile processing industry won incremental wage scales under the Mill Mazdoor Sabha more than ten years ago, the RMMS fought for no such demands. Even basic benefits such as house-rent and leave travel concessions were now raised by the RMMS till Dr. Samant entered the picture.

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<sup>33</sup> Chhachhi and Kurien.

<sup>34</sup> Chhachhi and Kurien.

<sup>35</sup> The 2.5 lakh figure refers to the number of workers on the pay rolls of the mills. But on an average not more than 1,65,000 to 1,75,000 workers were on duty on any given day. On reduction of labour force also refer to “New Phase in Textile Unionism?” by Amrita Chhachhi & Paul Kurian, EPW, Feb. 20, 1982.

<sup>36</sup> Chhachhi and Kurien.

The Rs.30 per month basic wage was, fixed by the Industrial Court in 1947 and linked to the 1934 price index. Thus the present minimum was effectively equivalent to Rs.34.34, which constituted a 15% rise in real terms over 35 years. The RMMS, though it was partly responsible for this failure of wages to rise, noted in its submission to the Tripartite Committee: “The minimum wage that the lowest paid textile worker should get is Rs.800 in the month of December 1976, at the time when the consumer price index number: (1960=100) was 300 and thereafter he should get 100% neutralisation for the rise that has taken place in the consumer price index...”

According to a study sponsored by the RMMS and conducted by the Ambedkar Institute of Labour Studies in 1976, 72.6% of textile workers were found to be able to spend between Rs.200 to Rs.500 a month. Only 5.7% could spend more than Rs.700. The study, which examined the causes and dimensions of indebtedness among textile workers, concluded that the average textile worker has a taken home pay of Rs.550, after deductions of provident fund, health insurance, society loan) payments, canteen bill, subsidised grain purchases, fines and even professional tax of Rs.2 to Rs.8 per month. Ambedkar study also showed that the net wage of 39.4% of the workers was between Rs.201 to Rs.300 while about 25% got less than Rs.200 and another 25% make between Rs.300 to Rs.400. Contrary to popular belief the majority of mill workers (69%) are the sole earning members of their family. From these meagre incomes, 64.5% of the workers send a portion to their dependents in the villages.

The wages had only marginally improved between 1976, when this study was conducted, and 1981 – when strike clouds began gathering over the mills. Much of the problem also arose from the imposition of a standard wage agreement over the entire industry, which had little basis over three decades after it was established in 1947. The technological level of the mills was more or less equal then but over the years the process of modernisation was not evenly spread over all the mills and with it ended the relative uniformity which once existed among the mills.<sup>37</sup>

Piecemeal departures from the standard wage rates were made in many cases. But since the basic wage structure applicable to the majority of workers remained unchanged, not only did the employers as a whole derive greater benefit than workers, but different mills derived grossly unequal benefits.

Though the textile workers' plight is an extreme case the outdated nature of the wage calculation mechanism was not unique to the textile industry. At a national level also, an analysis of the Minimum Wages Act (1948) shows that its provisions have not been fully implemented specially with regard to the frequency of wage revisions. There has been no systematic policy in the Five Year Plans with regard to wages and prices. One analysis of the Five Year Plans has found that there has been an emphasis on the need to link wage increases to productivity, but worker productivity has been rising while real earnings have stagnated or declined.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently there has been a broad-based loss of faith in governmental adjudication. Labour disputes have thus erupted frequently with varying degrees of intensity in different industries. The highest number of disputes, workers involved and man-days lost over the last two decades has been in the cotton textile industry.

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<sup>37</sup> Begaram Tulpule; *EPW*; April 24, 1982.

<sup>38</sup> *Industrial Relations System in India* by Sahab Dayal.

The Bombay cotton textile worker in particular witnessed sharp increases in the wages of workers in other industries while his own real wage stagnated. Even the modernisation and capital intensive turn of some textile mills did not benefit workers. Most agreements increasing the wages of workers on the basis of the saving made by the management by reduction of hands, had little real impact because this wage increase was calculated on the basis of the retrenched workers basic wage of about Rs.35. Thus most of the savings, by retrenchment of workers, accrued to managements.

However, when Samant made an issue of the difference in wages paid by the textile mills and the high wages paid by the chemical and engineering sector, the mill owners rejected such a comparison as being unrealistic. But Samant insisted on emphasising the profit margins of both the mill-owners and middle-men who stood between the workers and the consumers. Wages constitute about 20% of the total cost of cloth production. A hike of 30% in wages, Samant argued, would mean an increase of 6% in the cost which could be absorbed in the 40% to 50% margin between the mill price and the retail price.

### **The Demands**

Samant articulated the textile workers' demands in terms of three basic criteria for determining wages. These were bound to affront mill owners as much as they would strike a sensitive cord among workers and compel an overwhelming response from them.

Firstly, the charter of demands said, wages must be commensurate with the hard work put in by the workmen under the strenuous and hazardous conditions. Secondly, wages must compare reasonably with those earned by workers in other industries in the area and thirdly, the wages must ensure a satisfactory standard of living for the workers. On this basis the charter demanded an over-haul of the basic wage and D.A. computation system. This called for the ad hoc wage rise of Rs.45 per month, granted in 1979, to be included in the basic wage and the following increase.

Category of Workmen	Increase (Rs.) (for 26 days)
1. All workers (whether substitute or badli) with less than five years service	75/-
2. Workers with service between 5 to 10 years	100/-
3. Workers with service between 10 to 15 years	125/-
4. Workers with services of 15 years and more	150/-

Dearness allowance computed with this basic wage, along with other benefits, would raise the minimum wage to Rs.937.05 as compared to what Samant claimed was the existing minimum wage of Rs.668.49. (The mill owners claimed the minimum was Rs.715 per month).

Over and above this the charter demanded:

1. House rent allowance of Rs.40 for 26 days including the period of paid leave.
2. A leave travel allowance of Rs.400 per year for workers with five years or more of service.
3. A system of privilege leave which would enable workers with 240 days of work for one day leave for every 15 days of work. Workers who have recorded over 240 days of work would be entitled to one day's leave for every five days of work.
4. Casual leave to be increased from 5 to 10 days.
5. Over and above the ESIS leave, 8 days of sick leave at half pay every year.
6. Paid holidays to be increased from 5 to 8 days.
7. Annual increments of between Rs.10 to Rs.15 for different categories of workers.

Later, after the strike had been launched, Samant also demanded that the mills be turned into cooperatives to be run by the workers. At a rally on March 11, 1982 after the Long March to the Council Hall, Samant said that the government should invest Rs.37 crores in this venture with an equal amount contributed from workers' provident fund. This would equal the total share capital of the mills which was Rs.75 crores.

These demands were enumerated on behalf of the 2.3 lakh workers on the muster rolls of the mills but the backbone of the imminent battle was constituted by the one lakh among these who were badli workers. This younger lot of workers, who had little to lose and much to gain, were the core of the tornado which was about to tear through the mill area. Many badlis normally got work for only 5 to 10 days a month and earned about Rs.150 to Rs.300 as wages. It has been common practice for years that a badli may come to the mill every day in the hope of work with no guarantee of actually getting it. The proportion of badli workers was not regulated and fresh recruitments continued indiscriminately. As a result not enough badlis were made permanent. Instead badlis have always been systematically given breaks in their service to ensure that they do not accumulate 240 days of continuous service and become eligible for a number of benefits. The RMMS not only failed to protect the interest of badli workers at an institutional level but actively became party to the corruption which further undermined the position of these workers without privileges. Mill-level RMMS functionaries have, for decades, taken thousands of rupees in bribes from badli workers desperate to become permanent.

When the strike began in January 1982 R.D.Mohite, 28, had been working as a badli in Bombay Dyeing for eight years. Like most badlis Mohite had no service benefits. Usually in a month he was able to get work for 15 to 20 days. By 1982 Mohite had given up hopes of ever becoming permanent because the local RMMS representatives who charged between Rs.500 to Rs.1,000 to elevate workers to permanent status – a bribe that Mohite either could not or would not pay. Disgusted with the official recognised union Mohite stopped paying Rs.2 monthly due, or pauvti which the RMMS collected after a worker gets his wage. The RMMS traditionally set up a table near the wage distribution counter of every mill and installed strongmen there to ensure that all workers pay – voluntarily or by threat of force. Mohite's defiance was punished by keeping him out of the mill for ten days at a stretch. This was not a

difficult task to accomplish because the badli worker has no legal right to insist that he be given work regularly. It is by law the local labour officer's duty to help the workers. But in the words of Mohite: "The labour officer of the company listens to the union, not to the workers." And the union was deaf to the workers pleas and they thus became its antagonists.

The mill owner's hierarchy, however, remained oblivious to this. K.K.Podar of Podar Mills claimed in mid-1982, with all seriousness that the industry had made 100% people permanent. "There is an agreement with the RMMS by which in our direct production departments (spinning and weaving) 100% of the people are made permanent." Podar was willing to acknowledge that this was not the case in all departments or mills but still stubbornly maintained that "there is no exploitation of the badlis". When questioned on how this could be so when the mass of badlis were on the warpath because of the unequal treatment meted out to them by the mill owners and the RMMS, Podar answered: "Stray cases here and there can always happen in a society but that doesn't mean that we brand everyone as either a strong man or a culprit. A badli has to be employed by a mill on the basis of seniority. In other industries the temporary workers don't get equal pay with permanent workers or any of the other social benefits, like bonus, which badlis in the textile industry get by statutory requirements. I'm not talking about individual factories but if you take the Industry as a whole, there is so much of care and protection being given to these so-called temporary and casual workers which no other Industry has given."

Then why the discontent? Podar's answer: "In the summer vacation when absenteeism is very high, the mills take on many more people on the muster roll as badlis. This is why the percentage of badlis in most mills has gone up because their names remain on the muster. These are the junior badlis who work for five, seven or eight days (a month). So this is where the problem has arisen." IO Podar offered, as a solution to this problem, the following: "Historically the badlis are hired only for specific departments. If we could train the badlis as all-rounders and divide them into four basic categories, they would have gainful employment on more days, by rotation in various departments. We could then work with a much lesser number of badlis".

The actual problem, of course, was of a far greater magnitude than Podar could perceive or was willing to admit. As the worst sufferers among the workers, and most susceptible to pressure from the RMMS, the badlis became the core of the militant upsurge. With a remarkably intense passion and fervour, the badlis put all their fighting power behind Samant and helped create a force which would propel both into turbulent waters.

Samant was not the only leader active on the textile front in late '81. Between the gate meeting at Standard Mills and the formation of Samant's charter of demands, the Shiv Sena had made a demand for a Rs.200 per month wage increase. The Shiv Sena rose to power in the late 1960s on the "sons of soil" slogan of "Maharashtra for Maharashtrians". With the blessings of the government and finance from industrialists, the Sena had attacked communist unions in Bombay. But many of the young workers who had flocked to the Sena in the late 1960s were by the late 1970s disillusioned and rallied behind Samant. The wage rise demands of Shiv Sena chief Bar Thackeray, and his call for a one-day strike in the mills on November 1, 1981 was a response to the threat being posed by Samant and an attempt to demonstrate the strength he supposedly commanded. But at this stage, the Sena had a political alliance with the Congress(I). This placed added constraints on its union which in any case had used their cadre for strike-breaking activity. Thackeray was thus acting characteristically when he did not follow the very successful November 1, one-day strike with further action despite earlier



announcing an indefinite strike from November 16. George Fernandes, two years later, recalled with regret that “if Thackeray had not chickened out after calling that one-day strike he would have been the leader of the strike. (But) Samant happened to be the man on the spot.”

Fernandes was wrong. The mood of militancy and consequently the strike were not just there to be claimed by anyone who chose to do so. The moment called for a militant uncompromising leader and the workers found that only Samant could fit the bill. But the situation which placed Samant in the lead was not of his own making. Yash-Nant Chavan recalled that “those working on the textile front were long attuned to the strike idea even before the bonus agitation of 1981”. Even Dange acknowledged that “the strike was due and our (left parties and trade unions) leadership failed to call it. Samant called it and it (the strike) was so due that they also stuck to him for one year. If we had called it they would have also stuck to it for one year.” But the communists did not call the strike. And Fernandes later bemoaned the absence of a leader with Samant's popularity in the organised left and claimed that if there had been a leader the strike would have been called and conducted by him. But such a leader did not exist and could not exist within the fold of either the established left trade unions, the right-wing Shiv Sena or, least of all, the government supported INTUC. All these unions failed to effectively perceive the intensity of the workers' mood in October 1981. The Shiv Sena instead pressurized workers to resume work after the token one-day strike. Hence the workers' march to Ghatkopar and Samant was made inevitable.

In the early days of Samant's entry into the textile arena, few could have predicted how prolonged a struggle was around the corner. As the workers waited expectantly for the declaration of an indefinite strike, Chief Minister A.R. Antulay announced the establishment of a high powered committee to examine the issues involved and possibly avert a strike. When Samant agreed to give the committee a chance, the workers were disappointed and the cynics were not surprised. Earlier theories about a possible “nexus” between Samant and Antulay gathered further ground. The local press by and large had already created the impression that Antulay was using Samant to disturb working of the *Indian Express* newspapers in Bombay. In August 1981, the *Indian Express* had published an expose of Antulay's collection of funds for trusts privately headed by him in exchange for granting cement permits and discharging other official functions. The story, carried in all editions of the *Indian Express* including its vernacular counterparts, had severely undermined Antulay's ministry. He was eventually (in January 1982) compelled to resign from the post of Chief Minister as a result of this. But workers of *Loksatta*, a Marathi daily of the *Indian Express* group, had first approached Samant to take up their cause before the Antulay expose was published. In October 1981 after only a few meetings with Samant the *Indian Express* management suddenly declared a lock-out, which it justified on the grounds that Samant was an agent of Antulay who in turn was seeking to extract revenge and muzzle a leading free voice of the press. Samant denied allegations of complicity with Antulay and assured the textile workers that he was whole-heartedly committed to strike action. Two days after Antulay set up the high powered committee Samant told Javed Anand of the Daily: “It is not a joke to take over two lakh workers out on the street without adequate preparation. Why dissipate the energies of the workers without even waiting for the recommendations of the committee? Once we know how much they are prepared to concede we can fight for the remaining. Why should we have our people on the committee and thus bind ourselves to its decision?”

Those who saw Samant's acceptance of the committee as a metamorphosis to a tamer leader were soon proved wrong. Samant's firm refusal to have his representative on the committee or to call off the strike in the eight mills effectively killed the committee. For then both the mill owners and the RMMS also refused to cooperate with the committee. The mill owners were confident that any general strike, which followed, would fizzle out in a few weeks. Some of them reasoned that if Samant agreed to call off the strike in the eight mills they could offer the workers an increase of approximately Rs.100. This increase was expected to appease the workers and having the agreement signed by the RMMS was intended to undermine Samant's position by denying him any legitimacy in the strike field.

But the continuation of the strike in the eight mills was no more in Samant's control than was its origin. The workers of these mills had struck work despite their local leaders' collective decision to the contrary. The workers, primarily on their own initiative had refused to return to work after the token strike of October 21. Aware of this mood Samant wasted no time in reasserting his militancy. Most of the older trade union leaders felt this was the wrong time for a strike. Huge piles of unsold stocks, at that juncture, strengthened the management's position. Moreover the labour intensive textile mills were very different from the capital intensive modern industrial units where Samant had led most of his successful struggles. Ignoring all such warnings Samant, at a rally on December 8, 1981 told the workers to make immediate preparations for an indefinite general strike. He also told the workers about the government's threat to put him under indefinite detention and said that the strike must go on regardless of his own fate at the hands of the authorities. Meanwhile, violent skirmishes between Samant supporters and RMMS representatives were becoming a daily occurrence in the mill areas.

By New Year's eve the tension had mounted still higher. With the arrival of the Kohinoor Mill workers in the MGKU fold, all the 60 textile mills in the city came under Samant's wing. The Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU) was formed by Samant at the end of October, 1981, as the banner under which the imminent battle would be fought. The virtually total backing of the workers made the one-day strike on January 6 an unprecedented success. Even a large number of RMMS members joined in. The isolated few who entered the mills were hounded out by the striking workers. But some of the RMMS functionaries who entered the mills were so frightened that they reportedly locked themselves in lavatories.<sup>39</sup>

Ten days later at yet another mammoth rally, on January 17, 1982 the indefinite strike was declared with effect from the next morning. To the tens of thousands who sat intently listening to him Samant said: "Continue your struggle peacefully but with grim determination until all demands are met and if I am arrested, do not heed any call to return to work that may be falsely issued in my name." He also warned the police not to resort to repressive tactics for then Doctor would not be responsible for any retaliatory violence by the workers.

What Samant did not say, but which was understood among the rank and file, was that the time had come to sacrifice all. Ready to hawk or sell whatever they owned and do anything to

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<sup>39</sup> The aggressive mood of the workers was illustrated by their reaction to the arrest of "Comrade" Salaskar as he addressed a gate meeting at Century Mills. The incensed workers went in a morcha to the Worli Police Station to protest the arrest of Salaskar, who was emerging as one of the most important strike leaders. Samant personally went to the police station and asked the officers to release Salaskar because he could play an important role in maintaining peace among workers. The police relented and Salaskar was released. Had he been kept in lock-up both the police station and the policemen were in danger of falling victims to the workers' wrath.

keep the battle going, the workers thus began what few outsiders realised then would be for many of them, a battle unto death.

## CHAPTER 4: The making of a stalemate

On the eve of the strike, while the workers were digging in behind the barricades, the political scene in Maharashtra was in a state of flux. In the second week of January 1982, A.R. Antulay had been compelled to resign following the Bombay High Court judgement which found him guilty of making a quid-pro-quo between the distribution of cement permits and collection of funds for trusts privately set up by him. With Antulay went a style of government which was arrogant and arbitrary in the name of “dynamism”. But Antulay had some manipulative skill in tackling tricky political situations. As the strike began, the reins of power in the state of Maharashtra were passing on to Babasaheb Bhosle, a cherubic and jovial man lacking those skills and whose only qualification for the job was his unquestioned loyalty to Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Bhosale would leave behind the legacy of running a clown circus at Varsha, the official residence of the Chief Minister which he renamed Raigad.

While chief ministers were changing, Samant was in the process of discarding the tricolour flag of his union, which was a hangover of his INTUC days. The new flag was coloured red and dominated by his symbol – a clenched fist jutting out of a factory chimney. Despite predictions from the government, mill owners and even Bal Thackeray that the strike would not be total, the sun rose on January 18, 1982 to silent mills. The mill sirens, which announce the start of every shift got no response. The looms and spindles stood still. The tall chimneys were smokeless. After the experience of January 6, even RMMS functionaries did not dare to enter the mills. Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibits the assembly of five or more people, was immediately enforced around the mill gates and remained in effect for almost two years. But thousands of striking workers defied the order to ensure that “black legs” did not enter the mills. RMMS functionaries were reported to have defied a top level directive to enter the mills, even though they were threatened with dismissal from their positions.

Even the mill owners and the government acknowledged that the strike was total and the mills were at a complete standstill. But the workers soon realised this total stoppage of work did not seem to perturb the mill owners. This was partly due to the mill owners' assumption that the strike would not last more than a month. And, at that juncture, a temporary closure of the mills suited the mill owners.

In January 1981 the cotton textile industry was in one of the worst of its frequent, recessionary slumps. The Bombay textile mills, which account for 30% of the Indian cotton mill cloth production capacity, were over loaded with piled-up stocks on the eve of the strike. The strike was viewed by mill owners as an opportunity to liquidate these stocks. It is important not only to understand how the mill owners used every phase of the strike to their advantage. This will also help to explain why there was no cloth shortage in so vast a market as Bombay, even while 60 mills produced virtually nothing for over a year.

The general health of the economy and success or failure of harvests have always played a role in the off-take of cloth and taken a heavy toll on the profitability of the textile industry. But its sickness is largely a result of Internal management failures compounded by ineffective government policies. The textile mills not only suffer from gross obsolescence but have also been over-taken by the power loom and handloom sectors. While in 1947 the organised textile

Industry was responsible for 85% of the total cloth production in the country, its share of the production by 1982 was only 30%. In contrast, the production of the power-loom and handloom sectors went up to 4,973 million metres in 1981 from 1,013 million metres in 1951. Apart from large scale evasion of excise duty laws, the power loom sector thrived by violating most minimum wage regulations and paying its workers approximately 30% less than the mill sector. Many mill owners who frequently blamed the labour-intensive character of the mill sector for its ills, secretly diverted production to the power loom sector to ensure the accumulation of personal fortunes at the cost of corporate health.

The most critical factor contributing to the growth of “sickness” was the failure of most mill-owners to plough back profits into modernisation. In an analysis of the industry's health and the imperatives of modernisation, Praful Bidwai wrote in the *Times of India*: “The mill owner’s argue that it was impossible for them to plough back profits since they were too low. This is specious. For one, low profitability has been a feature of the textile industry throughout the world. For another, to quote a World Bank Report (1975), a significant part of the industry profit has been diverted to other industries.”<sup>40</sup> The author also quoted a statistical analysis which studied the 30 most profitable mills and found that their ploughback rates are among the lowest in Indian industry. Productivity also declined or remained stagnant not because of labour unrest but due to poor management of resources. The World Bank report noted the fact that modern machines were installed in the same squalid environment as the old machinery and thus performed only marginally better.

The pattern of family controlled managements further compounded the problems of this industry. Complacency was accompanied by the desire to extract all possible resources from the textile mills and invest in other more profitable industries. Under the soft loan modernisation scheme of the Industrial Development Bank of India set up in 1970, mill owners demanded that import of machinery be permitted because local manufacturers could not keep up with orders. But this led to the import of second-hand machinery which had been scrapped in Europe. Moreover, the bulk of soft loans went not to the sick textile mills but to the thriving mills which used the funds to diversify into more profitable lines of business. Even as mill owners protested vociferously against the proliferation of powerlooms, they encouraged sub-contracting by mills to power looms to become a way of life. That uncontrolled proliferation of power looms has posed a major threat to the mill sector is acknowledged even by government officials. The number of authorised powerlooms has been allowed to treble over the last 15 years, with a fixed quota for regularising power looms set aside in each plan period.

The high profitability of weaving cloth in the powerlooms inspired many mill owners to let much of their loom capacity lie idle. This led to the growth of small towns like Bhiwandi, near Bombay, where powerlooms became the nerve centre of commercial activity. At the time of the strike a large number of these looms were either owned or patronised by the owners of composite mills in Bombay. Even Commerce Secretary (Textile) Mani Narayanaswamy acknowledged in an interview that as a low-cost centre of production, powerlooms have been used by the mills as a base of production. This illegal connection was concealed in a variety of ways. The most common method involved sale of yarn by the mill owners to a relative or partner at a low rate. The relative or agent or partner had the yarn converted to cloth at a power loom. The cloth could then be either independently processed and sold or again handed back to the mill owner who processed the grey cloth, stamped it with his brand name and

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<sup>40</sup> From an article published in the Factsheet – “The 10th Month”.

marketed it. The low level of wages in the power looms meant higher profit for the mill owner. Since this entire process was kept out of the official mill records there are no figures available on the volume of this activity.

But it can be safely said that powerlooms were in a natural position to more than make up any short-fall in production created by the strike. The mill owners themselves stood to lose little because they continued to patronise the powerlooms. Kanti Kumar Podar, a former president of the Mill Owners Association and president of the Indian Merchants' Chamber in 1982, vigorously denied that there was any nexus between the mill owners of Bombay and the powerlooms of Bhiwandi. The power loom operators in that town however had a different story to tell. Within a month of the strike, power loom operators in Bhiwandi reported that business from mill owners had increased.

Whereas earlier the “beams” (large cylindrical metal reels with tightly wrapped yarn ready for placement on a loom) came from Bombay, during the strike yarn was brought to Bhiwalidi and placed on the beams there or at other independent units in Bombay. It was therefore one of Samant's principle demands that mill owners abandon the practice of patronising power looms and keeping badli workers in the mill idle. These incestuous links between mills and powerlooms were also accompanied by a growing monopolistic trend. Over the last two decades, several of the larger mills took over smaller or less powerful units. As a result of such amalgamation, by 1982, nine business houses controlled about 70% of the private mills in Bombay. While arguing his case Samant made the point that the amalgamated power of these companies was built on public funds provided at low interest rates by the financial institutions, and neither the exchequer nor the workers got their rightful share of the profits. Yet some mill owners insisted, with all seriousness, that they were just majority share holders and the MOA was merely the collective decision of the mill owners to represent to the government and not a powerful body fighting to further its own interests.

Apart from dismissing all charges of mismanagement, misdeeds and concentration of power in the hands of a few, the MOA responded sharply to the charter of demands issued by both the Shiv Sena's Girni Kamgar Sena and Samant's MGKU. Probably conscious of the Sena's lack of a mass base the MOA concentrated its efforts in replying to Samant's charges. Weeks before it ran elaborate advertisements in the newspapers countering Samant's charges, the MOA wrote lengthy letters to the Chief Minister stating its position on the demands. The government as the single largest mill owner in Bombay, with 13 nationalised mills, was expected to respond positively to such entreaties. “Bombay industry has been paying fair wages and fair bonuses” was the first claim of the memo sent to the chief minister in December 1981. Before dealing with the financial issues the MOA reminded the government that the agreement signed with the help of Sharad Pawar's government in 1979 was valid till December 1984 “with a provision for no fresh wage demand being permitted to be raised during the period of currency of the agreement.”

The mill owners' thesis, from the outset, was that workers were being misled by Samant. Well into the sixth month of the strike K.K.Podar still clung to this belief. In an interview to *The Telegraph* on July 20, 1982, he said: “When a worker feels that by joining a particular group he may be able to get a massive wage rise of 40% to 60%, in some cases even 80%, then on such expectations by and large people are carried away. They are led into this kind of a situation. Hopes and expectations were raised by Dr. Samant, especially after his victory at a textile processing unit (Empire Dyeing). Basically the strike is a result of fancy promises, and partly because of misrepresentation of the case of badli workers, of which there are some

50,000 in the industry. No responsible trade union leader, knowing the health of the industry, can make such demands. The textile industry has low profits and the wage component of the textile industry is 27% of its production costs. So even if we raise the wages by 15% this means a rise of 4% in the cost of production.” Though willing to acknowledge that the RMMS had lost control over the workers, Podar insisted that the recognised union had only temporarily lost its grip and only because of “high expectations and propaganda rather than resentment against the RMMS.”

Podar zealously pursued this line of argument throughout the strike. But other hard-liners were open to revising their opinions at a later date. As a senior director of Bombay Dyeing pointed out in January 1983, when the strike completed a year: “No one realised that the strike would last for more than three to ten weeks and thus everyone was, unfortunately, complacent.”

Samant's demand of Rs.480 per month per worker, the MOA calculated, would mean an additional wage burden of Rs.115 crores per annum for the Bombay mills. This was declared unrealistic not only because of the financial position of the industry but because D.A. had been hiked by 239% between 1974 and 1981. Samant's wage demands would mean a hike of 12% in the cost of the cloth – an increase could not be passed on to the consumer because “textiles sell only at the on-going price.” Unlike the modern capital-intensive industries, the labour-intensive textile industry could not easily pass on its cost increases to consumers: While the labour component of the Bombay textile industry was about 23%, the chemical industry's labour component was just between 4.5% to 11.4% and in the engineering sector the component was between 8.7% to 11.7% of the total cost. Moreover, the MOA claimed, the textile industry had already absorbed the rising cost of production from 1979 to 1981. While the cost had increased by 35%, cloth prices had increased only by 16.5%. These and other statistics provided by the MOA, were given the following postscript:

“The textile industry is spread throughout the country and any change in a centre like Bombay will have repercussions throughout all the textile centres. Consumers will be affected. Exports will receive set-back. Other industries will also be affected... no room should be given to thwart the sanctity of such legal agreements by threats of violence. If it were done, everywhere labour is likely to take the view that by force, existing agreements can be thrown out, creating indiscipline and consequently, a law and order problem.”

What the MOA's written statements did not discuss was the mill owners' position on Samant. It was common knowledge as early as November 1981 that several owners of the healthier mills were willing to concede about Rs.100 as an ad hoc increase if it would put a dampner on the agitational mood and help to sweep other issues under the carpet. Once this segment had made up its mind, the weaker mills could be pushed into agreeing.<sup>41</sup> According to some industry insiders there could have been a settlement at this stage but for Samant's insistence that a differential wage system be imposed. Samant was only willing to negotiate three categories under this system – Rs.150, Rs.100 and Rs.75. This tipped the balance against a settlement because the prosperous mills which earlier favoured a wage increase of up to Rs.100 withdrew the proposition. A wage increase imposed on a differential system would eliminate their advantage over the poorer mills. They were also apprehensive that once

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<sup>41</sup> It is important to note that this offer was never publicly or officially made but only privately discussed. The aim, even then, was to be able to persuade Samant to settle for a still lower figure.

placated Samant's appetite would become insatiable. If they had been divided earlier the mill owners were definitely united after the differential wage suggestion.

But the true hardliners, at that stage, were not in the ranks of the MOA. As mill owners later told journalists they had been willing to settle with Samant, like the rest of Bombay industry, but were forced by the Central Government to maintain a firm stand. In those days, long before the takeover of 13 mills on October 18, 1983, the mill owners and Bombay industrial community in general lauded the Government's firm stand on the "Samant menace". It was partly attributed to the industrialists' constant lobbying in Delhi.

The repeated arrests of Samant in 1981 were part of a crystallization of the Congress(I) policy towards the trade unionist. Though several individual Congress(I) functionaries in Maharashtra continued to hold the view that Samant was better inside the fold than outside opposing the party, the Congress(I) "High Command" did not budge from its position.

The bureaucracy, of course, handled the issue and described it in a more sanitized manner. Consequently Labour Secretary B.G.Deshmukh said in December 1983, that the question of Samant as an individual never arose and the allegation that the Central Government was out to "get Samant" was a figment of the leader's and the Bombay press' imagination. "There was an act, the Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act, how could the government flaunt it? We were putting down the Samant tendency<sup>42</sup>. This militant tendency could not be tolerated so (it had to be) prevented from getting any ascendancy anywhere." Deshmukh said: "Bombay city can't afford old style labour intensive industry and this crisis was bound to come, the sickness was inevitable. The structural adjustment was also bound to come and the strike played into the hands of the natural changes." A former municipal commissioner of Bombay, Deshmukh had sufficiently strong ties with the city to take a personal interest in the strike. On one of his visits to the city, Deshmukh roamed the mill area incognito and found workers were abusing Samant. Deshmukh came away convinced that while the "poor workers" suffered Samant was busy fulfilling the "historical function of showing how you can go wrong". The decisions Deshmukh took, or influenced ministers to take, were based on this perception.

Deshmukh's office was located on the first floor of a building ironically called "Shram Shakti Bhavan." [Labour Power Building]<sup>43</sup> In the lobby of this rambling building hung a huge picture showing four emaciated labourers wearing only loin cloths, heaving a gigantic stone. The ribs and bones sticking out of their malnourished bodies indicated nothing about the "Triumph of Labour" – the title of the picture. The scene depicted in the picture was only an ironical reaffirmation of the workers' determination, the inevitability of their frustrations and futility of their efforts in the prevalent framework as defined in the corridors of Shram Shakti Bhavan. In the hundreds of bureaucrats offices around this picture, even this human element was absent from considerations and deliberations. There only statistics mattered and these indicated the slow formation of an industrial working class in relation to increases in the total population. In the fourth decade after Independence, only about 23 million out of a population of 684 million were in the organised sector and they constituted only 10% of the total work force of 260 million. Factory workers constituted less than 2.5% of the total work force. Out of the remainder of the work force, 70% was in agriculture and 22% of this in the labourer

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<sup>42</sup> Deshmukh's definition of the "Samant Tendency" was the practise of disregarding all accepted norms and procedures. "There has to be some code of conduct, agreements must be honoured", Deshmukh added that Samant could not ignore and follow the law as and when it suited him.

<sup>43</sup> The building was, however, named Shram Shakti because it also housed the Energy Ministry.



category. Thus at Shram Shakti Bhavan the fighting mass of Bombay's 2.5 lakh mill workers was reduced to a mere fraction, namely 1.25% of the industrial work force which in turn is only 10% of the total Indian work force. It was a part of the tradition at Shram Shakti Bhavan that this miniscule fraction of 1.25% would be treated only as a miniscule fraction and no more. That this fraction, together with the family members dependent upon it, constituted about 12% of the population of the country's primary metropolis was also of minor relevance to the decision makers.

The electoral importance of this segment was a matter of concern only to the ruling party not to the bureaucrats, and the former had larger policy considerations which took precedence over the future voting behaviour of some 10 lakh Bombay residents. In the context of the conditions attached by the International Monetary Fund with its loan of Rs.5000 crores the government was under an obligation to show a certain toughness with labour. In this context 2.5 lakh troublesome workers were of no consequence and the tendency represented by their leader was a critical danger – a cancerous growth – to be controlled and eliminated with urgency.

The government's attitude was clear and predictable from the outset, G.V.Chitnis, general secretary of the AITUC in Maharashtra, recalled in retrospect. "The government is the biggest employer in this industry (textiles) and if this strike had succeeded the government would have had to give the same benefits all over the country," Chitnis said in January '84. "The strike had national implications at a time when the government was trying to force a policy of wage freeze in the country." Under this policy the strategy was, firstly, not to concede any demands at all; secondly if circumstances so compelled, to concede as late as possible; and thirdly, as little as possible. This policy had been at work in the government's handling of the Bangalore public sector employees' strike, in the promulgation of two ordinances denying bonus to Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) workers and in the issue of D.A. for bank staff all over the country. "If the government had conceded in textiles the bottom would have fallen out of this policy", said Chitnis.

The Congress(I) also had a commitment to protect the RMMS – a major affiliate of its trade union wing the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC).<sup>44</sup> Here again the MOA supported it whole-heartedly for, as George Fernandes put it so glibly, "The relationship of INTUC/RMMS with MOA is the stablest marriage in the country." In this context the demand for scrapping the BIR Act and subsequent derecognition of the RMMS took on an entirely political character. This policy was maintained despite the fact that even a section of the mill owners favoured scrapping or amendment of the BIR Act. In the three decades following the enactment of the BIR Act, the structure of the industry had changed dramatically with some mills installing highly sophisticated machinery and others retaining the archaic looms. The

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<sup>44</sup> The Congress(I) High Command was itself split on the issue of RMMS derecognition. Pranab Mukherjee, Shivraj Pal II and Babasaheb Bhosale – having no old union links – were willing to consider derecognition, according to a senior officer of the Maharashtra government who was closely involved in the decision-making process. But others like Bhagwal Jha Azad, C.M.Stephen and Vasantdada Pal II, as a former officer bearer of the RMMS, were the main hardliners. Eventually the hardliners won and it was decided that the RMMS would not be unseated. Publicly the government committed itself to allowing the legal process of derecognition proceedings to run its normal course. It was obvious to anyone even vaguely familiar with the legal process that it was heavily tipped in favour of the RMMS. The ruling party was relying on the cumbersome and futile legal process to push Samant against the wall. And Samant remained the main target of all government strategy. As a senior Maharashtra government official said: "Mrs. Gandhi is dead set against Samant's methods – with any other leader they (government) may have given in... if derecognition takes place Samant could take it as a victory and become more strident."

process of modernization was accompanied by rationalisation and such changes would be easier to impose without the BIR Act which compels mill owners to seek the sanction of the RMMS for any change in the production process which affects the workers. Even the Sanat Mehta Panel's recommendations rejected provisions of the type in the BIR Act, though for different reasons.

The Mehta panel recommended that wherever more than one union operates, the union with over 40% membership at the plant level ought to be recognised as the sole bargaining agent. It also recommended that where no union had such support then a composite, collective bargaining council of all unions in the factory ought to have the power to negotiate. Labour lawyer and columnist Radha Iyer noted that this was "a radical departure from the past where time and again both legislation and special commissions have insisted on having a single bargaining agent. This dogma has persisted since the British days but in practice seldom has such recognition of sole bargaining agents prevented industrial unrest. The BIR Act and the textile strike in Bombay are irrefutable evidence. The formation of bargaining councils is certainly conducive to democratic functioning and facilitates a process of consensus."

There were voices of dissent within the Congress(I) which favoured a jettisoning of the RMMS to save the party's future in a city never favourably inclined towards it. In October 1982, as the situation reached a more critical stage than it was ever expected to, B.A.Desai, the Congress(I) MLA from Bombay issued a public statement calling upon the Congress party to respond to the socio-political processes represented by the strike in a positive manner. Desai identified the sinister forces as "the Bal Thackeray-George Fernandes-Sharad Pawar combine" conspicuously excluding Samant who some local Congress(I) members felt should be in the party. But in Delhi a different view prevailed. INTUC president, N.K.Bhat was willing to concede that the BIR Act may require some amendment but its abolition was out of question as was the demand for recognition of the RMMS. Thus, while the viewpoint of Desai and others like him was considered by the High Command in Delhi, the hard-line opponents of Samant and supporters of RMMS had their way since they supported a position that was compatible with prevalent government policy on labour.

Thus a stalemate was created. In the year that followed there were several unofficial emissaries from the Congress(I). Among the few to meet Samant openly and place the meeting on record was former Labour Minister Gulzarilal Nanda. The one-time general secretary of the Textile Labour Association of Ahmedabad met Samant at Powai on the morning of 30th August 1982. Nanda had not come with an offer. He had only a request to make to Samant that the strike be called off and negotiations be initiated. Nanda was honest enough to admit to Samant that such a process of negotiation may not produce settlements which won all the demands but also warned that the longer workers remained on strike the more the mill owners' capacity to pay would be diminished. Nanda who had been persuaded by some friends to meet Samant in the hope that some good may come of it, also suggested that the firebrand seek other working class leaders' assistance and cooperation in conducting this struggle. Samant, predictably, refused to be associated with others or to end the strike without winning benefits. Samant also repeated, for Nanda's benefit, what he had been telling the world at large for over six months by then: "The workers have remained ignorant and not prepared for a struggle but now they are awakened and engaged in a struggle to end exploitation and injustice." There was no going back.

Nanda left the city, after his abortive attempt to change Samant's mind, convinced that Samant's tactics would not bring an end to exploitation and remembering that similarly high

levels of consciousness had led to a long struggle earlier but ended in damage to the industry and large scale unemployment of the workers. But then Nanda did not have the proximity to the workers to see the nature of, and reasons for, this battle unto death.

Similarly even after the strike completed six months Kanti Kumar Podar's perception of it and the workers' motivations was still out of line with reality: The propaganda convinced workers that if they stay out till July 19, (when the strike reached its six-month mark) the RMMS will be derecognised. But that is a debatable point, there is some ambiguity because there is no special provision under the BIR Act "about whether the RMMS should have support only of those workers attending or even those staying away from work."

The MGKU had filed its application for derecognition of the RMMS on March 24, 1982, with the Registrar of Unions in the Labour Commissioner's office. The MGKU claimed before the Registrar of Trade Unions that 90% of the textile workers had paid their subscription for two months to the new union instead of the RMMS. The MGKU thus argued that since 90% of the workers had not sought permission of the RMMS to remain in arrears of membership subscription (under clause 7 of the RMMS constitution) they had ceased to be members of that union. The RMMS replied by accusing the MGKU of being "guilty of instigating, aiding and assisting the commencement and continuation of the strike of the employees of the cotton textile industry in the local areas of Bombay.... the applicants are vague and no prima facie case is made out for initiating action (for derecognition) under section 15 of the Act.". The RMMS submission to the Register also brought up technical points about the MGKU's internal workings and questioned whether it had held elections as per its constitution after "it became a legal entity".

In a situation fraught with often meaningless technicalities and legalities, the process of fighting for the derecognition of the RMMS was the biggest Catch 22 of them all. Mrs. Savita Sudhamaya Bhattacharjee, the middle-aged, quiet, retreating woman who held the post of Additional Registrar of Unions, at first refused to take cognizance of the MGKU application for derecognition of the RMMS. But Samant moved the Bombay High Court with a writ petition and on April 25, 1982 won an order from the court directing Mrs. Bhattacharjee to verify the RMMS membership within two months. But the catch which plagued the workers and eventually frustrated the MGKU's efforts was built into the BIR Act.

Under the BIR Act, the union applying for recognition needs to prove a minimum membership of only 25% of workers. The RMMS had, over the years, only about one lakh workers out of the total of 2.3 lakh workers as its members. Secondly the Act gives no voice to a minority union, as the Industrial Disputes Act gives to industries under its purview. Consequently, Samant could not legally claim any voice even though the vast majority of workers supported him. Thirdly, the derecognition procedure is long and plagued by ambiguities. Section 15 of the Act gives the grounds under which a union can be derecognised but does not spell out the methods for verification of membership. The Act, for example, states that a registered union which "is not being conducted in the interests of employees but in the employers..." can be derecognised but is silent on exactly how the Registrar is to arrive at this conclusion. Fourthly, the same section stipulates that any month in which there was a strike for 15 days or more cannot be considered for purposes of verifying membership. It also automatically causes a recognised union to be derecognised if that union goes on an illegal strike.

P.N. Dada Samant claimed that the RMMS's records of membership subscriptions proved nothing since many listed as workers were not textile workers but outsiders who might have worked in the mills for two or three weeks. While Dada argued this point the MOA's R.L.N. Vijaynagar still maintained that the Registrar had erred in choosing the months of December 1981, and January and February 1982 for verification of the RMMS membership. Under the law, Vijaynagar argued, the Registrar could not include the strike period in the months chosen for the verification proceedings. Amidst these claims and counter-claims the RMMS President Vasant Hoshing stood firm and projected himself as a committed protector of the law. "I know the mood of the workers" he said, "but I know what is good for the working class in the long run. But, even so, we failed to carry the entire working class {with us}. That is our failing and I admit it. But in the larger interests of the workers, I have taken this stand (against the strike)." Hoshing's belief in the sanctity of tradition and law extended to the point of refusing workers permission to work on Independence Day. Some of the approximately 24,000 workers and clerical staff who were back in the mills by then wanted to work on August 15 and remain in the mills overnight because Samant's jail bhara andolan was to begin the next day (August 16). The "loyal" workers were afraid of entering the mills on the day of the andolan and preferred to be inside a day earlier. But Hoshing refused them permission on the grounds that it would be in contravention of "tradition and unpatriotic" to work on the national holiday.

Contrast this attitude with Samant's vehement disregard for most norms and his demands for the abolition of the BIR Act and you have the essence of a stalemate. Samant and the workers were on an entirely different wavelength from the mill owners, the RMMS and the government. There was, at this stage, a possibility that if the RMMS had been derecognised by the Registrar Samant might have proclaimed it as a victory and the workers would have returned to work, since this demand was paramount and monetary benefits were a secondary issue.<sup>45</sup> But the government and the mill owners were jointly committed to ensure that this did not happen. At the end of July 1982 Podar firmly maintained that there could be no compromise with the law – the sanctity of which was essential for the maintenance of "long term industrial peace".

There was price to be paid for this firmness and the mill owners, with the Central Government's encouragement, were willing to pay it. The Union Government had specifically and emphatically directed the mill owners not to negotiate with Samant – this directive served as unifying force within the MOA. Moreover, as one mill owner pointed out, "how can you tell the government that its union (RMMS) is useless?" Consequently the absurd situation was created where the combined interest rate on the accumulated losses was eventually greater than the wage bill demanded by Samant.

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<sup>45</sup> Despite the firm avowals of Podar and other hardliners, many mill owners, who in the early stages were willing to give up to Rs.100 and make a compromise settlement, also saw a settlement signed by the RMMS as being futile. "The RMMS had no hold – so there was no point in making an offer to them," said one mill owner. "Money was not the issue – change of unions was the paramount issue."

## CHAPTER 5: Divide and lose

Bombay's textile workers were the earliest and most militant form of organised labour in India. For decades they were the vanguard of the Indian working class movement. Long after this ceased to be true, and vanguardism became almost a term of abuse, there was still a temptation to see in the struggle of the Bombay textile workers glimpses of the entire Indian working class on the warpath.

But the government and the mill owners knew from the outset that nothing of the sort was happening or was even likely to happen. The policies which led to the creation of an unbreakable stalemate were based on a close knowledge of the state of the established central trade unions and their inability to function effectively together. The government relied on the internal rivalries of the unions to make a mockery of the most valiant workers' struggle.

Therefore, dramatic pronouncements by the strike leadership about the Indian working class on the warpath in the form of 2.5 lakh textile workers left the bureaucracy and the ruling elite unmoved. This was a result of not only an insensitivity to the implications and dimensions of the turmoil in Bombay but also a certain disdain for the over-statements by professed "supporters" of the working class cause. Consequently most decision makers failed to perceive and acknowledge the textile workers' capacity for indigenous organisation which was primarily responsible for the intensity and long duration of the struggle.

The textile workers first rose in unison in 1908 to protest the conviction of Lokmanya Tilak in a sedition case, for which he was sentenced to six years rigorous imprisonment. For six days all mills remained shut. The violence which accompanied this strike left 15 people dead, many others injured, and brought the military out on the streets of Bombay. The strike had no leaders or organisation and it was as much revolt against the conviction of Tilak as against the working and living conditions of the mill hands. Lenin on hearing reports of this uprising had written: "The Indian proletariat has already matured sufficiently to wage a class-conscious and political mass struggle and that being the case Anglo-Russian methods in India are played out."<sup>46</sup> Events which followed proved Lenin wrong and the methods which he thought had run their course kept the British Empire intact for another 40 years.

Long after the imperial forces had relinquished political control in India the proletariat was no closer to getting its fair share, let alone control, of state power. In the post-Independence period the Indian left failed to effectively harness the frustrations of that 50% of the population which remained below the poverty line. The geographic and demographic spread of trade unions remained limited even three and a half decades after Independence. Only 10% of the Indian work force was in the organised sector and of this 25% was not unionised. Landless agricultural labour, which constituted 50% of the workforce, had almost no effective organisation let alone trade unions. At the beginning of the 1980s almost 70% of the trade unions in India were in six states, namely Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Kerala and Bihar. These states also accounted for 60% of the total membership of registered trade unions. Till 1975 only 1.7% of the unions in India had a membership of over

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<sup>46</sup> *Strikes in India* by V.B. Karnik.

5,000 workers each, while 73.2% of the unions had a membership below 300.<sup>47</sup> The National Commission of Labour noted as far back as 1966 that the common constraints for unionization are: 1) the casual nature of employment, 2) ignorance and illiteracy of workers, 3) small size of the business establishment with low per capita investment per person employed, 4) scattered nature of establishment and 5) superior strength of employers operating singly or in combination. Thus the strongest unions were formed in the oldest and biggest industries. Membership of unions in cotton textile, coal and basic metal alloy industries accounted for 50% of the total membership of unions in 12 major industries.

This narrow base was further weakened by the repeated and frequent splitting of the central trade unions which led their affiliates to compete as much with each other as they fought with managements. The first split occurred after the militant upsurge of 1928 when the Bombay textile strike thrust the communists to the forefront of the working leadership and moderates led by N.M.Joshi left the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the first central trade union body in India. In 1931 a group of orthodox communists split from the AITUC and formed the Red Trade Union Congress (RTUC). In the following two years, 50,000 workers in Bombay were thrown out of their jobs and in 1934 almost every textile mill reduced wages. The divisions in the union seriously hampered the effective organisation of strikes and protests, and the cost was paid by workers. The vagaries of the trade unions and the frivolity of these splits was manifest in their decisions to re-unite. The RTUC returned to the fold and merged with AITUC in 1935 and Joshi's group, the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), followed in 1940. But the next year another group of radicals, who opposed any support to the British, left to form the Indian Federation of Labour. This body was in intense competition with the AITUC by the end of World War II. After Independence almost every political party established its own trade union wing. The Congress set up INTUC. The Socialists formed the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat which merged with the Federation of Labour to create the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). A set of dissatisfied Socialists set up yet another body, called it the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) and affiliated it to the Revolutionary Socialists Party.

The decade of the 1950s was marked with numerous attempts by these bodies to unite or arrive at "understandings" about areas of activity and thus curtail competition. But these efforts proved futile and in 1959 the HMS split yet again with some Socialist Party leaders quitting to form the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat.

Eleven years later the split in the Communist Party of India (CPI) divided the AITUC and created the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), controlled by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). The 1969 split in the Congress party similarly split INTUC and led to the formation of the National Labour Organisation led by the Congress(O). In 1972 the INTUC, AITUC and HMS arrived at an accord on the issue of determining recognition of unions where more than one is in competition. But the CITU was not party to this National Council of Central Trade Unions and formed its own United Council of Trade Unions. Both bodies died without achieving anything when the emergency was declared in 1975.

The most devastating effects of this fragmentation were felt by the workers. Due to the incessant splitting at the national level local unions were often left with inadequate finance and vacillating membership support. In this politically vitiated atmosphere workers' loyalties were not given a chance to grow. Studies have found that workers see unions as

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<sup>47</sup> *Labour Movement in India* by G.K.Sharma.

intermediaries to secure economic benefits and protection against management's arbitrary actions. Therefore, if the union fails to deliver, workers will seek another union because their involvement with any union is more on a contractual basis than ideological or philosophical.<sup>48</sup> In the earlier stages of industrialisation workers tended to attempt improving their socio-economic condition through a temporary alliance with industry and were submissive. If conditions became too distasteful they tended not to strike but abandon individual mills or industries. Moreover, as has often been said, the Indian labour movement was born out of philanthropy, and has been a movement *for* the worker not *by* the worker.<sup>49</sup>

Labour movement presumes a higher degree of consciousness among workers than conveyed by mere trade union objectives.<sup>50</sup> And such a movement is yet to develop in India. Meanwhile, much of the theorising by academics and trade union leaders has concentrated on the “management” of the rank and file. Consequently, over the last decade there has been a growing demand for greater autonomy of unions from political parties and at a unit level from the central trade union body. It is out of such trends that a movement could grow. And the textile strike was perhaps the most radical manifestation of this grass roots trend. But then the RMMS was also an extreme example of the process of degeneration and complacency which afflicted central trade unions at the turn of the decade.

To a large extent the RMMS's ills were the result of an inevitable process. After spending the first decade and a half of its existence in a few unpretentious rooms the RMMS built “Mazdoor Manzil”, a sprawling multi-storey building with a grand central staircase. The lawns of the approximately one acre plot occupied by the RMMS, in the heartland of the Bombay's textile mills, were guarded by a high wall and imposing gate. In the years that followed more buildings were added and the corridors were decorated with a collection of portraits which serve as a historical record of the heavyweights of Maharashtra politics who also graced the offices of the RMMS. The range of portraits included the somewhat Machiavellian Rajni Patel, who was once President of the RMMS but died defending Datta Samant in court, and Vasantdada Patil who retained his old RMMS loyalties when it came to taking a stand against Samant.

By the end of 1981 the RMMS was collecting Rs.3 lakhs in monthly subscriptions from the textile workers. Workers earning wages below Rs.1,000 paid Rs.2 per month and those earning more paid Rs.3 per month. The monthly expenses of the union were about Rs.1,70,000. This went to pay the 110 full time staff -members of the union and for the upkeep of the two buildings which included a theatre, several lecture halls and a hostel. The Ambedkar Institute of Labour studies also had its offices and library at Mazdoor Manzil, and was funded by the RMMS. As a recognized union the RMMS had always adopted a legalistic approach to the problems of workers and in the total absence of struggle it became at best a bureaucratic monolithic body and at its worst a repressive machinery for the enforcement of the mill owners' law. Its very origins were rooted in the Congress party's strategy to counter communist threats and gain control over this vital chunk of Bombay's industrial workers. Its purpose over the years remained the same, namely, to neutralise radical elements which sought to control the textile workers.

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<sup>48</sup> *Trade Unions in India* by Pramod Verma and Surya Mookerjee.

<sup>49</sup> Sharma (Quoting Oscar A.Orant in “Jobs and Workers in India”).

<sup>50</sup> Sharma.

The system of representation within the union reflected the nature of functions it was required to perform. The RMMS was ostensibly governed by a Joint Board of Workers “elected” from each mill, with each Joint Board member representing 100 workers. But instead of holding an open election workers were required to “apply” for seats. A secret ballot was held only if there were more applicants than seats in a particular mill. Even then, every effort was made by the union hierarchy to dissuade other contender from contesting the “election” in order to allow one worker, obviously of their choice, to be “elected”. The Joint Board then elected the executive body including the President, General Secretary, Treasurer and other officials. When the pre-strike unrest erupted in late 1981, RMMS officials pointed to the ratification of the 1979 agreement by the Joint Board. But since the Joint Board had no credibility as a truly representative body the acceptance of the 1979 agreement had no relevance.

Evelyn D'Souza, treasurer and office factotum of the RMMS tended to respond sharply to such criticism and questioned if by the same criterion Parliament and the Union Cabinet could be held to be representative. Hoshing saw no reason to decry this institutionalisation. “People come and go” he said, “but the institution survives. Today the trade union movement has become just a shop, nothing more.” Given the function which the Congress party and MOA expected it to fulfil, the RMMS never sought to be an expression of the workers' movement at the plant level. Subsequent failures were products of this historical background and institutional structure.

INTUC policy followed the precepts of Gandhi, whose views on trade unions and labour struggle were unrealistic even in his own time. The INTUC President N.K.Bhatt described his union's policy in the following manner: “We work not solely for the working class but for the whole country and for the working class as apart of it.” Such an approach was bound to leave major lacunae in effective labour representation – which Samant filled. That there was “something lacking” in the RMMS even Bhatt acknowledged. During the last one decade specifically, the RMMS failed to understand the technological changes and the impact on workload and wages. Bagaram Tulpule noted that the “RMMS dealt with each specific measure of modernisation in each mill as an isolated case. Some wage increases on an ad hoc basis were negotiated in each case, but these were limited to only those workers who directly tended the new higher technology equipment – leaving the bulk of benefits of the new technology in the hand of the employers... The representative union should have taken the initiative to demand a complete revision of the entire wage structure, to bring it in line with the present technological and economic realities and job differentials.”

'On an average the RMMS signed 200 modernisation agreements every year. Most of these agreements related to the scrapping of machines, introduction of new machines and clubbing of jobs which resulted in reduction of the work force from eight to sixty, on an average. With the unflinching support of the Government behind it the RMMS continued to act in this manner with impunity and no fear of threats to its power over the textile workers. The frequent and successful inroads made into the textile sphere by other unions, were dismissed as a not unusual “tide”.<sup>51</sup> After the hard and bitter battle of the textile strike was over and RMMS General Secretary Bhai Bhosale had been ousted from office he still claimed to have established “trend-setting” system of variable D.A. in 1973, which gave workers additional benefits. Why this agreement was then followed by a strike was explained by Bhosale with the following: “Dange Sahab, with his magic, saw that there was a strike.”

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with Bhai Bhosale.



If the failures of the RMMS were colossal they were also in built and probably unavoidable. But the major trade unions affiliated to the opposition parties could not avail of such an excuse. As Columnist Sumanta Banerjee noted: “The record of the major trade union organisations during the last three decades – their failure to evolve a new strategy that would go beyond the mere economism of struggle for higher wages, opportunistic deals with employers or government to maintain their positions – had led to some disillusionment with the conventional organisations among the Indian working class. This is reflected in the mushrooming of maverick trade unions independent of the major political parties and national trade union organisations in several parts of the country”. There had been self-generated area committees of workers in Pune during the Emergency which were active in resisting victimisation of workers and other forms of repression. The more famous and oft-cited examples of independent trade unionism was A.K.Roy, a former CPI(M) member in Dhanbad who organised mine workers and tribal peasants. Shankar Guha Neogy, another trade unionist not affiliated to any central trade union body organised unions of mine workers, tribal youth and landless labourers in Madhya Pradesh.

Bagaram Tulpule was equally scathing about the failure of the major trade union organisations in the country: “None of them seem to have devoted much thought to the movement as a whole: its philosophy and goals in the unfolding socio-economic and political milieu, its growth in the post-independence era, its strengths and weaknesses, achievements and failures, the challenges it faces today and the ideas, strategy and methodology it must adopt to meet these challenges effectively.”<sup>52</sup>

Though cries for unity from trade union leaders date back to the origin of rivalries nothing has actually been done to prevent compulsive splitting and multiplicity. Even when a challenge of the magnitude of Datta Samant arose there was no effective introspection leading to an active response. Condemning the individual trade unionists set upon empire building, Tulpule noted: “Most of the established trade union organisations, it is true, do not practice this methodology of rowdyism, violence and terror. But they also do not seem to be doing anything to combat the heinous spread of these methods. The apparent success of these individuals is a phenomenon that calls for a serious study by the movement since their methods may in time completely swamp established trade union methods or organisation, and collective bargaining. A movement which deliberately indulges in these methods will inevitably invite repression against itself and workers' interests will suffer thereby.”<sup>53</sup>

The left trade unions did publicly support Samant, on the textile strike but their support meant little to Samant. Tulpule again commented on the divided nature of the leading Marxist groups (CITU, AITUC and Lal Nishan): “Therefore the idea that their support to the (textile) strike, such as it is, will bring strength to the Marxist cause or will bring Samant within respective and distinct spheres of influence seems as bizarre as the proverbial tail seeking to wag the dog”<sup>54</sup> The state of confusion among the left central trade unions was perhaps best illustrated by the events surrounding the second all India one-day strike on January 19, 1982. Radha Iyer reported in *Business Standard* that the central trade unions which had called that bandh, did little ground work and the government began to take the bandh seriously only when the opposition parties announced their support early in January.

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<sup>52</sup> Bagaram Tulpule, *Janata Annual Number*, 1981.

<sup>53</sup> Bagaram Tulpule, *Janata Annual Number*, 1981.

<sup>54</sup> Bagaram Tulpule, *EPW*; May 1. 1982.

The bandh was eventually marked by numerous instances of spontaneous response from sectors not covered by the organised trade unions. Despite the railwaymen's union instructing its members to report for work, both union leaders and management suspected that workers would defy the order and took elaborate precautionary measures. But workers from small scale sector units in north Bombay, where in some cases there were no unions, participated in the bandh. Since the leadership had called no meetings or organised any programme for the bandh, no union activists were seen on the streets. Yet there were examples of demonstrations organised by the local level militant trade union leadership.

In Bhiwandi, the Janata, CPM, HMS and an independent youth organisation had set up a united action committee and decided to take a procession through the town. On the day itself, however, only the youth organisation could mobilize some people and took out a procession of about 300 volunteers who did not confine themselves to the issue of the bandh but also focused on the problems of the power loom workers. Similarly, in Nagpur, though the HMS backed out of the bandh several workers in its fold stayed away from work that day. This is proof, Iyer wrote, that “the workers were willing to lead the struggle and that the leadership is not. It showed that even when they did organise one it was only a passive one and not an active militant action. The fact that it was only after the political parties decided to support the bandh that the government began its onslaught against the bandh on such a scale also indicates that the government is not seriously worried about workers' action or trade union action. What it is worried about is political action and the growth of political forces. Ultimately, even the government realises that it is not trade unionism but political forces that can be dangerous to its political power...”<sup>55 56</sup>

So when George Fernandes criticised Samant for fighting a political battle on the basis of a strike alone, he was not far from the truth. Derecognition of the RMMS and scrapping of the BIR Act were major political issues for the government but posed little danger so long as Samant stood alone with a strike of “only a fraction of industrial workers.” Fernandes characterised this as “saber rattling” at the government, mill owners and other trade unions. But Fernandes' role, and that of his contemporaries, was even more disturbing and workers were not oblivious to this. Attacking the established central trade union was inherent to Samant's style which in turn was determined by the mood and demands of the rank and file. “Samant has guts, no doubt, but he lacks wits” Somnath Dube of the Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat (HMKP), liked to say. But Samant had enough wits to see that the old style trade unionism was on its way out – it is debatable whether the new style which he evolved would be beneficial in the long run but it had the power to make an immediate impact.

In his more candid comments even Fernandes acknowledged the deradicalization of his own union, the HMKP, and talked about the cadre becoming “stability and security conscious”. As he pondered over the vast institutional structure set up by his unions Fernandes wondered if “I made a mistake in building a strong organisation.” This was a veteran firebrand's acknowledgement of the difficulty in reviving militancy. While Fernandes' union and other trade unions were passing through a non-radical period the workers' militancy grew unhampered. Similarly Yashwant Chavan of the Sarva Shramik Sangh believed that “Datta Samant has risen out of this as an expression of what was brewing in the working masses.”

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<sup>55</sup> Sumanta Banerjee also noted in his column in *Deccan Herald* that while opposition parties claimed credit for the bandh it was more a spontaneous expression of discontent.

<sup>56</sup> Radha Iyer, *Business Standard*; February 3, 1982.

Whether Samant could truly harness this unrest to constructive use was, at that stage, immaterial. He could and did spearhead it. But most of the established central trade union leaders failed to see in this an opportunity to thrust the working class movement a giant step forward and instead perceived a threat to their own standing and the future structure of trade unions. Somnath Dube was among the more candid, for he said: “A struggle of 2.3 lakh textile workers is not a political revolution. But had he (Samant) succeeded, the other trade unions here (Bombay) would have been wiped out; this was the obvious reason for their inability to stand by and support him. Everyone feared this, and (they were) happy that here was the MOA – a powerful body with direct access to Mrs. Gandhi – which will bring Samant to his Waterloo. That was a very wrong way of thinking. I for one feel guilty that we have not been able to do justice to the situation. It was such an historic event. I have lived in the mill area for three decades but never seen anything like this; the fervour was unmatched.”<sup>57</sup>

While almost all trade unionists would agree that” the workers' mood was unprecedented they also unanimously suspected Samant's politics. His refusal to attend the trade union convention held at Shanmukhananda Hall in June 1981, together with his refusal to come on a common platform against the government was interpreted as being covert support of Mrs. Gandhi. Even as the strike became long drawn out, many veteran” unionists suspected that Samant was negotiating with the Congress(I) for a place within the party. His refusal to participate in the one-day national strike on January 19, 1982, was seen as further proof of his dubious political leanings. The AITUC's textile union, the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU), made several efforts even after this to get involved with Samant's programmes and support him. The GKU stand, Chitnis explained, was determined by the: conviction that “the real confrontation in the Indian working class movement is not between us and Doctor. We were not jealous of Doctor. We passed a resolution of support and handed it to Samant.”

But these resolutions meant little to Samant for he knew most workers who once owed loyalty to the GKU and other unions were already behind him. With his highly personalised, ad hoc and unorganised style of functioning Samant had limited use for the activist cadre of these unions – except those who were unconditionally willing to support him. The only such union was the Sarva Shramik Sangh, a left trade union affiliated to the Lal Nishan party which split from the CPI in 1942 on the issue of supporting the British in the war effort. Dange almost contemptuously dismissed the Sarva Shramik Sangh as having no base of its own. Other left trade unions by and large accused it of using Samant's mass base. But the Shramik activists insisted that they supported the strike because it was a landmark struggle between the workers and the government-mill owner combine. Even the Shramik activists in Pune were trying to organise workers on the issue of the textile strike.

*Shramik Vichar*, a daily newspaper committed to the cause of the working class and published by the Shramik, actively supported the strike. The *Shramik Vichar*, printed on a small, almost antique, press in two ramshackle rooms in one corner of Pune became a major source of information and inspiration for the strikers. When a delegation of the Bombay strikers went to Pune they made it a point to visit the *Shramik Vichar* office to meet the workers and ask them to keep the paper alive at any cost with a promise of monetary contribution when their battle had been won. The Shramik leaders held that the popular upsurge of the textile workers was a crucial development in the Indian working class movement and must be supported.

Unlike most of the other left trade unions the Shramik did not view the fallacies in Samant's

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Somnath Dube.

method of operation as sufficient ground to stay aloof from the strike or to quietly oppose it. The opportunity for Shramik to strengthen its own base was obvious and many of the more acutely aware striking workers resented this. The Shramik leadership, however, maintained a stand which was concerned with the larger aims. V.G.Deshpande, a Shramik leader in Pune, put it thus: "If Doctor can be given a broadly left orientation, the potential of a revolutionary turn is there in this".

Apart from the Shramik there were activists from other established unions, mostly young people, who for personal or institutional reasons saw the importance of Samant and the limitations of their old, organisations. Regardless of how actively or inactively their trade unions were supporting the strike these activists got busy among the rank and file of strikers without being asked or told to do so.

The rank and file itself was unflinchingly behind Samant regardless of previous trade union affiliations. As we shall shortly see, the mood and its manifestations were such that the leaders of other unions could not play a role even if they wanted to. In April, three months after the strike began, Samant and Fernandes shared a platform where Fernandes expressed his reservations about the strike – Fernandes had said in December '81 that the piled up stocks of cloth in mills and the glut in the market forebode ill for any strike at that juncture. Secondly, Fernandes felt that Samant's decision to "bury a lonely furrow", despite offers of support from others, was likely to endanger the strike effort. Fernandes acknowledged Samant's unchallenged leadership of the textile workers and left the decisions to him.

Fernandes and the HMS even supported a Maharashtra bandh called by Samant on April 19. At that stage the determination of the textile workers was just beginning to be perceived by the RMMS, mill owners and other trade unions as an unchangeable reality. The early claim of the MOA and government, that the strike could not last beyond "a few weeks", was losing ground. As the strike entered the third month the RMMS and mill owners intensified their lobbying.

Several mill owners approached union ministers to seek direct Central Government intervention in the strike. On the other hand, unions in other industries and even among white collar workers, like the LIC, began raising funds to help the textile workers. Amid speculation about a possible change of leadership in the RMMS, and the deepening financial crisis of the mills, Union Commerce Minister Shivraj Patel flew down to Bombay on April 16 to examine the possibilities of breaking the stalemate. Whatever their private apprehensions, publicly the MOA maintained that the strike was bound to fizzle out shortly and the process had already begun. Shivraj Patel, who at the stage was Mrs. Gandhi's eyes and ears, took this impression back to Delhi. The reasoning offered to back up this claim was that with the onset of monsoon, in a month and half, the workers who had gone to their villages would be compelled to return to the city. June-July has traditionally been a peak attendance period in the mills.

Those who held this failed to note, or deliberately chose to ignore, the process of consolidation underway in that parallel world with which they had no contact. In the villages the textile workers who had returned were busy organising the support of rural masses, particularly the poor and middle peasants. In the city the workers were equally busy fulfilling their promise to Samant to manage the strike on their own. The century-old tradition in indigenous agitational organisation was coming into play and producing a phenomenon whose characteristics and dimensions defied traditional definitions and classifications. Herein

lay the answers for those who were baffled by the mystery of the workers' tenacity and ability to conduct a marathon strike.

## CHAPTER 6: The Long Haul

In 1982 Dange was a wrinkled, benign old, man happily playing the role of grandfather and whiling away time within the confines of his daughter's small flat. He only vaguely observed happenings in his erstwhile domain of Bombay's textile mills. But half a century earlier he had been the first major leader to appreciate and articulate the textile workers' innate agitational ability and sense of solidarity. As Dange later wrote, the 1928 strike was not a creation of the communist union but the union was the product of the strike which the workers had called. "The (textile) workers learnt in 1924 from real objective conditions, that he who is not with them is against them. In the class struggle, there are no neutrals. So, when we in 1928 expressed our disbelief in arbitration or enquiry committees and rejected proposals of submitting the fate of the strike to another class court of imperialism and the bourgeoisie, we were simply repeating their own lesson which the workers had learnt in 1924. Not only that, we being young and ignorant of all the happenings of 1924, were in fact warned by the older workers against such committees and we ourselves were given lessons in the past struggles by the class-conscious and the older workers. The most class-conscious and experienced workers are generally better teachers of the class struggle than many a petty bourgeois intellectual bookworm."<sup>58</sup>

This high level of consciousness and experience among textile workers came from a long tradition of indigenous organisation within the mills, primarily the storm of mill committees. Some of the earliest mill committees were formed in 1908 when Bal Gangadhar Tilak advised jobbers to organise in this manner for the purpose of discouraging workers from drinking liquor. But one of the first actions of these committees was to organise a total strike in protest against Tilak's conviction and deportation by the British Government.<sup>59</sup>

Dange's Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) had therefore made a provision in its constitution to channelise the workers' initiative and provided for the formation of mill committees to be established and run by workers at the factory level. But the constitution did not give these committees the individual power to call a strike and they were meant to act as "purely advisory" bodies. But, as Dange soon found, the committees could not be compelled to restrict their sphere of activity. After the 1929 strike mill committees functioned as rival authorities in the mills and used lightning strikes to assert their power. Dange told the court during his trial in the Meerut conspiracy case: "They (mill committees) took initiative and powers of their own accord and it was against my principles to lessen their initiative by pointing out the letter of the constitution. They were controlled only so far as to guide their actions in a disciplined channel, conformable with the general interests of all the workers, and to give them a proper perspective in matters which were immediately beyond their comprehension and in which therefore their individual actions were likely to conflict with the general line of movement."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Dange.

<sup>59</sup> It was not surprising then that in the vigorous and emotional outburst of 1982 the workers often shouted pro-Tilak slogans and denigrated Gandhi who had consistently taken a stand in favour of the mill owners.

<sup>60</sup> Dange.

The mill committees, in Dange's view, were schools of learning where the workers would learn the whole mechanism of production and distribution, and become capable of exercising control when the factories were nationalised. The mill committees were also a means of reading the pulse of the union: "They are advisory in the sense that they advise the central leadership on the workers' mood, their grievances, the state of organisation and the steps that are to be taken on a scale larger than that of one individual mill or factory."

Dange made scathing remarks about the role of non-militant trade unions which, ironically, were equally valid half a century later in 1982: "Afraid of displeasing the bourgeoisie, (the reformist trade unions) do not want the mill committees or factory councils to take initiative in direct action, where necessary, in India. They want to keep these committees as "purely applicant bodies", standing in all humility before the trade unions bureaucracy sitting at the head office." But eventually the character and nature of the organisation Dange built also changed, to become less radical and militant. And in 1983 another trade unionist of the communist tradition, Yashwant Chavan, noted that the left trade unions are "very hostile to this concept of mill committees. They use mill committees gave strength to the workers for fighting day-to-day harassment." The committees of the late 1920s did not survive beyond the strike of 1934, when the communists faced severe repression and militant activity among textile workers declined. But the basic instinct, crystallised and channelized by mill committees, survived over the decades to reassert itself from time to time and was responsible for the historic strike of 1982.

Discussions and activity in the mill committees preceded the tidal wave that swept through the mill areas and headed for Ghatkopar. Thus, when the workers promised to manage the strike themselves they acknowledged the magnitude of the task and were confident of the machinery through which it could be accomplished. The RMMS bosses had typically failed to understand the mill committee phenomenon. Even with the benefit of hind-sight, RMMS General Secretary Bhai Bhosale insisted that mill committees were no more than a means for other unions to enter the textile mills: "They (mill committee) are alright for some purpose like inviting Samant." Bhosale acknowledged that the committees might have some potential to curb malpractices of managements but "we have not taught them" Bhosale also refused to make any allowance for the workers' innate organisational abilities, saying that "workers forming their own union is a good idea, but old affiliations remain and nothing much can come of it (such independent efforts). We have seen for the last 20 years".

This attitude made it impossible for Bhosale and others like him to perceive the depth of enthusiasm, excitement and organisation that marked the first few months of strike. P.N.Samarit later recalled: "In the first month they (workers) had tents in front of the mill gates and were very well, organised. They would sit there, celebrate the strike and enjoy – we (MGKU officials) were also roaming about." All this changed with the imposition of section 144 outside the mills. Samant claimed that the order had been imposed because the mill owners wanted to remove stocks piled up in the mills and were afraid the workers would prevent them if allowed to congregate around the mill gates. Hundreds of workers were arrested following the imposition of the order. At this point Vidyadhar Budbadkar, one of Samant's most dynamic young lieutenants, regularly met with Salaskar and Mandre, an aged worker from Kohinoor Mills. The three of them often met under a tree on the Empire Dyeing compound to discuss developments in the strike and explore possibilities of a future course of action. It was at these sessions that the concept of zone committees was discussed and formulated. The two veterans, Salaskar and Mandre, recognized that the mill committees in their original form had limited use in maintaining the strike and there was a need for a wider

body which would perform the same function at a larger level. Budbadkar elaborated upon the idea and by March five zones had been demarcated, one each for the Kala Chowki area, Delile Road, Saat Rasta, Worli and Dadar.

The establishment of the zone committees was coordinated by the Ghatkopar office. The activists of all mill committees were called there and 12 of the most active workers in each mill were selected for membership of the zone committee of their area. Many of these workers were not members of their mill committee but were selected for the zone committee on the basis of the depth of their involvement in the strike. Positions and titles had little relevance in the thick of battle and everyone who was fighting fit did whatever was in his capacity. In May, a general meeting of all zone committees was called at the union headquarters and their role was clearly defined. The zone committees were essentially expected to intensify the struggle, organise workers, hold public meetings and maintain contact with the workers in their homes. The mill committees, about six in every zone, continued to function in coordination with the zone committees and began a door-to-door campaign of meeting workers, to appraise them of the situation and ensure their active participation in the strike. At another level of zone committee activists met at Samant's office in Ghatkopar every week to give an account of the situation in their area and whenever heeded, to take advice from the MGKU leadership which, at this juncture, consisted of Dr. Samant, P.N.Samant and T.S.Borade.

In a highly organised manner some mill committee representatives chose a place near the mill where all the workers were required to come every morning and sign on a roster. (Workers leaving for the villages were required to inform the committee. This allowed the committee not only to keep track of the number of workers still on strike but also helped them to identify who was eligible for strike benefits if and when some were available. Mill committee leaders, who, met privately in strategy sessions, often addressed the rank and file with information about fresh developments on the strike situation and called for solidarity. This regular contact allowed them to accurately gauge the level of morale and take action to boost it when found flagging. In several instances the committees of different mills held joint meetings. On a few occasions they also organised free meals with the help of sympathetic organisations. Such programmes provided little material assistance but were intended to, and did, boost the workers' morale. When workers gathered in thousands at such occasions the mood was not only aggressive but also festive. Mill level leaders made speeches, others distributed leaflets and copies of *Shramik Vichar* while workers exchanged notes with each other.

The government responded to these campaigns of the zone committees by extending section 144 in the entire mill area and thus prohibiting gatherings of five or more people in a vast area of the city. (Earlier the order had been imposed only around the gates of the mills). Over 116 strike activists were arrested. P.N.Samant was arrested while addressing a meeting in the mill area. Salaskar was also arrested. Vidyadhar Budbadkar and five others were arrested under the NSA. Wherever even ten or less workers gathered at one place the police would swoop down and arrest them. Earlier the workers had gathered in the open spaces around their chawls and bastis. The workers of Sriram Mills, for instance, lined up under a tree in a compound near the mill to note their attendance on the roster.

Meanwhile, the main activists of the mill committee would sit in the tea shop next door and map strategies for their immediate needs. Most of them were slightly brash young men with an air of aggressive defiance. They were cautious of strangers and at first spoke hesitantly. Any suggestion about the inevitable failure of the strike aroused instant anger among these



young men. They had more than the emotional fervour and almost religious faith of a Lata Shelke. In the eyes of these young men was the cold look of die-hard zealots. Most of them were badli workers who felt they had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Vishnu Rane, 25, a worker of Srinivas Mills was among those young men who formed the backbone of the strike. An SSC graduate with the look of a smart college student, Rane was a leader in the Srinivas Mill committee. Rane and his friends had a simple manner of articulating their views which was surprisingly devoid of rhetoric. But then Rane, like others in his ranks, was no ideologue. He belonged to a set which was assertive and even included rougher goonda elements. Ironically, some of these goondas were first inducted into the mills by the RMMS to protect its own interests. But in the turbulent times of the strike some of their henchmen also turned against the RMMS. This was one of the factors which helped to explain the growing assertiveness of workers' committees under the nose of the RMMS. With the help of such erstwhile goonda elements, organisers like Rane were able to mount a strong Campaign to counter the efforts of the RMMS and mill owners to force workers back into the mills. They always remained reluctant to reveal details about their operations and even had a "bodyguard front" which remained unidentified not only to the police but also to much of the rank and file of strikers. Violence and counter violent tactics were the forte of groups like the one led by unassuming and harmless looking Rane. Rane and his friends earned notoriety when petrol bombs were thrown on a bus of "loyal" Srinivas Mill workers, killing two and injuring nine others. Five of the activists were eventually sentenced to life imprisonment. Rane was acquitted.

When the police began raiding the meeting places of these groups most of the activists went underground. Those who remained in circulation kept a low profile and set up offices in obscure chawls where workers came one by one throughout the day and marked their attendance. Some, however, continued to fight the battle on a violent front. But such actions invited intensified police action against the strikers. Many of them stopped sleeping at home since the police often pounced on them late at night. In many cases the families of the workers were besieged and harassed by the police.<sup>61</sup>

The police also arrested workers at random and held them in lock-up overnight, or for a day or two, without pressing specific charges. Like the activists before them the police went door to door ordering workers to return to work, using arbitrary lock-ups as a threat. The strikers were located and threatened by the police with the direct collusion of the RMMS functionaries. The zone committees, however, continued to function underground. Most of their activists, except those arrested under NSA, were released within two weeks. According to Gurbir Singh of the Navjawan Bharat Sabha (NBS), which supported the strike for the first ten months there were essentially two forms of police terror. The first consisted of general harassment, under which workers were picked up and kept in the lock-up for up to one month under section 151 of the CRCP. The second form grew out of the local police officials need to show that they were actively dealing with incidents of violence. "So they made arrests to show to the higher authorities," explained Gurbir Singh, "and the police got lists of activists directly from the mills."

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<sup>61</sup> After arresting Salaskar in the early hours of October 3, the police went to his one room tenement in Worli and harassed his wife. Without pressing any specific charge the police also picked up Salaskar's son, who was in the last year of school. Salaskar, with his years of experience in trade union struggles, recalled his days in jail with wry humour saying that it gave him a chance to make friends with a wide variety of people – including cinema-ticket black marketeers.

A similar process was at work in the villages where textile workers had sought refuge. The government estimated that 50% of the workers had gone to the villages, but the MGKU put the figure as high as 70%. About 97% of textile workers come from outside Bombay, and 32% live in the city without their families. Though these workers by and large have no substantial land holdings, they retain strong links with kith and kin in the villages. Since the wages of the male worker in the city have usually been a major source of sustenance for the workers' immediate family and relatives in the village, it was all the more remarkable that his rural relatives could not only manage without his input but also support him. These urban-rural linkages of the workers played a major role in sustaining the strike effort for such a long period.

In areas with a strong concentration of textile workers, strike activists went on bicycles from village to village, in groups of five to ten. They shouted slogans along the way and held meetings, where they read out reports on the progress of the strike in Bombay. The workers had gone to the villages with the intention of staying away for six to eight months, which was their initial estimate of the duration of the strike. Even after this period was over they remained determined to return to Bombay only when called by Samant. There was correspondingly a firm belief that Samant would not give the call to return till the battle had been won.

Sarva Shramik Sangh activists in Pune reported that workers in villages around that city needed little organising and convincing in the first six months – when they kept the struggle alive on their own strength. But the reach of the RMMS also extended to these villages and this was used to exert pressure on the strikers to return to work. The entire kulak elite, including the sarpanch and other powerful men of the village hierarchy supported the RMMS in its efforts to persuade and bully workers to return to work. The *Economic and Political Weekly* reported in September 1982 that “the village governmental structure has also been used, with notices sent to every potice patil asking for the names of the striking workers and asking him to approach them and convince them to go back”.

However, these exhortations had no impact on workers and only served to further convince them of the nexus between the urban-rural elite and the governmental structure. A knowledge of the theory and history of class struggle was not necessary to perceive this nexus and most of the activists had no links with the communist parties or Marxist traditions of the older workers. These youths found their ideal not in a political party but in Samant, who had no professed ideology or specific long-term aim. For it was Samant who was forging the links between urban and rural workers that “revolutionary” parties had merely theorized about.

Samant made his debut on the rural scene on February 21 at a conference of agricultural labourers at Satana in Nasik district, organised by the Lal Nishan Party (LNP). Following this Samant and Yashwant Chavan went on tour of three southern districts of Maharashtra. Thousands of peasants and the textile workers gathered at planned and spontaneous meetings, to meet and hear Samant. Most of such meetings were organised by the workers and rural poor themselves with only some help from activists of Samant's union or the Lal Nishan Party. Samant's message to those who attended these meetings was that the urban and rural workers must unite to fight against the moneyed elite of both town and country.

The *Economic and Political Weekly* reported in September 1982 that Samant's tour, early in the strike, was a resounding success. Workers and their poor peasant relatives and friends turned out in masses of up to twenty to thirty thousand for meetings in the bigger villages, and

often gathered to force spontaneous unscheduled meetings on the way or to turn planned “road visits” into full-scale rallies complete with processions through the villages. These meetings were nearly all organised by the workers and rural poor themselves, with some preparatory help of textile union activists from Datta Samant's Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union and the LNP's Kapad Kamgar Sanghatana. Just as in the Satana conference, they were marked by expressions of unity between workers and rural toilers and hostility against the rich farmer elite. Few of this elite or their political representatives attended the workers' meetings and when they did they often found a highly uncongenial atmosphere. At Uttur in Kolhapur district a sarpanch grew intensely disturbed at talk by LNP organiser Santaram Patil on agricultural labourers' problems and the need for unity, he rose to protest “just talk about workers, why are you bringing in politics,” and was ignored. In the following speech Datts Samant himself took up the theme saying that workers could not afford to stay away from politics, that they had experience of all the ruling parties betraying them, and that the sarpanch's party should send a resolution through the grampanchayat supporting the strike. And the man was besieged by workers afterwards pressing this demand.<sup>62</sup>

On such tours of the rural areas Samant collected grains from the peasants and strengthened solidarity among the striking workers in the rural area consequently, the workers in the villages enthusiastically participated in bandhs and gheraos of MLAs and government officials. At one point there were innumerable tales circulating about how RMMS activists, sent to counter the strikers' campaign were hounded out of villages by striking workers.

The CPI and CPM had from the outset, opposed the large scale migration of strikers into the villages on the grounds that this would damage the dynamic momentum of the strike. The momentum, however, was maintained by workers in the city who through the broad-based area committees managed to cut across all trade union and party affiliations to create solidarity among a diverse variety of industrial workers, while at the higher level various major unions including the LIC workers, Western Railway workers, Glaxo, RCF etc., contributed cash and grains to the strike efforts. These area committees took receipt book from the MGKU and collected thousands of rupees for the strikers from individuals. Thus these area committees played a key role in keeping the strike alive. The Chembur Kamgar Samiti was a prime example of this and in time became the most famous of the committees. This Samiti was born out of the efforts of a handful of non-textile workers (some of them in white-collar jobs) who wanted to participate in the strike effort. Samant's answer to all such people who offered him their help was that they should help educate the workers to keep morale high and provide aid through supply of free grain. The textile workers living in Chembur worked along with such active supporters from the RCF and other units to organise a body aimed at providing a joint forum for all workers and consolidating the strike effort.

The Samiti was divided into sections. One group was in charge of running the meetings. A second group was in charge of distributing food. A third group (known as Sangharsh Vibhag) was in charge of keeping in touch with the MGKU office and providing adequate support for all centrally organised protest actions like morchas and dharmas. A fourth group, called Sanghatana Vibhag was responsible for encouraging further proliferation of such committees. A fifth group was in charge of encouraging the use of militant songs and dramas (to spread the message and spirit of the strike). A sixth group was responsible for explaining the implications of the latest developments to the strikers. Each group had five or six activists. Among their more successful actions was a morcha taken to the local housing board office

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<sup>62</sup> *EPW*, September 18, 1982.

where the officials were persuaded not to forcibly demand rent from textile workers while the strike lasted.

As stated earlier, the area committees were created partly for logistical reasons. Apart from the problems created by the widespread imposition of section 144, it was also expensive and inconvenient for workers living outside the mill area to travel every day to the mill committee's gathering spot near the mill. The area committees were meant to perform the same function in the suburbs. The workers could sign on the muster roll maintained by the area committee and also keep informed about developments.

Apart from raising funds from workers in other industrial units these committees also organised madat pheries – donation collection rounds in the streets of their neighbourhood. For example, the Oharavi committee (which had about 10 main activists) with only 1040 textile workers as its core membership was able to raise enough funds to distribute 1200 books free to children of textile workers when schools reopened in June. These area committees coordinated their activities with the mill committees and MGKU head office to participate in strike related programmes.

Most area committee activists felt a great sense of pride and satisfaction about their non-hierarchical style of functioning. They tirelessly stressed that among them there were no bosses and all decisions were taken by consensus. Though deeply sincere and full of conviction these activists also displayed a painful, probably inevitable, streak of naiveté. For they frequently said quite earnestly that “the workers must unite and tell the government that we are one, peacefully.” Implicit in such statements was the belief that if the government could only be convinced about the solidarity of the workers it would relent and take the necessary action in their favour. There was a tendency to overlook just how strongly the government was committed to crushing the struggle, and Samant, at any cost. Therefore, many area committee activists were not aware, till it was too late, of just how heavily the odds were stacked against them. They were also not severely bitter or critical of Samant's handling of the strike until the strike was a year old.<sup>63</sup>

Samant had used mill committees before in a variety of industrial units where he had taken over the union. The established trade unionists had criticised these committees as “mere” strike committees. The current stage of capitalism, it was argued, rendered them grossly inadequate and incompetent. These committees of Samant's were also, moreover, largely undemocratic and hence in spirit bureaucratic and vulnerable to corruption, co-optation and distortion.<sup>64</sup>

The same could not be said of the area committees, and later zone committees, of the textile strike (though in many ways the strike was a natural culmination of the Samant style). Their internal functioning was by and large democratic. Regardless of their level of proficiency against this stage of capitalism, these committees represented and provided to the rank and file a better fighting chance than the methods of the established trade unions. Here, in operation, was the working class solidarity that the “petty bourgeois intellectual

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<sup>63</sup> It was in January 1983 when the zone committees and area committees were further organised into a Central Committee, that they helped to articulate the growing dissent and dissatisfaction of some workers with Samant's style of functioning.

<sup>64</sup> Pendse, *EPW*, April 18 and 24, 1981.

bookworms”<sup>65</sup>, condemned by Dange, had only theorised about and debated. As with many other aspects of the strike there is a temptation to romanticise the workers' solidarity. But the success of the group formations which made this solidarity possible must not be over-rated or exaggerated. There were, of course, major differences of opinion on the handling of the strike within the mill and area committees. Those who disagreed with Samant, or some who even gently questioned his plans and actions, came away deeply embittered. The committees had some inherent limitations and could not prevent much of the rank and file from often feeling that they were floundering in the dark. Even as he held his position, still defiant and determined, the textile workers knew it was not enough to be assured of a light at the end of the tunnel when he often could not see it himself.

Those who ventured into the workers' dark chawls past the sixth month point of the strike confronted the sad reality of an inexorable struggle which would not end and was rapidly sapping the strength of the beleaguered army. Signs of battle fatigue were visible in even the most zealous and relentless fighters.

Within six months of the strike, the once bright and cheerful Lata seemed to have aged beyond her years. She talked mournfully about her youth spent in that dark and dismal hut and Khandeo's prime years gone amid the heat and deafening noise of loom sheds. There was regret and a sense of doom of one who has burnt all bridges and finds only closed doors ahead. By then, Lata was running her household on the income from a panbidi shop she and her husband had opened in an outer corner of their 10' by 10' hut. Since the daily profit of about Rs.12 from this shop was not enough to feed a family of seven, Lata took to different types of handicrafts to earn money. But the proud Khandeo Shelke would not allow his wife to work outside the house to earn a wage, like hundreds of other women who had taken to selling vegetables or doing manual labour. The sparkle in Lata's eyes had dimmed and her lack-lustre face spoke of a strain which had to be experienced to be understood.

There were also underlying fears of intimidation by violence. The workers, Lata said one day, had to choose between life and going to work – so they don't go. “Khandeo keeps saying I'll go now this month but he never goes. We are already in debt to my sister for about Rs.7,000. Whatever can't be noticed (by neighbours) we have mortgaged – but not the utensils because then people will laugh. My brother has helped on a monthly basis. Thanks to God there is at least family unity. But all around there is fear – mill owners are not taking badlis or activists (back into the mills). What will happen... ?” As she talked about the strike and its all pervasive effect on her life Lata looked blankly around her. If she still continued to march along with the others it was with the weariness of one who wants only an end to the fighting – little caring whether it is in victory or defeat. But her mind remained lucid and her perceptions became even sharper. She one day compared herself and fellow textile workers to the refugees of Bangladesh and said, “They came to our cities and lived on our footpaths –where will we go... we are already on the footpaths.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Dange.

<sup>66</sup> As the political consciousness of the workers continued to rise, it also lent itself to a wry wit. On one visit to a congregation of textile workers in BDD chawls a worker, realising that I was a journalist, sought me out to say: “You must write about the strike in a paper which Indirabai (Mrs. Gandhi) reads because she says she doesn't know about the strike.” The man was referring to a remark made by her during a flying visit to Bombay. Just back from a triumphant trip to USA, Mrs. Gandhi flew to Bombay on a Sunday morning to see the critically ill Amitabh Bachchan, superstar of Hindi cinema and son of Mrs. Gandhi's life-long friend Teji Bachchan. As she stepped out of Breach Candy Hospital Mrs. Gandhi was questioned about the strike by reporters. The Prime

For over two lakh men and women like Lata such moments of doubt and deep despair alternated with hope and a reaffirmation of faith. While fear of violence played its part, much of the power exercised by the mill committee activists was based on rekindling the basic sentiments which had generated the tidal wave of support for a prolonged strike. As S.B.Modak, a mill committee official said: “Workers are even eating half their normal food and living somehow and passing the time fighting for the future – now we are not scared.” There were, of course, dissenters among the strikers – many were among the older generation of workers, who had a long association with the RMMS. Bapu Bale Mane, in his late fifties, belonged to this category. By June '82 Mane insisted that one-third of the workers wanted to return but were prevented by fear of violence from strikers. Mane's view of the strike was dominated by a sense of hopelessness. To him there was nothing heroic about the younger workers waging a war he knew they could not win.

Outside the realm of the mills where the strike was not a day-to-day reality, the popular perception of the strike was similar to Mane's. As early as April 19, a Maharashtra bandh called by Samant in support of the then three months old strike was only a partial success.<sup>67</sup> But contrary to popular expectations this did not signal the end of the strike. The fact that Samant regularly threatened to launch a jail bhara andolan without actually doing so was also seen as a sign of weakness. Many strike activists had felt from the outset that Samant was not planning enough agitational mass actions.

Samant's detractors were not far wrong when they accused him of lacking enough active participants for a jail bhara andolan. With over 60% to 70% of the workers in the villages and those in the city busy earning a living by any means possible, there was a limited number of workers available to court arrest. Thus the union first opted for actions like demonstrations in front of the homes of MLAs – a programme jointly organised with the Trade Union Joint Action Committee (TUJAC). Though the agitators were quickly picked up by the police, such events helped to highlight the strike in the press. It reminded the inhabitants of that parallel world that the strike was not fizzling out, as they had expected, and was instead going strong. Such events even compelled the mill owners to admit that the strike continued.<sup>68</sup>

The mill owners' hopes for an early fizzling out soared when Samant lost the Thane Lok Sabha by-election in May 1982. Though Samant was careful not to make the Thane election a central issue in the strike his fate in this contest was taken by many industrialists as an indication of his future and that of the textile strike. Though Samant lost the election he managed to split the Congress(I) vote to ensure the defeat of its candidate and the victory of the BJP candidate.

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Minister replied that she had only just returned from abroad, and knew nothing about the present state of the strike. This explanation for her ignorance was irrelevant to the workers, who never forgot that she had time to visit a film star friend but not to study or solve their problems.

<sup>67</sup> This was partly due to the fact that even in Bombay Samant was not able to bring business and commercial activity to a standstill since 561 of the 1654 buses of the Bombay Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) undertaking were operating. Samant controlled less than half of the BEST union at the time.

<sup>68</sup> The efforts of several ministers to intervene in the strike in search of a solution were of no avail since, Samant said, none of them had anything positive to offer the workers. In an interview to Olga Tellis of *Sunday* magazine in mid-July, Samant said: “(Before) the strike) I tapped the MPs who were convinced of the just demands of the workers. Even Y.B.Chavan and Vasantdada Patil were sympathetic. After the strike call was given we were busy consolidating and strengthening the strike. Once you are in strike, it is a war, and you cannot talk of peace unless there are indications from the other side. Before that every possible effort was made to avoid it.”

Far from demoralising the textile workers this defeat worked in Samant's favour. His decision to contest the election had actually disenchanted some sections of the strike activists. They feared that if Samant was elected to the Lok Sabha he would go the way of George Fernandes – getting embroiled in the petty party and power politics of Delhi at the cost of the interests of thousands of workers who had reposed their faith in him. Moreover, the demographics of the Thane Lok Sabha constituency were such that a defeat for Samant there did not necessarily indicate the same of his following among the textile workers. The BJP victory was largely the result of support from shopkeepers and petty businessmen who formed a sizeable segment of the electorate in the constituency. There was also a large “Agri” caste vote which went to the BJP since its candidate, Jagannath Patil, belonged to that community. Samant's failure to win the support of the entire working class segment, in the many varied industrial units of the Thane-Belapur belt, did not automatically spell doom for his position in the textile mills.

While the anti-strike forces were quick to claim that Samant's defeat in this election would soon diminish his following, their actions were contradictory. When Samant announced his jail bhara campaign shortly after the election defeat, the then Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosale addressed a rally at the RMMS's Mazdoor Manzil and commanded Congress(I) MLAs to seek out mill-workers and convince them to return to work. This was an unwitting admission that Samant's election defeat had not had the expected impact on the strikers. The intensified RMMS activity was based on the premise that with the end of the harvest season and reopening of schools, the workers in the villages would be compelled to return to the city. In the absence of an agreement the disappointed workers were expected to trickle back into the mills. But the workers did not pour back into the city. Samant had sent activists who put up posters in the villages urging workers to remain there. Those in the city remained adamant about returning only with benefits in hand. In this context, Samant's jail bhara call was a direct response to the workers demand for action instead of just speeches. But frayed nerves and short tempers at the MGKU office were evidence of the high tension existence of its inhabitants. Questioned by a reporter about future strategy in case the jail bhara andolan failed, P.N.Samant burst into a tirade against the press accusing it of only “looking for sensational developments and asking what is happening next – nothing has to happen.”<sup>69</sup>

When both Samant's election defeat and the onset of rains did not bring workers back into the mills, the mill owners were compelled to acknowledge that the strike had surpassed all their expectations. Gradually the mill owners began to reassess the situation and found that there may after all be some good in evil and misfortune. For them Samant was both.

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<sup>69</sup> The strike had already exceeded the total number of man days lost in the previous two years. The nation lost 22.56 million man days as a result of industrial disputes in 1981 and 21.93 million man days in 1980. By May 1982 the textile strike alone had caused a loss of 22 million man days.

## CHAPTER 7: All quiet on the east side?

When the strike first began inhabitants along the Western sea shore of Bombay, for whom the mills and agitated workers were only distant tales, experienced a strange new sense of insecurity. The media's attention on the human and economic dimensions of the strike, with special emphasis on the “fear psychosis” being generated by the striking workers, created a subtle paranoia in the minds of the middle class. This fear began to take root when the strike did not fizzle out within a few weeks, as the mill owners had predicted. Apart from the 2.3 lakh workers, at least four times that number of people were directly affected by the strike. Including the family members of the strikers and those working in support services catering primarily to textile workers (e.g. canteen and restaurant workers), an estimated ten lakh people were probably going hungry, becoming increasingly desperate and were feared to be on the brink of a violent outburst. For the government and the middle class the strike was primarily a law and order problem. This segment expected burglaries and thefts to increase as the deprivation and frustration of over one-tenth of the city's population increased. Few cared to check with the CID officials monitoring the situation, who found no significant increase in the crime rate due to the strike.

The tension was highest in places where the executive staff of the mills lived. One such pocket with a high density of textile technocrats was in Prabhadevi on a by-lane, off Veer Savarkar Marg, leading to the sea. In an area not more than an acre, stood the twin towers of Bombay Dyeing and two sprawling housing societies called “Technocrat” and “Textila”. Hundreds of the highly paid technical experts and managers of textile mills lived in these colonies. In the adjacent lane was a sea-side bungalow hidden behind carefully planted trees where the owner of Bombay Dyeing – Mohammed Ali Jinnah's grandson, Nusli Wadia – lived. The residents of this neighbourhood feared that gangs of mill workers would soon be heading this way and there was no knowing how they may give vent to their anger. When one day a group of belligerent looking workers actually arrived at Technocrat shouting slogans, there was panic among the residents. But the agitated workers wished only to see one of the mill-managers living there and they left peacefully after meeting the official. This isolated and harmless incident illustrated the paranoia which coloured the middle class perception of the strike and was responsible for a strong negative emotional response to it and the workers.

The mill owners made the most of the sympathy which was therefore showered upon them by the city's elite and gradually shifted their own attention to the possible benefits of the strike. In this context they naturally had neither the inclination nor the means to understand the nature and dimensions of the strike and the human tragedy it signified. Their total failure to grasp the dynamics of the situation was illustrated by the fact that when they met the Union Commerce Minister in April 1982, they asked for police protection claiming that if this were provided the workers would return to the mills. Simultaneously, the government was receiving intelligence reports exactly to the contrary. But this changed nothing for the MOA and its chairman was of the view that “the long drawn fear-stricken strike of the workmen (is) led by an irresponsible labour leader who has no respect for law or the rules of the civilized society and whose cult of labour relations is violence.”<sup>70</sup> Neither the unprecedented length of the strike nor the level of solidarity among the workers could change this view. Samant's

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<sup>70</sup> H.Maganlal at MOA 107<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting; June 23, 1982.



defeat in the Thane Lok Sabha by election gave more strength to this line of reasoning. R.L.N.Vijaynagar, secretary of MOA, was proclaiming that things would move fast in the months ahead and the strike would fizzle out because the workers' endurance had run out. This could only be cause for celebration since in Vijaynagar's view the strike was "not a worker welfare attempt but a clear fight among labour leaders to gain ascendancy over the workers in Bombay." The chairman of the Housing Development and Finance Corp (HDFC) and former chairman of Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India, H.T.Parekh, noted with satisfaction that in the workers' returning to their villages and possibly not coming back to the city was an opportunity to deal with the excess labour situation. As late as October 1982 Parekh wrote in the *Economic Times*: "To a layman Dr. Samant's demand and the offer by the industry both seem unrealistic. Both sides should put forward their revised minimum and maximum to reach a quick settlement which they have not done. Once the gap is narrowed, a mediator acceptable to both can determine a reasonable figure after a quick discussion with both parties."

Such views, common among the top ranks of industrialists and chiefs of financial institutions, were not only ill-informed but also reflected a certain naivety because they ignored the issue of union recognition. The editor of the *Economic Times*, Hannan Ezekiel had written a lengthy article on the strike entitled "Approach to a Solution" without even touching on the issue of RMMS. In a reply to this article B.N.Dattar<sup>71</sup>, head of the RMMS-sponsored Ambekar Institute of Labour Studies, was compelled to note that since Ezekiel failed entirely to deal with the question of the BIR Act and RMMS derecognition, his "Approach to a Solution" suffered from a basic unreality.<sup>72</sup>

But the views of these respected opinion-makers were an accurate reflection of the prevalent perception of the strike among the ruling elite. They were willing to acknowledge that the strike had raised certain fundamental issues but the overall perspective remained deeply rooted in tradition and their own class interests, making it impossible for them to understand critical issues from the workers' point of view. Therefore, the strike leadership's lack of respect for "constructive and constitutional" methods was frequently denounced without attempting to examine the extent to which the credibility of the system they sought to protect had been eroded at the grassroots. Thus Ezekiel could in all seriousness suggest retraining schemes for workers squeezed out of the industry due to modernisation and retrenchment, without realising that such "schemes" have absolutely no credibility with the workers.

Such thinking could only produce an offer which the workers would find ludicrous. On July 9, just as the strike approached the six-month mark, Labour Minister Bhagwat Jha Azad answered a calling attention notice on the strike in Parliament. Noting the "hardships suffered by the workers" Azad announced a Rs.30 ad hoc wage increase, a Rs.650 advance (to be later deducted from wages over a period of time), a tripartite panel to examine the textile industry's problems and an assurance that workers who immediately returned to the mills would not be victimised. The Tripartite Committee's brief was to look into the problems of badli workers, the demand of workmen for house rent allowance and conveyance allowance among other things. There was, of course, no mention of the workers' principle and most fundamental demand – derecognition of the RMMS.

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<sup>71</sup> The article was written by Dattar on behalf of Vasant Hoshing, President of RMMS.

<sup>72</sup> *Economic Times*, October 17, 1982.

Opposition MPs raised token protests against the offer made by the Labour Minister calling it “unfair”. Since the offer had been formulated in consultation with the MOA it welcomed the announcement and expressed the hope that workers would soon resume duties.<sup>73</sup> To the workers the offer was as much of a blow as it was a consolidating force. What Samant described as “the most dishonourable offer and package, which humiliates the self-respecting workers” was a shock because it belied their hope that a prolonged strike would force the government to relent. Strike activists almost unanimously rejected the offer and it reinforced their determination to continue the struggle. For the offer was seen as adding insult to injury.

Therefore, Samant began planning a chain of strikes in Maharashtra as part of a campaign to intensify the textile strike. Samant told Kumar Ketkar of *Economic Times* on September 21, that the struggle would now be spread horizontally since it was clear after a marathon debate in the Maharashtra Assembly that the government was making the strike a prestige issue and would not accept the legitimacy of the workers' demands unless forced to see reality. The labour scene in and around Bombay suddenly seemed even more volatile when, at the same time, George Fernandes prepared to launch a strike of municipal employees. A week earlier, in Delhi, all the non-INTUC unions had boycotted the National Labour Conference and had pledged to give greater momentum to their “total confrontation” with the Government. For the mill owners this “confrontation” was crucial because they saw it as a chance to destroy the “Samant menace”. Even as the losses continued to accumulate the mill owners lost what little interest they once had in resolving the conflict and settling the strike. And the losses were indeed stupendous. By the middle of November, 1982, the mills had lost production worth Rs.1,030 crores, profits of Rs.40 crores and exports worth Rs.100 crores. The workers had by then lost Rs.205 crores in wages over 44 million man days. The state and central governments had lost Rs.205 crores in revenue.

The total production of mill-made cloth in the country was 837 million metres less in the first nine months of 1982 as compared to the corresponding period in 1981. Mill-made cloth production at textile centres other than Bombay went down by 20 million metres during January-September 1982. Ahmedabad was particularly affected because of the 50% power cuts. As against this, the Textile Commissioner's Office had made a provisional estimate that the decentralised sector had increased cloth production by 265 million metres in the first nine months of 1982. However, the total cloth production in the country was still lower by about 570 million metres in October 1982. Yet there was no cloth shortage and the piled-up stock position of textile centres other than Bombay did not substantially improve. The quantum of piled-up stocks of cloth at other centres went down only from 264.6 million metres in January 1982 to 237.3 million metres in September that year. And this was higher than the corresponding month in 1981 when stocks stood at 224.5 million metres. It became apparent, as early as March 1982 that other mills were not benefiting from the strike and the positive fallout of the strike was going to the powerlooms. Not only did the power loom sector take advantage of the strike on its own initiative, but it was also helped by some of the strike-struck mills. Many of the leading mills had cloth produced on powerlooms and then marketed with the mill stamp, in order to keep the mill's brand-name alive.

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<sup>73</sup> Naval Tala. Chairman of the Tala group of textile mills saw in the government's Rs.30 offer a touch of magnanimity since it was not obliged to give anything to workers who had flaunted laws and followed an “irresponsible” trade union leader. The employers had not been party to this ad hoc award but had agreed to it “as a gesture to ensure industrial peace”. See *Economic Times*; October 21, 1982.

Consequently there was no cloth shortage in the market. The ancillary and accessory manufacturers supplying to the Bombay textile mills found alternative markets and did not suffer great losses. While the figures of losses incurred by mills continued to rise astronomically, the mill owners themselves were not affected since these losses did not impinge on their personal fortunes in any visible manner. Thus while the interim offer of Rs.30 was welcomed by the mill owners, the Tripartite Committee was dismissed by them as being unnecessary the Committee's job was to examine problems of the textile industry's workers, which did not interest most mill owners. Others more sympathetic to the workers' cause also doubted the credibility of this Committee because it indicated only that the Government was keen to create an impression of wanting to resolve the strike. The appointment of the Committee in no way indicated a change in the Government's basic attitude towards the strike and thus could not be an instrument for breaking the stalemate.

However, the former chief justice of Maharashtra, Justice Deshpande, who was selected to head the committee, insisted later that at the time of appointing the committee the then commerce minister Shivraj Patil "sincerely thought a way out of the stalemate could be found by examining the whole industry and seeing how rationalisation could bring higher wages – he was dead earnest." Senior officials in the commerce ministry echoed these sentiments and stressed the need for obtaining an objective view of the situation. But more than that it was hoped by officials that the committee would eventually provide an opening for a compromise settlement which would end the strike. But the committee did not exist in a vacuum. It worked in the same, deeply vitiated atmosphere which had generated the stalemate of the strike. The governments' refusal to allow Samant to be represented on the committee further reduced the possibility of it being able to offer a solution acceptable to the workers. Out of the three unions invited to participate only the RMMS and the Textile Workers' Association in Ahmedabad took part in the committee's proceedings. Other unions boycotted the committee.

The mill owners went to the committee with the determination of only presenting old arguments and claims about their inability to pay higher wages, still unwilling to concede any benefits. Thus the proceedings of the committee, which commenced almost five months after it was appointed, were plagued by dissensions and the inability of various representatives to come to an agreement. The committee eventually made recommendations only on the issues of house rent allowance (HRA) and badli workers. After much wrangling it decided to grant the workers an HRA ranging from Rs.32 to Rs.65.5 On the badli front there was no unanimity but the committee tentatively formulated a system which would make a segment of these workers permanent but at the same time also create an additional category of "reservists".<sup>74</sup> These semi-permanent workers would not enjoy all the benefits and protections of permanent workers but they would be entitled to daily employment. The committee could not reach an agreement on the issue of a wage increase. But in this case even the representative of the Maharashtra government lodged a dissenting vote and agreed with the trade unions that there was some scope for increasing the wage over and above the standing offer of the Rs.30 interim increase. While Justice Deshpande later refused to discuss the details of the report, which never having been formally accepted by the government was not released to the public, he broadly discussed the issue in these terms: "The workers were feeling the pinch of the cost of living. But money must come from the profits of a concern. For almost two years there was no production but maintenance costs were borne by the mill owners. If the cost of living increased so did the cost of raw materials and can the industry raise the price of cloth

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<sup>74</sup> *Financial Express*, March 27, 1983.

proportionately? There is a limit up to which the price of cloth can be hiked. So where from to pay?”

This was the basic thrust of the committee's proceedings and it came as a surprise to no one. By the end of August 1983, it was clear that even the Central Government had lost interest in the committee and did not reply to its requests for clarification and other information. Therefore, though they had not been formally informed, the committee members knew when they met on September 8, 1983 that it would be their last meeting. The committee had been initially given a term of one year and the government clearly had no intention of extending the term. Moreover, given the pace of work and total lack of unanimity, Justice Deshpande was himself of the view that nothing was to be gained by the continued wrangling. Moreover, as Justice Deshpande pointed out, with only two out of the required five union representatives in the committee, what validity could its report have similar views prevailed at the Commerce Ministry in Delhi where the decision to wind up the committee was taken. Given the progress of the report, officials felt, there was no point in investing further time and money to deal with the larger questions about the textile industry in India, which was originally a part of the committee's brief.

Senior officials at the Commerce Ministry took the same view as Justice Deshpande, that higher wages would mean greater sickness of the mills. But the more candid among the Udyog Bhavan bureaucrats went a step further and pointed out how “the strike played into their (MOA's) hands. It would have been better to have a constructive dialogue with the workers to settle the production norms etc. In the absence of that there is now forced rationalisation.” Though it took some time for the government officials and mill owners to openly and jubilantly talk about the benefits of the strike, they had been conscious of the possible dividends after the first few months of the strike.

Having overcome their surprise at the prolonged duration of the strike, the mill owners were viewing it with a tinge of optimism. The strike was creating conditions which could help the Industry in the long run. As Ashok Piramal, Chairman of Morarjee Goculdas Spinning and Weaving Mills, told shareholders at the company's annual general meeting held on December 7, 1982: “The prolonged enforced closure has also given our management an opportunity to make a detailed appraisal of the working of the mill as also to chalk out strategies for the future... we had drawn up a plan for modernisation of our mills involving a capital outlay of over Rs.15 crores by end 1981. I am pleased to state that despite the great constraints faced in the last twelve months, we have taken vigorous steps in forging ahead in this direction... Secondly, co-terminus with modernisation every effort must be made to improve productivity in all areas or else it would totally negate the massive capital outlay. While this is a sensitive issue it is high time that all concerned the managements, the unions, the employees and government took a dispassionate and objective view of what is in the long-term interest of this vital national industry with an international dimension.”<sup>75</sup> This was Piramal's euphemistic way of saying that the strike provided an opportunity to retrench workers on a scale that in normal course would have taken over a decade.

A director of Bombay Dyeing said in January 1983: “We (the Bombay textile mills) were over-burdened with labour. Now at least 25% of them are not expected to come back and replacements will not be taken. This is a big saving for the mills which will now not have to pay retrenchment benefits or compensation. The closure of certain mills will also clean up the

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<sup>75</sup> Ashok Piramal's speech at the Annual General Meeting of Morarjee Mills on December 17, 1982.

industry and place less of a burden on the banks that kept them going.” It was by then, openly acknowledged that about 35,000 to 40,000 workers, and the 50,000 badlis, would eventually be left out on the streets with no recourse to enforce their right to work in the mills.

The strike which mill owners had predicted, at the very outset, would destroy the sick mills was proving to be an instrument of modernisation and nationalisation. By the time the strike completed one year, the mill owners were convinced that top bureaucrats of the Commerce Ministry shared and endorsed their view that some mills must be allowed to die a natural death to enhance the future of the remaining mills. By the end of the financial year in March 1983, this was widely perceived to be the joint strategy of the industry and government. The owners, of both healthy and marginally sick mills, were well satisfied with this situation since they were confident that nationalised banks would eventually allocate special funds to modernise the better mills and to nurse the sick ones. Owners of mills considered to be a total write-off were equally confident that once an appropriate period had elapsed, and the unions' uproar had been contained, the government would allow them to close down the mills, sell the land and move out of the city to set up modern units in areas where the cost of labour, power, water and other basic infrastructure would be much lower. “You may lose 3,000 jobs in the city but you will create 30,000 jobs elsewhere” said one prosperous mill owner. While these figures were exaggerated this point was also made by Labour Secretary Deshmukh. “Having 50,000 people walking in a morcha in major cities means nothing,” Deshmukh said. “What is so special about the Bombay workers?” Essentially Deshmukh argued that there was little justification for sinking further resources into protecting already “privileged” urban workers. The Asiad argument of over-expenditure in urban centres should also be made with regard to labour, the secretary said forcefully.

Such talk confirmed the government's “get tough” policy on the labour front and convinced mill owners that the non-viable units would be allowed to die and others would be given liberal financial aid. The Reserve Bank of India had categorised the mills from 'A' to 'C', using the financial health of the mills as a criterion. The mills in category 'A' were profitable before and after the strike. The 'B' mills were marginally profitable before the strike but sick afterwards. The 'C' mills were either already sick or on the verge of sickness when the strike began and were not expected to be viable after the strike.

Even when bureaucrats gradually began talking about the “political necessity of not allowing the mills to die,” there were only limited apprehensions in Bombay. This changed when commerce minister V.P.Singh announced during a press conference at Bombay in late August 1983, that the government had decided “in principle” to take over the mills in category 'C'. This announcement triggered off an intensive round of lobbying in which mill owners whose mills fell in category 'C' tried to make a case for the exemption of their mill from being taken over by the Government. A “takeover” would kill the grand plans of closing down the mills and selling the land or just selling the surplus land on the mill compound in order to make handsome monetary gains. Vasantdada Patil and his wife Shalini made personal promises to at least one mill owner that they would ensure his mill was exempted from the “takeover”. Pranab Mukherjee was also perceived as being sympathetic to the mill owners' point of view.

By mid-October some of the mill owners whose units fell in category 'C' were certain that their mills would not be taken over. Thus the takeover of 'C' category mills by an ordinance of

the union government was a rude shock to some mill owners<sup>76</sup> and broadly condemned by their fraternity as a “stab in the back”.<sup>77</sup> The National Textile Corporation's (NTC) accumulated losses of Rs.500 crores were paraded before the public by the deflated and irate mill owners. They were also quick to point out that apart from the 13 mills takeover, another 17 NTC mills all over the country were not functioning. What purpose could such a takeover serve, the owners asked, except that of being an ill-conceived populist gesture.

On the other hand there would have been no justification for giving further finance from nationalised banks to managements which had failed to run the units successfully and in many cases deliberately made them sick. The Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) report on the sick textile mills in fact concluded that even a relief package contemplated by the financial institutions would be insufficient for the category 'C' mills. Commerce Ministry decision makers had therefore concluded that the sale of land was indeed the only way of financing the restoration of the mills' health. However, the sale of land and its end use in central Bombay is a highly contentious issue. A senior commerce ministry official maintained that there would be no way of monitoring the sale of the land, its price and end use if the land remained under the control of the mill owners. This was offered as one of the primary considerations in the decision to take over the mills and eventually nationalise the units. What was not mentioned in the corridors of Udyog Bhavan but was openly discussed in political circles was the rumour that the Congress(1) had taken over Rs.50 crores from the real estate kings of Bombay as bribes for the eventual sale of the surplus land of mills taken over by the Government. The rumour was never confirmed.

The takeover, though a major drama of the strike, did not occur till October 1983, when the strike was effectively over. Having examined the perceptions and preoccupations of the mill-owners it is now important to return to the dark, congested realm of the chawls and bastis from where the war was being waged in 1982.

When the strike remained essentially peaceful till the seventh month, the middle class apprehensions about large scale violence also slowly receded into the background. So when Samant and about 8,000 textile workers decided to court arrest on August 16, 1982, to the man on the street it meant only a minor traffic jam in the heart of south Bombay at rush hour and was worth a small news item in the next day's newspaper. There was nothing in this to touch the lives, or excite the interests of the elite. But only two days later the lull was shattered by an explosion of violence which brought the army out on the streets of Bombay for the first time since Independence.

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<sup>76</sup> The 13 mills taken over were: Kohinoor Units 1, 2 & 3, Sitaram, Madhusudan, Tata, Finlay, Elphinstone, Goldmohur, Jam, New City, Podar & Phoenix. Excluded from this were two category 'C' units: Mukesh Mills which had burnt down a year earlier & Bradbury, which was already in liquidation.

<sup>77</sup> Arvind Lalbhai, president of ICMF, proclaimed the takeover to be a “rude shock”.

## CHAPTER 8: Agni Pareeksha

Worli Naka is a unique point of confluence for the parallel worlds of Bombay. Six roads merge at this strategic junction on Bombay's principle traffic artery. Three of these roads lead into the mill area, and slum colonies of the mill workers; the other three lead to the elegant homes and offices of Malabar Hill and Nariman Point on the one side, the airport and sprawling suburbs on the other. The residents of Sidhartha Nagar, a hutment colony located a 100 yards from the Naka had a heightened consciousness about the characteristics of the other world. But on the morning of August 18, 1982, even they were overwhelmed by an unprecedented outburst of anger which many had articulated but almost given up hope of channelising into action. Till about 9.30 a.m. that morning, life was normal. Then, suddenly, the flow of traffic from the Naka, down Annie Besant Road towards Nariman Point, stopped. To those standing at a bus stop down the road from the Naka, it seemed as though all the traffic had been held up at an extended signal. Then gradually a few cars and taxis began to trickle down the empty road and one taxi screeched to a halt. The excited cab driver shouted almost hysterically that no buses would be coming that way. "The buses are burning" he shouted.

At Worli Naka, and in the by-lanes around it which led to the mill areas, all hell had broken loose. Amid the sound of breaking glass and lusty slogan-shouting it seemed as though Kamble's bada kranti was finally at hand. Had the hitherto placid textile workers finally gone on the war path? And if so, what was the immediate provocation for this outburst? A day earlier the girni kamgar had peacefully courted arrest in the best tradition of non-violent civil disobedience. The fuse had, in fact, blown elsewhere but till the next day's newspapers made it clear, most of the city under siege would believe that the violence was an inevitable outcome of two and a half lakh workers remaining on strike for six months. Certainly, textile workers had apart in what followed over the next three days but they did not initiate the violence.

An explosive situation had prevailed in the police force over several months as a newly formed union of police constables pressed for its demands to be met. In the early morning hours of August 18 the Maharashtra government itself detonated the bomb. In a well-planned and secretly executed operation, the government arrested S.D.Mohite and 22 other leading activists of the Maharashtra Police Karamchari Sanghatana, which had staged a black badge demonstration on Independence Day. Extra reinforcements of the Central Reserve Police and the Border Security Force had been brought into the city earlier under the pretext of handling the textile workers' jail bhara campaign. These forces were instead used to take control of the Nalgaum Armed Constabulary and ensure that the local constables were unarmed. The keys of the armoury were taken away from the police at gun point by BSF jawans. On hearing about the arrest of their leaders the policemen gathered in groups at BDD chawls, adjacent to Worli Naka, where many of them lived. Within hours they had spontaneously launched a rail and rasta roko agitation. Textile workers, who form a sizeable segment of the BDD chawls population were also swept up in the angry outburst that followed.

At another point, a maidan near Lower Parel railway station, a meeting of textile workers was in progress. When they saw that the trains had stopped and realised what had happened the workers joined the rasta roko and began throwing stones at buses, cars and taxis. In the frenzy

of violence which followed, a section of the crowd headed for Morarji Mills No.3, broke into the premises, pulled out some files and furniture and set them on fire. The police chowky installed at the mill gate since the strike began, was also completely gutted. Another group of textile workers went along with the constables in a morcha from Jambori Maidan via Worli Naka to Nana Chowk. All over the city, policemen and textile workers combined to go on a rampage in which lumpen elements had a field day. The show-room of Century Bazar, where the Century Mills' office IS located, was looted by hundreds of men, women and children. The State Government was compelled to call in the Army – which had never been needed to quell civil disturbance in Bombay since Independence. For the next three days the city intermittently remained under curfew. At the end of the first day alone at least four people lay dead and 120 were in hospital with bullet injuries. About 24 BEST buses were burnt, and 450 other buses damaged. The BEST estimated damages exceeding Rs. 1 crore. The Central Railway estimated damages of Rs.16 lakhs. And it had all been triggered off by the Government's “firm stand” on yet another militant union action.

The Maharashtra Police Karamchari Sanghatana, formed about a year earlier, had been pressing for certain basic demands. The body wanted government registration, promotion for constables to the post of head constable after 15 years of service according to seniority, immediate implementation of government scheme for providing subsidised food grains to policemen, housing, free education for their children, and implementation of government orders regarding the grant of refreshment allowances, D.A. etc. As in the textile strike, the crucial issue for the government was not the actual demands but the militancy of the policemen and how it could be curbed. This helped to forge a link (however temporary) between traditional enemies – the instruments of state terror and the proletariat<sup>78</sup>.

The frustration of the textile workers seemed to merge with the wrath of policemen and erupt in unison. The textile workers had struck work for six months before the Central Government made any offer for a settlement and appointed a committee to examine some of their demands. The policemen had waited for a year and obtained no results. When they took to the streets – shocking not only the city but the whole country – the Chief Minister immediately announced, in a television broadcast, that a special committee headed by the, Inspector General of Police would examine their demands. This left many of the striking workers wondering if they had erred by remaining peaceful.

But the government's attitude towards the constables and their “Sanghatana” remained unchanged. Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosale categorically ruled out any talks with the outlawed Sanghatana even while he assured cabinet colleagues that the agitating policemen would not be victimised. The failure to understand the deep-rooted causes of such uprisings was so complete that many bureaucrats resorted to a conspiracy theory in attempting to explain the unprecedented street violence and disruption of life in Bombay.

Bhosale went so far as to openly suggest that the Sanghatana had grown in power as a result of the “money power” secured from “somebody” last January. This was an obvious reference to donations granted to the Sanghatana by the then Chief Minister A.R.Antulay, from the Chief Minister's fund, just before he resigned from office. It was convenient to attribute such staggering, uncontrollable mass actions to a conspiracy. Conspiracies the bureaucracy could handle but genuine mass action was beyond its scope of experience. The response of the

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<sup>78</sup> However, this was not true of the rural areas where the unrest had distinctly anti-police implications. In Dhulia, thousands of men and women and children were reported to have stoned the main police chowky.



mainstream media was once again predictable: "... the Bombay bandh on Thursday bears comparison in sheer irresponsibility with the railway strike amidst food shortages in large parts of the country in 1974. Mrs. Gandhi did not shrink from her duty then. She must not shrink from it now..."<sup>79</sup> wrote Girilal Jain in the *Times of India*.

The scale and nature of violence ruled out the state administration's claim that the city's lumpen elements had simply grabbed the opportunity to go on a rampage in a temporarily unpoliced city. Certainly, the lumpen elements had a field day but the looting and ransacking had too distinct a pattern to have been the work of criminals alone. Food grain stores were a primary target in the mill areas. As one worker was reported to have said: "Nine months we went hungry – you don't expect us to loot TV sets." While money lenders, symbols of exploitation and objects of hate, were another popular target, adjoining shops with valuables were left untouched. The only houses to be attacked were those of Bhal Bhosale, General Secretary of the RMMS; Vasant Hoshing, President of RMMS and Bhaurao Paul, MLA and a mafia don-like figure. All three men were despised and hated with a passion which was obvious from the ruthless manner in which their houses were ransacked. It was clear that these homes were specific targets because adjoining flats were left untouched. But in the homes of those the workers perceived to be their tormentors, every piece of glass was smashed, television sets and other goods were thrown out of the window. In Bhal Bhosale's house the mob decamped with a cassette deck, furniture and a fan from the balcony. In the large bazaar close to Bhosale's house, the only shop to be touched was a co-operative society stocking grains and other food items. Similarly, while private cars and other vehicles were targets for destruction, pedestrians were not disturbed and even helped. The August riots were not a revolutionary insurrection, but they could not be dismissed merely as a riot by anti-social elements.

Samant had, from the very outset, adopted a policy of avoiding violent confrontation between the striking textile workers and the state. Much of the rank and file was, in fact, unhappy with Doctor's tame attitude. Individual groups of young textile workers had, thus, independently planned and executed violent actions and counter-actions against RMMS functionaries and "black legs". The most celebrated case had been the petrol bomb attack on "loyal" workers of Sriram Mills (mentioned in Chapter 7). Samant may not have publicly condemned such actions but he privately discouraged them on the grounds that any sustained violent confrontation with the State would only invite repression of the sort which workers would find intolerable and that would prove counter-productive to keeping the strike alive. Thus Doctor was quick to tell all reporters who contacted him on that chaotic August morning that he had nothing to do with the violent eruptions in the city.

The activists of the area and the zone committee understood and accepted the workers' need to spontaneously give vent to their frustrations but they were also alive to the continuing animosity between the police and workers. Many a zone committee activist would tell of how he had earlier spent several hours in discussions with policemen, trying to convince them that they were merely instruments of state oppression and were themselves equally oppressed. But the response of policemen varied from indifference to arrogance, depending on the individual's attachment to his uniform. Those constables who responded favourably to the inculcating efforts of textile workers only expressed their helplessness to act.

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<sup>79</sup> Girilal Jain in *The Times of India* (quoted from BUILD Newsletter)

When the riots left the textile workers bearing at least half the blame for the violence, the more shrewd strike activists expressed an intense anger, against the policemen which almost equalled their hatred for the RMMS. The girni kamgar was being blamed and oppressed for the three days of violence unleashed by those who habitually maltreated them. With the leadership of the Police Sanghatana in jail and other militant elements similarly dealt with, the rank and file of Bombay's constabulary soon reverted to normal, in terms of its harsh treatment of the striking workers. The upcoming Ganesh Chaturti festival, the most significant festival for Maharashtrians, lent an urgency to the process of reorganisation.

The riots not only created confusion among the rank and file of the textile workers but also marked a new low for TUJAC members in their hope of making a breakthrough to settle the strike. A month before the police uprising, veteran trade unionist S.M.Joshi had gone to Delhi and met the Prime Minister, in connection with the strike. During the brief audience granted by her, Mrs. Gandhi told Joshi that she was not averse to discussing a settlement to the strike with anyone, including the TUJAC – which included Samant. On this basis, the TUJAC passed a resolution on July 17 which called for talks between TUJAC, the MOA and the government. The bottom line for the proposed negotiations, the resolution stated, was the demand to rectify wage disparities between textile workers and their counterparts in other industries, derecognition of the RMMS, immediate scrapping of the BIR Act, recognition of trade unions by secret ballot, permanency for *badli* workers and monetary relief to workers for the strike period (instead of a mere advance, as earlier offered by the Labour Minister). This resolution was passed even though many TUJAC members were irked by the fact that Mrs. Gandhi had told Joshi that Commerce Minister Shivraj Patil had met Samant. The TUJAC members knew nothing of this meeting and were offended at being left out of such important developments. P.N.Samant, who was present at the meeting, said he was not his brother's keeper and thus did not know of all his meetings. However, P.N.Samant gave his own support to the resolution and the decision that a TUJAC delegation, along with Samant, should go to Delhi and take up the Prime Minister's offer for talks. P.N.Samant gave no promises about his brother's reaction but offered to place the resolution before him and get his reply.

Since Samant was not in his office throughout that day P.N.Samant did not see him till the evening, at a rally Samant was to address. There was no opportunity for discussion before the meeting and in his speech that evening Samant announced plans for a *jail bharo andolan* which automatically ruled out any conciliatory action such as going to Delhi with a delegation. The disappointed and angry TUJAC leaders decided to still go ahead with their plans and were given a tentative appointment. But when they tried to confirm the appointment, no reply was forthcoming. Then the police riot of August 18-19 further altered the situation and the meeting with Mrs. Gandhi never materialised. The growing distance between Samant and the TUJAC had been visible even before the riots. On August 15, the TUJAC and Samant held separate protest functions. The jail bharo andolan which Samant launched in August (without consulting TUJAC) had been suggested by TUJAC in May. At that point, in May, Samant had not accepted the idea and said that the agitation could be launched later. Somnath Dube of the Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat was of the view that perhaps Samant's reluctance at that stage was due to his continuing negotiations with Vasantdada Patil for a possible re-entry into the Congress(I). But there is no evidence to show that such negotiations took place.

The final breach in the poorly constructed edifice of the TUJAC came with the clash between Samant and George Fernandes over the BEST and Municipal workers' strike. In September,

Fernandes called a strike of civic employees and refused to link it with the textile strike though he had offered to join forces with Samant to “give the textile strike a broad base and a political orientation.” Thus, when George in turn was trying to fight a hard-pitched battle at BEST, Samant refused to participate in the indefinite struggle. This conflict occurred in late October just as the textile strike had entered its most vigorous phase. The mills had, by then, begun to take on new workers in an effort to break the strike. At the end of September an official of the MOA, R.G.Shetye, had admitted to Faraz Ahmed of the *Indian Express* that 30,000 to 40,000 new workers had been recruited in the mills and this was almost half the number of workers inside at that point. While, in admitting this, the MOA was acknowledging the continuing strength of the strikers it was also warning them that if they did not return to work soon, more and more new workers would be hired to replace them. This increased the pressure on Samant to intensify the struggle. Thus, in early October he announced a second jail bhara campaign along with a three day utpadan roko (production **bandh**) in all units where his unions were in control. On October 11, Samant and 11,000 workers courted arrest and were sent to jail<sup>80</sup>. The utpadan roko evoked an excellent response and about 3,500 units (approximately 90% of the Units under Samant's control) shut down for three days.

The State Government responded to this renewed militancy by arresting over 3,500 textile workers and union activists from other units on the eve of the utpadan roko evoked a poor response, the agitation cost Maharashtra a production loss of Rs. 25 crores and half a million man days over just three days. The workers had, in fact, responded enthusiastically to the jail bhara call and on the first day the police refused to arrest the workers who had proudly proclaimed: “They won't have enough jails to keep us.” There were widespread and severe lathi-charges on the workers. Though the TUIAC played no role in this agitation, the CITU independently issued a statement condemning the lathi-charge on workers peacefully courting arrest.

But the saddest drama was played at BEST. Fernandes, who had the recognised BEST union, had called for an indefinite strike, while Samant had asked his followers in BEST merely to join the three-day utpadan roko. At the end of three days Samant's supporters returned to work while Fernandes' supporters remained on strike. Samant's rationale in not continuing the strike was that he had no specific demands and his supporters may later be victimised. P.N.Samant explained a year after these events: “George never asked us (to join the strike). Had the strike been complete the management would have talked to Fernandes immediately and he would have settled for a Rs.75 increase. We would not accept that (our strike would have continued) and we would be victimised later.” But the actual cause of conflict was the deep personal rivalry and mistrust between Samant and Fernandes. Wrote Radha Iyer: “This show of strength union politics, which has been repeated in BEST several times in the past, has cost Dr. Samant tremendously in terms of his image. Even the mill workers have been extremely disappointed by his stand. It is clear that Dr. Samant has outplayed his last cards. It the most he can now call for another utpadan roko agitation for an extended period of five or ten days. Beyond that there is nothing for him to do. The mill, workers are getting restive.”<sup>81</sup>

The workers, feeling the mounting tension of a deepening crisis, were pushed closer to desperation by the government's continuing intransigence. Even in mid-October, after the

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<sup>80</sup> Some of the workers held were taken to Aarey Milk Colony where a volatile situation developed leading to a police firing in which one man was killed. Yashwant Chavan, who had been giving a speech there, was arrested for allegedly inciting the workers.

<sup>81</sup> “Lessons of the Textile Strike” by Radha Iyer; *Business Standard*, October 30, 1982

utpandan roko, Union Commerce Minister Shivraj Patil reiterated that while the government was keen to make a settlement and end the strike, there was no question of negotiating with an unrecognised union.

At the end of October the MOA further unsettled the rank and file by stating emphatically that 45,000 workers, who failed to report for work in spite of repeated warnings, had been retrenched. Simultaneously the media was also highlighting the crisis by projecting a picture of the rank and file in a state of complete panic. When the police reported that a textile worker had committed suicide by setting himself on fire, the editors of *Indian Express* quickly dispatched a reporter to the dead man's house for a complete "human interest" story on the tragedy. The reporter was specifically briefed on the need for the article to illustrate how the textile strike had driven the poor workers to suicide. The *Indian Express* coverage of the strike was largely guided by its vigorously anti-Samant policy a hangover of that newspaper management's tussle with Samant in 1981. The report on the textile worker's suicide was carried on October 14 under the heading "Worker Immolates Himself". The first two-thirds of the brief news story described in highly emotional terms how, "unable to withstand the financial burden thrust upon himself by the prolonged strike", B.G. Pednekar had taken his own life. But Pednekar was no longer on strike when he committed suicide. He had returned to his old job, as a printing supervisor in Jupiter Mills, several weeks earlier. Moreover, Pednekar was no "lowly worker". He belonged to the elite or technical staff<sup>82</sup>.

Though the Express was not read among the textile workers, its Marathi counterpart *Loksatta* was widely read in the mill areas and it followed a similar editorial policy. This not only, destroyed *Loksatta's* credibility among mill workers but made it the object of passionate hatred. Reporters roaming the mill areas were often menacingly asked by workers if they belonged to the *Loksatta*. Those who worked for the *Indian Express* and *Loksatta* were then obliged to quietly leave the area or risk incurring the workers' wrath. At a later stage the *Free Press Journal*, apparently following a policy similar to, the *Indian Express*, carried a report on November 25, with the bold headline "Workers Cracking Up". The report was based on one doctor's observation, at a public hospital, of 20 cases of mental instability among textile workers during routine medical examinations of 300 persons over three months. Apart from having no statistical validity such a report presented a one-dimensional and exaggerated view of the situation.

That the hardships were heart-rending and back breaking could not be denied. But the sorrow one felt was usually overwhelmed by a sense of admiration inspired by the manner in which the battle was being waged. The ample opportunities for casual daily wage labour in Bombay helped many strikers to make enough money to keep body and soul together. But more important than this was the strength of the social fibre and true sense of comradeship which held them together, even while leaders of different ideological hues were embroiled in bitter and petty quarrels.

The most pathetic of such quarrels was that between the unholy trinity of George Fernandes, Sharad Pawar and Bal Thackeray, and Samant. The three leaders mounted a common platform on Shivaji Park in October and demanded of Samant that he make immediate efforts to end

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<sup>82</sup> The financial dailies of Bombay had from the outset faithfully supported the mill owners. As early as May 1982 the *Financial Express* reported that workers were trying to return and seeking assurances from the mill owners that they would not be victimised. Though not literally accurate, the report was an entirely erroneous presentation of the strike situation at that stage.

the strike. At a time when the workers' confidence was waning and agonising decisions were being forced upon the strikers, the actions of this trinity were like a slap in their face. Fernandes' involvement with the trio embittered those already disillusioned with him and the bitterness lingered long after the strike had ended. Over a year and a half later when Fernandes returned to address a meeting at Shivaji Park, on another "working class" issue, textile workers in the audience loudly abused and heckled Fernandes till he was compelled to resume his seat.

Long after his alliance with Thackeray and Pawar had ceased to exist, Fernandes still justified it by arguing that they had never attacked Samant or questioned his leadership but merely said that an action with dimensions as vast as the textile strike could not be the work of one man alone. But at the second and last public meeting of this alliance (in December 1982) Fernandes had gone out of his way to ridicule Samant and assert that he (Samant) did not have a monopoly over the workers. But in all fairness, by December the main target of this alliance was not Samant but the MOA. At that second meeting held in front of the MOA's office, the emphasis was on "warning" the mill owners not to try and move the mills out of Bombay. It was never specified just what power this political alliance had to enforce its threats. Neither the mill owners nor the workers took the Fernandes-Pawar-Thackeray trio, or its threats, very seriously. Such actions actually inadvertently helped to consolidate Samant's strength among the textile workers. The posture of the Fernandes-Pawar-Thackeray alliance destroyed what little credibility the opposition parties enjoyed among the workers. The opposition parties in general, and these three leaders in particular, came to be identified as enemies of the strike effort on par with the Congress(I). For all his organisational failings and tactical errors, Samant accurately assessed the workers' mood. Even though a substantial segment of the rank and file had, since October, been vacillating between the desire to go back to work or continue the battle on to death. Samant knew the struggle would continue. This gave him the confidence to reject outright Chief Minister Bhosale's offer to better the earlier award made by the Labour Minister in Parliament in July. Bhosale offered to raise the advance amount to Rs.1,500. Instead, on October 11, Samant launched the jail bharo and utpadan roko campaign (described earlier).

The government had proclaimed the jail bharo and utpadan roko andolan a failure. But the agitation was followed by hectic government activity on the strike front. Undoubtedly, much of this activity was superficial, because the government's attitude remained essentially unchanged. Yet this activity had the effect of generating some hope among the workers. Much of the optimism grew out of the intensified nature of the activity at the highest level in both the State and Central Government. On October 23, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Labour Minister Virendra Patil and Commerce Minister Shivraj Patil were all in Bombay to meet Chief Minister Bhosale and RMMS leaders, in a bid to break the stalemate and settle the strike. Sources informing the press about proceedings at these closed door meetings also indicated that the ministers were actively considering scrapping the BIR Act. There was, by this stage, little love lost between the RMMS leadership and the Congress(I) hierarchy. By end October, even Vasant Hoshing and Bhal Bhosale were compelled to publicly criticise the government's policy on the strike, after toying the line for over a year. The RMMS did not even organise a rally, till the sixth month of the strike and then only to protest against the alleged assault of a "loyal worker". While Bhal Bhosale and Hoshing had always criticised Samant for his refusal to compromise, they now also denounced the government for groping in the dark. The change in RMMS leadership, on the cards since the strike began, thus became imminent.

On October 28, within a week of the Union minister's visit to Bombay, the MOA sent a delegation to Delhi led by Arvind Lalbhai, President of the Indian Cotton Mills Federation. The delegation met the Finance Minister and Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosale was also present at the meeting. The decision to send this delegation to Delhi was a reaction to reports on the grapevine that Samant had met the Prime Minister and a settlement was in the offing. Samant denied to the end that he ever met Mrs. Gandhi. But several mill owners were convinced that the two had met and the unionist had agreed to settle for Rs.50 to Rs.75 increase. However, the alleged deal had fallen through even before the mill owners reached Delhi to prevent a settlement. Samant's insistence that the new offer would be an addition to the earlier offer of Rs.30 supposedly killed the possible settlement. Even the mill owners' two days of closed door meetings with the Finance Minister failed to produce a settlement. But the efforts to convince Samant continued. It was discreetly indicated to the press that Shivraj Patil who was scheduled to visit Bombay shortly, would try to arrive at an informal agreement with Samant. By then the Congress(I) had a vested interest in resolving the strike, or at least seeming to do so, because some of its own MLAs had started a vigorous anti-RMMS campaign and were demanding that Samant be heard in order to reach a valid settlement. But the MLAs were largely serving their own ends.

For a variety of reasons the strike appeared to have finally become enough of an embarrassment for both the State and Central Governments to disturb and spur them into action. It was in this climate that Chief Minister Bhosale contradicted his earlier stand of refusing to talk with an unrecognised union and invited Samant to a meeting. Much of this activity was due to the Congress(I)'s long term concern with its electoral future in Bombay. Responding largely to this pressure, a break-away faction of Congress(I) M.L.As attended a rally held by Samant's supporters and passed a resolution demanding that the BIR Act be scrapped. Though they were at pains not to criticise Samant, whom they described as a representative of the workers' "collective conscience", these MLAs were not primarily interested in the welfare of the striking workers.

In October, when the strike in eight mills completed one year and the general strike showed all signs of doing the same in three months, it had also become a multi-faceted political issue. For example, the primary interest of the MLAs claiming to be sympathetic to the workers was to embarrass Chief Minister Bhosale whom they wanted to remove from office. This aspect of their interest in the strike later surfaced at the Nagpur session of the Maharashtra Assembly, in December, where dissidence within the Congress(1) broke out on the floor of the Assembly. Even two months earlier Bhosale was under pressure from both the Central Government and his party's M.L.As. The controversial dinner meeting with Samant on October 30, was a response to these pressures and a last ditch effort to make a face-saving settlement. But all he had to offer was an additional Rs.850 advance money, making the offer a total of Rs.1,500. Bhosale also promised Diwali bonus for those who rejoined work immediately. But the offer of an interim wage hike remained stagnant at Rs.30 and there was still no mention of the most important demand viz. derecognition of the RMMS and scrapping of the BIR Act. Samant, predictably, firmly rejected the offer. The mill owners described the offer, which had been made after detailed discussions with them, as "worth considering". While the MOA and the government waited for the new offer to produce results, it was condemned from all sides. P.K.Kurde of CITU described the offer as an insult to the "brave workers". Shanti Patel, Janata MP and an HMS leader said in a press statement that: "If the Maharashtra government has serious intentions to end the textile strike it should stop making unilateral appeals without bringing together the involved parties on the negotiating table."

Even if some among the rank and file were tempted to accept this offer, the activists agreed with Samant's outright refusal. The fact that they were then able to carry the majority of the textile workers with them was proof of their ability to accurately read the workers' mood and readiness to continue fighting. The Diwali bonus offer, especially, had no real value. At that stage, few workers who quit the strike, returned to their own mills. How would a worker of Sriram Mill collect bonus if he was currently working in Sitaram Mills or any other mill? The government's offer to do no more than increase the advance money was unanimously considered a deliberate insult to the workers and their heroic struggle. The token Diwali bonus given by Samant to about 80,000 striking workers had much more value. This money was raised by some 85,000 workers in other units, owing allegiance to Samant, who contributed one day's salary to support the strike effort. The Rs.30 offer lowered the tolerance level of the already frustrated workers. The smallest provocation could trigger off an angry, possibly violent reaction.

On November 18, exactly three months after the police riots, a group of textile workers had gathered at the Bombay High Court for the hearing of a writ petition filed ostensibly by Advocate P.B.Pradhan but master-minded by the MOA. The workers had waited all day for the hearing to take place. Eventually, when the courts closed for the day and the case had still not been heard, Pradhan told the workers outside to go home. He added that if they knew what was good for them they would accept and be happy with the Rs. 30 wage increase offered. The already incensed workers roughed up Pradhan and then some men (it was never verified if they were actually textile workers) ran into the court room and threw the furniture out. The police arrested 36 men in connection with this incident.<sup>83</sup>

The murder of Tukaram Laxman Vadge, an RMMS activist, in December was seen as proof of the increasing role of violence and terror in keeping the strike alive. But the government's own figures told a different story. Given the size and duration of the strike it had been remarkably non-violent. At the end of December the strike had cost 11 lives and the police recorded over a 1,000 cases of assault, stone-throwing and other forms of violence. Violence did play a role, but not a predominant one, in prolonging the struggle. Neither Samant nor the RMMS had the physical machinery to terrorise two and a half lakh workers. Thus, they stayed out of the mills for as long as they wanted to and returned only when compelled by economic necessity. Peer pressure and other subtle forms of coercive persuasion were liberally used, but their influence would have been negligible if the rank and file had not been determined. What zone committee activists did, by and large, was to channelise this fervour in the desired direction, and rejuvenate it when it flagged.

Yet, in early December, this was proving a backbreaking, uphill task for even the most zealous strike activists. The poor response to a bandh called by Samant on December 13, did nothing to improve either the activists or the rank and file's morale. The press, especially the financial dailies reported yet again that the strike was fizzling out. Their optimism was based on the fact that 17 mills had resumed production.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The police officer handling the case later told reporters that the whole incident seemed like an attempt to defame textile workers. Through others (i.e. non-textile workers) may have also participated in the violence, the growing frustration and suppressed anger of many activists was a undeniable reality.

<sup>84</sup> But the production of cloth in December 1982 was only 20,970 bales (of 1,500 meters each). This was less than half of the monthly average production of 44,969 bales (of 1,500 meters each) in 1981. Moreover, since the production chain remained broken or partially disrupted – because skilled workers in all departments did not return to the mill simultaneously – the quality of cloth produced was poor.

Fernandes and Kurne chose this juncture to once again publicly repeat their criticism of Samant for acting alone – or as Fernandes liked to say “burrowing a lonely furrow”. The only voice of encouragement, outside the MGKU and Sarva Sharmik Sangh fold, came from the original radical leader of the textile workers – S.A. Dange. At a large public meeting in Prabhadevi, Dange urged workers “to capture the city” with processions and rallies in every nook and corner of Bombay. On December 21, the National Campaign Committee of Central Trade Unions organised its first and only public action in support of the textile strike – a one-day general strike of textile mills all over the country. Over nine lakh textile workers all over the country were estimated to have participated in this solidarity strike, which was widely proclaimed as a big success. This only marginally boosted the worker's morale and its material contribution was no greater than the opposition parties' walk-out on the strike issue during the Nagpur session of the Maharashtra Assembly.

Meanwhile dissident Congress(I) MLAs continued to use the strike as a weapon against the embattled Babasaheb Bhosale. Baburao Patil, who was intensely disliked in his constituency and was suspected to have connections with the criminal underworld of Bombay went on a one-day hunger strike along with two other MLAs demanding an early settlement of the strike. When these MLAs were served with a show cause notice by the Congress(I) high command for their defiant action, they replied that their efforts were only meant to strengthen the party's image.<sup>85</sup> Worried about their personal fortunes in contesting the next election on Congress(I) tickets, with the party's popularity in the city at an all-time low, such elements were undaunted by “disciplinary” measures. While these superficial supporters of the workers' cause had at best some nuisance value within the party, they were not taken seriously by anyone outside the realm of intra-party politics.

While politicians of all parties indulged in gimmicks of this sort or issued tame statements, the sharpest indictment of the government's handling of the strike came from Justice S.C.Pratap, a soft spoken judge of the Bombay High Court, known for his liberal stand on public interest cases. The writ petition filed by the MOA made the state of Maharashtra, Datta Samant, RMMS and the Police Commissioner of Bombay respondents (in that order). It asked the Court to order the government to declare the strike illegal under the BIR Act; order Samant to withdraw the strike and refrain from using coercive methods on “loyal” workers who should be given protection by the police. A brain-child of MOA officials, the case backfired and exploded in their faces with an intensity which thrilled the workers.

Sharply critical of both the mill owners and the government, Justice Pratap ruled that the failure of the government to refer the strike to adjudication, on the grounds that no useful purpose would be served, amounted to a “breach of statutory duty”. Justice Pratap also noted that at the outset of the case, six months earlier, the MOA seemed willing to refer the matter to adjudication, then later backed out “obviously in keeping with the wind that blows and power that fluctuates”. Having no powers to directly intervene in the strike, all Pratap could do was to admonish the government and support the workers. He chose his words well when he wrote:

“In the life history of these workers and in their struggle for justice the strike here, irrespective of political opportunism of rival unions and the hypnotic power of their respective leaders, reflects a classic resistance movement based on the hallowed twin

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<sup>85</sup> Bhaurao Patil later followed his mentor A.R.Antulay out of the Congress(I) and joined Antulay's splinter group.



principles of non-cooperation and, by and large, non-violence... No judicial conscience alive to the felt necessities of the time can fail to realise the thrust and impact of the resultant injustice to them.”

But a government which would ignore the struggle of a quarter of a million workers for over a year was not susceptible to the pressures of such moral indictments. In industrial circles Justice Pratap was hastily dismissed as a populist judge known for such decisions. For the workers, the judgement provided only moral solace. Materially and effectively it meant nothing. The MOA, which in early December was claiming that daily attendance in the mills had gone up to 61,000, seemed to be gaining ground. Attendance dropped by 10,000 on December 13, when Samant called a bandh but rose again within a week. The period which followed the failure of this bandh was described, even by Yashwant Chavan (of Sarva Shramik Sangh), as a “miserable situation”. On January 10, a week before the strike's anniversary, the official attendance figure was 79,000. Bharat Patankar, an activist of the Sarva Shramik Sangh who was active in the textile field at that stage, saw one significant factor as being responsible for this rise. Other opposition unions such as the Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sabha (BMS), which had earlier supported the strike, began holding meetings from the middle of December, telling the textile workers that the strike ought to be called off since they were suffering while the mill owners and the government were not being hurt. Simultaneously, the number of police raids on the homes of textile workers, at night, and random arrests of these workers increased.

The MGKU and Sarva Shramik Sangh therefore launched a programme of counter propaganda and held chawl meetings all over the mill areas to win back workers who were breaking away from the strike. As the police swooped down on these meetings and picked up the activists, fresh batches of speakers and organisers arrived every day to carry in the campaign. According to Patankar, the flow of workers began to be reversed around December 25: “The workers can't stand the oppression of the RMMS inside the mills. Yet they are afraid of coming back out because they have signed a promise of good conduct on paper, so they need to be assured, that everyone is doing so.” Patankar, who had just then returned from a tour of villages, reported that rural-based workers who had come to Bombay were once again heading back to the villages instead of re-joining the mills.

Though the MOA officially claimed that attendance was 75,000 on the eve of the strike completing one year, officials of the mills acknowledged that attendance had dropped again. This gave credence to the theory that workers who were going back to the mills were still part of the strike effort and willing to quit work when they had earned a little money to live on. Moreover, at that stage, workers were hopeful that when the strike completed one year the government would feel compelled to act and concede some of their demands. Only a week earlier the Congress(I) had been routed in the Assembly elections of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The activists were aware of the fears of the Congress(I) leadership that the wave of discontent which had swept through the two southern states would also blow the way of Maharashtra. Seeing themselves as a major vote bank, the restive workers hoped that in this moment of insecurity Mrs. Gandhi may make substantial concessions to the strikers. The party high command in Delhi may even be pressurised by the state unit to alter its stand on Samant, many activists felt. Congress(I) officials in Bombay privately helped to create this impression. As one such official said: “She (Mrs. Gandhi) is really down, right now, and there's no saying what can happen.”

Regardless of the larger political context, the MGKU and Sarva Shramik Sangh had already decided to intensify the struggle before the election results of the southern states were known. On December 30, various unions, along with the MGKU and Sarva Shramik Sangh, gathered at the Shramik office to draft and adopt the following resolution: “The textile strike is a struggle for fundamental trade union rights of the working class and against offensive turn in the anti-working class policies of the government... The paltry interim relief announced by Bhagwat Jha Azad, the then Central Labour Minister and later by the Maharashtra Chief, Minister is just a poor joke which only a washed-out clown can crack.” The resolution went on to emphasise the importance of reinforcing the struggle of the valiant textile workers and the need to act quickly to strengthen the strike: “In pursuance of these objectives... and in view of the fact that the TUJAC has been completely inactivated by internal differences we deem it necessary and expedient to declare the formation of the Textile Strike Solidarity Committee, and appeal to all trade unions in Bombay to join the committee.” This committee, it was decided, would act on the following points: 1) collection drive for textile workers; 2) solidarity demonstrations where clusters of factories and offices are located; 3) locality-wise working class committees to be formed to think out ways of helping to strengthen the textile strike.

But such working class committees had already long been in existence. The Solidarity Committee was essentially an unimproved reincarnation of the TUJAC. The members of the existing workers committees were unsung heroes of the strike. Samant acknowledged this and mentioned it in an interview to Olga Tellis on the eve of the strike anniversary: “One of the most fascinating things in the history of trade unions action is that the humble, young textile workers, without what people like to call “ideology” or “isms”, have the tenacity, indomitable courage and moral fibre to continue the strike. I never imagined it myself when I gave the call for the strike. I cannot imagine other workers doing the same. I also feel damn disturbed that lakhs of workers are out for so long. We need immediate economic changes. What is disturbing is that instead of fighting economic exploitation and exploiters the government is doing everything within its power to protect such exploiters.” Samant ended on the emphatic note that the strike was going strong and there was no question of it fizzling out soon.

But the mill owners with a peculiar brand of logic claimed that the strike was already “fizzling out”. Kanti Kumar Podar said in January 1983 that: “The strike is fizzling out, it will never be called off, and there will be no settlement. What for and with whom?” this claim was backed by the following strange logic. Though the industry employs 2.3 lakh workers only about 1.8 lakh of them are required on any given day – including supervisory, technical and security staff. Thus, out of the 1.8 lakh only about 1.51 lakh are workers (the others being categorised as “staff”). Mr.Podar claimed that since 75,000 workers in the latter category had returned to the mills – constituting 52% of the normal work force on any given day – the strike was “fizzling out”. Podar went still further and said that since attendance in the 13 nationalised mills was low and seven other mills were not producing, these should be excluded from the calculations. On taking an average of the functioning mills Podar claimed the daily attendance was 65% of the normal attendance. On this basis Podar proclaimed: “We have stopped talking of the strike. It has fizzled out; 65% have returned and the rest may be on strike even in 1984. I take it they are not interested in coming back.”

But by then the unprecedented struggle which Podar pretended to dismiss as insignificant, had broken most previous strike records. At the end of one year the textile strike alone had resulted in the loss of 48 million man days as against 32.50 million man days lost in the whole country the year before and an annual average loss of 20 million man days. The previous

record had been set in 1974, the year of the railway strike, when 43 million man days were lost.

Yet, these startling statistics meant as little in Podar's plush corporate office as in the narrow lanes of Sidhartha Nagar. A light mist hovered over the slum when I went there on a cool January morning. Streams of muddy water flowed along the narrow lanes where putrid heaps of garbage lay at every corner, as permanent fixtures of a dismal scenario. Lata, who was busy washing utensils outside her hut, smiled wearily as she saw me. Khandeo sat on the wire mesh bed inside the hut. The man who had talked with feeling about the strike throughout the year was speechless, confused and bewildered by its duration.

Nearby, in the loft of another hutment, G.S.Gajarmal was at work, surrounded by pamphlets, books and newspapers about trade unionism and “the struggle”. For Gajarmal, the quintessential activist who continued to vigorously plan small meetings, every day that the strike lasted only further intensified his commitment to the struggle. There were doubts -but only about the course of events in the short run. Overriding this was the unshakable confidence in the justice and eventual triumph of his cause. The once fiery K.P.Kamble who had talked of a bada kranti still shared Gajarmal's views but not his confidence. If Gajarmal was hounded by the police, Kamble as a jobber was also badgered by the officer of his mill to return to work. Kamble was a sad and disheartened man, for whom bada kranti was now just a pipe-dream.

Lata was more vocal than Kamble and more deeply embittered. If she had sparkled with optimism a year earlier, she now bristled with anger – much of it directed at Samant. Lata had no use for those who sang praises of workers' solidarity. To her, talk of solidarity was a mere abstraction at a time when all around there was only more and more suffering. The woman who had talked with zest and revolutionary fervour about challenging the “other world”, the realm of seth log began to sink in the quick sands of fatalism. Her fighting strength was at the penultimate stage of depletion. Lata, Gajarmal and Kamble, each viewed and experienced the strike at different levels. Each was a microcosm of some aspect of the strike. Yet these were the lucky ones. Others died, broke limbs during lathi-charges, lost their preciously built huts in the metropolis and hawked every valuable they possessed.

But every time Khandeo, and thousands of others like him, were tempted to return to the mills the expectation of a settlement being imminent held them back. And yet the desire to return did not minimise Khandeo's or Lata's commitment to the strike cause. There were traces of resentment towards Samant along with a recognition of his shortcomings as a political strategist but their loyalty to him did not waver. But there was no comfort in having faith in a person who produced no results. For thousands like Lata a clearer perception of the deep-rooted nature of vested interests at work only further reinforced their sense of powerlessness. Only those who, like Gajarmal, sought the aid of ideology through books and pamphlets, found their convictions growing stronger and acquiring even deeper roots.

Of the tens of thousands who came to the anniversary rally at Shivaji Park on January 18, 1983, the majority had mixed emotions. The rally was one of the biggest during the strike even though the MGKU had feared that the government may prevent workers from reaching the rally ground. But apart from a few skirmishes between MGKU and RMMS activists, there was no major attempt by the authorities to prevent workers from attending the rally.

As the sun set on January 18, about one lakh men and women sat before the towering statue of Shivaji, waiting to hear Doctor speak. There was, in the large crowd, a sense of pride and even triumph though by all conventional definitions they had won nothing and lost a great deal. But even three weeks later, on February 8, the Labour Commissioner's office acknowledged that over 60% (or 1,41,150) workers were still on strike. This, in itself, was an achievement. And yet that moment of triumph in the shadow of Shivaji's statue was also the beginning of the end.

## CHAPTER 9: Death of a dream

It was a muggy August afternoon and the air conditioner in Samant's room, at his Ghatkopar office, was running on full power. I had spent most of the morning discussing the strike with P.N. Samant and listening to him laud the tremendous strength of the workers. It was well past lunch time when we finally emerged from the over-cooled cabin to the outer office where the typists and other clerical staff of the union were seated. My glasses fogged on contact with the heat in the outer room. Through the mist I noticed a small group of workers tentatively hovering at the main door of the barrack-like office. They had been waiting to catch a few words with P.N. Samant. The only woman in the group slowly approached dada and haltingly made a plea for assistance. She wondered if perhaps the union could get her an alternative job. The union, she had heard, was arranging jobs for textile workers who were not taken back by the mills. The woman had not quite finished stating her appeal when she was loudly interrupted by dada. In an outburst that lasted above five minutes dada lashed out at the woman for bothering the union office. There was a faint attempt by the woman to explain how far she had travelled on her mission but she was silenced by dada, who angrily wagged his long index finger at her.

Only the mill committee of her unit could help her was essentially what dada was saying. But it was not the content of his message which stunned the poor woman. It was the harsh and arrogant manner. The woman was frail, probably in her late fifties, and dressed in a worn-out cotton saree. When dada's tirade ended she remained rooted to the spot where she stood – silent, expressionless and obviously shocked. Dada who then walked off to have lunch, was his affable self within seconds. Hadn't he been unnecessarily harsh? I asked. It had to be done sometimes, he replied casually, otherwise such people were continuously crowding the union office begging for help.

This incident was isolated only in the intensity of P.N.Samant's tirade. But it illustrated how and why the workers had grown disillusioned with the union. At the end of it all Doctor was still loved. But dada and the union's methods of functioning had, for obvious reasons, inspired no loyalty. At the same time this incident occurred, in August 1983, the strike was past even its last death throes and dismembered dreams of the valiant lay scattered around the battlefield. Belying all hopes of the optimists, the weeks following the triumphant rally at Shivaji Park had marked a further hardening of the stalemate to the workers' disadvantage. Many activists had believed that the historic, unprecedented feat of a strike of 2.3 lakh workers completing a year would bend the government. They believed this even while their instinct quietly reminded them that past experience had left no grounds for such optimism. With the inevitable inaction of the government many of them began edging towards fatalism. The events of the next few weeks conclusively destroyed all grounds for optimism and deepened the fatalism. The determination and intensified organisational efforts of a few activists were of no use when changes in the political equation within Maharashtra led to a further hardening of the government's position on the strike. The strike leaders had often laughed at the “washed out clown” (Babasaheb Bhosale) who sat in the Chief Minister's chair, but his replacement by a veteran tactician ensured that they did not have the last laugh.

By mid-January, Babasaheb Bhosale's crisis-plagued ministry was finally shunted out and a successor was selected, in what A.R.Antulay called a fraud of an election within the party. The party high command had decided to put Vasantdada Patil back in the Chief Ministers chair primarily to control growing dissidence within the Maharashtra Congress(I). But he was

also expected to defuse controversial issues like the textile strike. Since Vasantdada had, from the outset, been a committed hardliner, his handling of the strike was predictable. He was bound to use his power as Chief Minister to strike the last nails into the coffin already prepared for the textile workers' struggle. Stray efforts by some of Vasantdada's party colleagues to salvage their position vis-à-vis the Bombay textile workers, continued even after he assumed office. But the possibility of a breakthrough proved to be a cruel mirage. The most crushing disappointment was the outcome of the only publicly announced meeting between Samant and the Union Minister of Commerce. Though the government had, from the outset, refused to negotiate with Samant since his Union was not recognised and he led an illegal strike, several ministers had privately met Samant for informal discussions throughout the strike. P.N.Samant claimed that over the entire strike period Pranab Mukherjee himself met Samant about five times. Samant did not remember, or chose not to disclose, the details of these meetings but he spoke of Mukherjee as quite considerate, "he accepted that the mill owners were doing illegal acts". At these meetings Mukherjee gave Samant the impression that the government may scrap the BIR Act and accept a differential wage structure for the various categories of mills. But for any concrete results these secret meetings had to move to a public sphere. Samant had long awaited an opening which would allow Mukherjee to disclose his views in public and thus break the stalemate. The only publicly acknowledged meeting till February 1983 had been the dinner with Bhosale, which had proved to be a failure.

When Vishwanath Pratap Singh took over as Commerce Minister, in early March 1983, and announced that he was willing to talk with anyone to settle the textile strike, Samant and his supporters viewed this as a possible breakthrough. Singh had recently won the admiration of people all over the country by resigning as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh after failing to control the dacoit problem within a self-imposed deadline of one month. One such admirer was P.N.Samant, dada, who had followed the personality and work of Singh as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and identified him as a Congress(I) man with a difference. Thus, when P.N.Samant read about Singh's offer in the press, he sent a telegram to the new Commerce Minister taking him up on his offer. Singh replied promptly. Samant was invited to meet the minister in Delhi on the following Sunday. This message reached Samant on a Tuesday and was soon released to the press, which interpreted the invitation as a major breakthrough. The workers were overjoyed and saw in this an opportunity to make an honourable compromise. The long, painful wait seemed to have paid off. Samant was advised by the leading activists to accept a compromise and not remain adamant on the demand for abolition of the BIR Act. Most of the leading activists now accepted that the government would not concede this demand, since even dissenters within the bureaucracy and political hierarchy favoured, at best, an amendment. The most critical need of the hour was to reach an agreement that would get the workers back inside the mills.

But panicky mill owners and an indignant Vasantdada Patil had other plans. They flew to Delhi to convince the concerned ministers and the Prime Minister that since the strike was already fizzling out it would be a fatal error to make any concession at that stage. Singh was accordingly briefed by Mrs. Gandhi to concede nothing. Thus, when Samant emerged from his Sunday afternoon meeting with Singh he had little to say except that some common ground had been found and details would be discussed when Singh came to Bombay a week later. But Samant probably knew even then that the dialogue would not be continued. The Chief Minister and MOA representatives, who had air dashed to Delhi, had not wasted their time. When Ram Dulari Sinha, Deputy Commerce Minister, came to Bombay instead of V.P.Singh a week later many strike activists expected Samant to meet her and pursue "negotiations". Instead Samant left town when Sinha was due to be in Bombay. The workers

were dismayed and disillusioned with this act of Samant. Most of them did not know, and could not imagine, the strength of the hard-liners in the government who had held the day when Samant met Singh. Ram Dulari Sinha came to Bombay not to pursue Singh's efforts in resolving the textile strike but to counter-act the effects of Samant's meeting with the Commerce Minister. Her job was to ensure that the strike was fizzling out as Patil said it was.<sup>86</sup>

With this, the hopes and high-flying morale of mid-January slumped to a new low of despair. Like mirage-weary desert travellers the workers began to learn to live with the reality that neither the Union nor the State Government had any intention of arranging a settlement. At first gradually and then with increasing speed, they returned to the excruciatingly hot boiler rooms and suffocating spinning rooms of the textile mills. The simple men who once spoke of a bada kranti and nurtured a grand dream of freedom from an unrepresentative, oppressive union, began to relive the nightmare in resentful, enforced humility.

After the V.P.Singh fiasco even the Union government once again reverted to spouting the MOA line that a settlement was unnecessary since the strike had, in effect, fizzled out. Even the toughest strike activists now accepted that they were up against a wall they could not vault and prepared to surrender. In the uncertainty and insecurity that followed, the zone committees' relations with Samant changed for the worse. After the meeting with V.P.Singh many mill and area committee activists felt that an opportunity to make a graceful exit from the battle, which they knew by then could not be won, had been missed. Failing to get an active response from Samant the area committee activists formed a Central Committee in order to seek a compromise resolution of the strike. But Samant's reaction to this was sharply negative. Many an activist was chastened by Samant and thus alienated from him. "When there is no response from doctor for the Central Committee, why should they stick their necks out?" asked one Central Committee activist who till then had been a zealous Samant supporter; "Without consulting us (Central Committee) he announced that he would give jobs to 25,000 workers. And when the activists couldn't do that (provide the jobs) the workers blamed us."

In the prevailing mood of deep pessimism the loss of the committees' credibility weakened their hold over the rank and file. This further accelerated the disintegration of the strike. At this juncture, when there was a need for an action programme which involved the workers, Samant chose the Sangli Assembly by-election as a major rallying point. Vasantdada Patil, a member of Parliament at the time he became Chief Minister, was contesting the Sangli Assembly seat vacated for him by his wife. All other opposition parties backed out of the election because they considered it a waste of time to fight Vasantdada in his own stronghold. But the MGKU and Lal Nishan party decided to field a joint candidate. "After one year's clownish performance... Barrister Babasaheb Bhosale was replaced by pragmatic Vasantdada Patil as Chief Minister..." read a press statement issued jointly by Samant and Yashwant Chavan. "As regards the 16-month-old strike, Vasantdada Patil has personally and treacherously sabotaged the efforts made by the Central Government through Union Commerce Minister V.P.Singh in initiating negotiations with Dr. Datta Samant, for an

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<sup>86</sup> In terms of pure statistics, the general labour situation in Maharashtra was substantially "better" in February 1983, as compared to the same time a year earlier. In 1982, 149 units had been shut down due to strikes and lock-outs involving 2,41,581 workers, of which 2,19,348 workers were in Bombay – 2,12,547 of them belonging to the textile mills. In February 1983 there were more units (168) shut down due to strikes or lock-outs but the number of workers had fallen to 1,73,681; of which 1,53,703 were in Bombay and 1,41,150 of whom were from textile mills. (Statistics provided by Labour Commissioner's office.)

honourable settlement and thus betrayed the sons of the toiling peasants of Maharashtra working in Bombay mills... instead of solving the problem he is imagining that the problem has solved itself. But the working and toiling masses of Maharashtra must show this arrogant satrap of capitalist policies that issues of textile workers have not become extinct and that none of the problems concerning common people can be extinguished by suppression.” With this brief they set out for the Maratha's stronghold to campaign against him in the name of the textile workers and the working class struggle.

The exercise had only notional value for the rank and file of textile workers. Defeating Patil was virtually impossible and even Samant and Chavan knew this. But unlike leaders of other opposition parties, they felt that the election should be made an issue and Patil should be given a run for his money. And even that was not easily done. Though many textile workers came from the outlying and backward areas of Sangli district, Patil's constituency is in central Sangli city and excludes the working class suburbs. It was therefore to the MGKU and Lal Nishan's credit that their candidate, backed by the Dalits and left parties, posed enough of a challenge to Patil for him to get nervous. The Chief Minister was reported to have camped in the constituency for nearly a month, brought dozens of Ministers and MLAs to help his campaign and even exercised strong-arm tactics on the voters, reported Gail Omvedt in the *EPW*.<sup>87</sup> She also recorded how the ward and village chiefs were warned that the areas not voting for Patil would get no development funds. Muslim minorities were made to feel insecure and thousands of saris were distributed to women voters. Instead of losing his deposit, as Patil's camp predicted, Shantaram Patil (the Samaht-Lal Nishan candidate) polled 15,000 votes to Patil's 53,000 votes. “If we can do so much in a rich constituency like Sangli which has been in Dada's family pocket for decades, the whole Congress power is going to be rocketed in 1985,” said a jubilant activist.

But this euphoria was of no use to the majority of the textile workers in Bombay, most of who were inside the mills and once again oppressed by both the RMMS and the mill owners. The disintegration was aided, and made increasingly painful, when the left trade unions had begun telling the workers to resume work in November-December 1982. The activists dismissed this as a defeatist attitude and most workers agreed. But by March 1983, the situation was different. The Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS), a group of young activists with Naxalite affiliations, which had actively assisted workers in fighting police cases and countering other forms of repression, now challenged Samant's leadership and began actively encouraging workers to return to the mills. Their rationale was that Samant had allowed the strike to fizzle out, the battle was lost and there was nothing to be gained by letting the workers suffer indefinitely. NBS activists also noted that the mill owners were planning to use the strike to retrench about 70,000 workers and intensify the process of modernisation. The NBS claimed that Samant was not giving serious thought to these issues. The NBS favoured a damage-limiting, compromise agreement which may not secure the original demands but would save jobs by preventing mass retrenchments.

As time passed, this argument appealed to more and more workers. Many, like Prabhakar More and G.V.Chitnis, felt that a compromise settlement ought to have been made when Bhosale offered to increase the advance money. As Fernandes would say in late 1983: “When the minister announced (in Parliament) Rs.30 interim relief (Samant) could have accepted that and done something... but then Samant would not be Samant and then it would be just one more strike and he would be in a different situation.” Similarly, Chitnis was of the view that

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<sup>87</sup> “Textile Strike Turns Political” by Gail Omvedt, *EPW*: August 27, 1983.



Samant had missed a major opportunity to settle the strike when he failed to follow up on S.M.Joshi's meeting with the Prime Minister. Once the strike had extended to a full year, Chitnis insisted that Samant had an obligation to intensify the struggle and find a way out, which he failed to do. To those who shared this view-point the failure and tragedy of the textile strike was entirely Samant's doing because he refused to co-operate with other non-INTUC unions. Somnath Dube, who was candid in his self-appraisal, held essentially the same view: "It is not that we (TUJAC) were very united but our problem was that Samant would not take us into confidence."

In the most extreme form such complaints stemmed from a blatant egotism. Dange insisted that the story could have been different if he had been active and able to participate. He had left the field open for Samant, Dange said in late 1983, because he was not capable of physically putting in the time and energy required to participate fully and he did not want to play a bit role. Dange wanted the failure to be all Samant's. When asked why such an old and carefully built tradition of communist unions among the textile mills had declined, Dange said: "The answer would smack of vanity, but the main reason is that I gave it up." But should an institution, and at that a Marxist institution, be dependent on a single individual? "That depends, movement, it won't tolerate (the person). As long as I am alive my need will be felt. Thirty or forty main leaders come here on holidays and for hours they sit arguing, shouting at me, asking questions. At every crisis you will find such meetings here. I have not cut myself off from them nor have they cut off themselves from me. But I don't take responsibility that would be wrong because I'd be inefficient and irregular..."

Dange's estimate of his own importance was not entirely unjustified because while in retreat many an activist felt that things might have been different had Dange been with them. Some even directly blamed the Sarva Shramik Sangh for "keeping doctor and Dange apart."<sup>88</sup> While the role of the Shramik could be questioned at many levels and assessed from different view-points, this particular allegation had little basis. Given the highly individualised style of Samant and the ideological firmness and personal ego of Dange any "coming together" would have been temporary. Such allegations largely surfaced in a period of deep despair, when the workers found themselves engulfed by darkness. Many of them were overwhelmed by a sense of insecurity and hopelessness. This was not to change in the near future. To many who fought in the battle and lay grievously wounded in body and spirit, it seemed as though the sun should never rise again. Only those familiar with the cyclical patterns of history knew that some day the sun would rise again bringing with it fresh light and energy for the exhausted workers whose fiery militancy had not been extinguished. Thus, even those compelled to return to the mills remained loyal to Samant. When a morcha called by Samant on March 7, 1983, brought out mammoth crowds the State Government dismissed it as the few live embers of a dying fire. But Samant continued to draw large crowds throughout that year and into the next. The phenomenal turn-out at the second anniversary morcha on January 18, 1984, was evidence of this.

By June 1983 it was futile to deny that the strike had fizzled out. After its unprecedented duration of 18 months the strike was effectively over and most strike activists acknowledged this. The face of defeat was ugly and tragic. This was evident from the state of K.P.Kamble, Lata's fiery neighbour who had confidently predicted the coming of a bada kranti a year and a

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<sup>88</sup> Dange also claimed that workers, mostly his old loyalists, had wanted him to make a settlement but he refused to play the role because, as he said, he didn't want Samant to have the excuse that the strike failed because of Dange's interference.

half earlier. After weeks of pressure from RMMS activists and mill representatives, Kamble had finally gone to the mill where he worked as a jobber for over a decade. Apart from addressing him in a humiliating manner, the labour officer of the mill demanded that Kamble sign an undertaking and pledge unquestioning obedience to the management and give an assurance that he would never go on strike again. When Kamble hesitated he was reminded by the mill officer that technically his services had already been terminated. The mill had sent two notices threatening to retrench him if he failed to quit the strike and resume duties. He was being taken back as a favour, the labour officer stressed. Kamble knew better. The mill had particularly been seeking him out because, as a jobber, he commanded the allegiance of at least 100 workers who were expected to follow him back into the mill. The new recruits employed by the management were not producing the required quality of cloth – and thus the need for old skilled hands.<sup>89</sup> But at this stage Kamble, broken in spirit and overcome by a sense of hopelessness, was compelled to ask his strike comrades: “How does it make a difference if I am at home (and not at work)? If they (mill owners) take my job away, will Samant get it back?”

So Kamble resumed work and began dealing with the bizarre ways of the RMMS which had learnt no lessons from the strike. But no sooner had he returned to the mill the MGKU activists began pressurising him to leave – in the hope that these who had followed him inside would also once again come out. A month after he entered the mill, Kamble was out again. But now he was merely a statistic on the daily attendance registers. The humiliation was unbearable for the once-proud Kamble: “I look at our condition and am sad. I never asked for money from anyone and now I have to ask...” His voice trembled and there were tears in his eyes. Then he went on to praise his brother, who worked in a fish market and gave him Rs.5 per day to enable him to eat roti and chutney. As he wiped his eyes Kamble said: “Starvation outside is better than slavery inside.” Jobbers like him were being made to do menial work, which was an unforgivable humiliation for men of that standing in the labour hierarchy. Many permanent workers were being taken back as badlis and some were given half the earlier wages. But Kamble, and thousands like him, shortly returned to the mills once again and this time they went to stay – for as long as the management would keep them.

Anger against Samant simultaneously reached new heights. The bada kranti would have happened, Kamble said: “But (Samant's) union didn't give it a chance and now the wind had gone out of it. The union was always peaceful so that created an anticlimax. Samant never took fast and immediate action and so the government got a chance to gear up. He should have given a call to go to managers' homes and demonstrate. But, instead, there was a lack of union support for those workers who were arrested by the police for standing up and fighting. We could have blocked the major thoroughfares but when we were arrested by the police Samant would have said these are not my people... He has done a lot, but he failed to bring political pressure.” And yet, even while he was so acutely aware of Samant's failure as a political tactician, Kamble remained loyal to his chosen leader. Kamble, like thousands of other equally disillusioned workers, did not doubt Samant's integrity.

Leaders of Salaskar's stature attempted to contain disillusionment with Samant by reminding workers that they had insisted on launching the strike. Samant had wanted to just continue the strike in the eight mills that had been closed since October 1981. Samant had wanted to fight the battle of the remaining mills in court by challenging the RMMS and having it

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<sup>89</sup> There were several reports, at this stage, about cloth from the Bombay mills being rejected by cloth merchants due to its poor quality.

derecognised.<sup>90</sup> “I am fire, you'll be burnt,” Samant had warned the first band of textile workers who sought to make him their leader. The activists, however, never regretted the decision to strike even when they were deeply disillusioned with Samant's methods and inaction.

Yet, the government and mill owners steadfastly clung to the belief that the workers had been misled and misguided. In May 1983, Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil called upon the MOA to adopt a “forget and forgive” approach to settle the strike because the workers had been “misled” by Samant. Patil took pains to point out that the mill owners were not to be blamed for they followed “a legal path”. Samant, on the other hand, was a “new type of Hitler”, according to Patil.

By June 1983 even the MGKU had effectively relented and decided that workers who went back into the mills could no longer be described as “black legs”. Economic necessity was driving them back and Samant had no more promises to hold out. If the strike had been a test of Samant's adamance versus that of the government's, the latter had clearly won. Even Samant recognised this: Therefore the zone committees no longer exhorted workers to stay out and quietly made a shift in strategy. Acting on the premise that workers continued to remain loyal to Samant and the cause of their struggle, in spirit if not in deed, the union adopted the strategy of unobtrusively organising workers inside the mills. Slowly, the zone committees began holding secret meetings of 20 to 30 workers who had gone back to the mills. By June 14, the MGKU brought its gradually evolving strategy into the open at a meeting held at a small hall in Dadar.

In July, the union began a membership collection drive outside the mill gates. At a meeting held in Prabhadevi, on July 9, the workers stood in line to pay the membership fees of Re.1 each. Out of the one lakh workers, estimated by the MGKU to be inside the mills, about 70,000 paid this membership fee, according to P.N.Samant. This naturally boosted Samant's position at a time when the mainstream media was proclaiming the beginning of the end of Samant's career as a trade union leader. But the workers were not waiting in long queues to pay subscription to the MGKU because of any charisma that Samant exuded. They were drawn to the MGKU because of the misery and injustices they experienced inside the mills. RMMS functionaries had resumed their repressive role with a vengeance. Having already signed over 60 modernisation and rationalisation agreements during the strike period, the RMMS also aided the mill owners to implement its scheme of large-scale retrenchments.

The affairs of the RMMS by this point passed into the hands of N.K.Bhatt, President of the INTUC and a die-hard Indira Gandhi loyalist. Bhatt had worked with the INTUC since 1947 and was then in his third term in the Rajya Sabha. He began the operation of getting the RMMS back on its feet by first ousting the existing leadership. He then issued press statements protesting against the mill owners taking advantage of the strike to retrench workers without adequate benefits and compensation. While Hoshing and Bhosale had remained reluctant to concede any fallings on their sides, Bhatt acknowledged that the RMMS's inability to keep pace with the changing mood of the workers had led to the strike situation. Bhatt said in an interview on February 4, 1984: “If Samant gave a wrong lead there should have been someone to give a right lead. But Samant's style had not led to anything. Has it benefited anyone? Is it a method?” thus Bhatt visualised his job at the RMMS as an

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<sup>90</sup> In retrospect even the Labour Commissioner of Maharashtra, P.J.Ovid, identified Samant's decision to take all 60 mills on strike as his most crucial tactical error.

opportunity to repair the damage done by Samant. Despite their obvious failings Hoshing and Bhosale were unrepentant to the end and relinquished office only after a combination of persuasion and pressure exerted by Bhatt. With a new team of officials, led by Haribahau Naik a new team of officials chalked out a programme to enforce discipline in the union, build and train cadre, and prepare for fresh elections to the union posts.

Yet, Bhatt, like Hoshing and Bhosale, remained aloof from the rank and file. His contact with those the union was meant to represent was limited to looking out of his office window and seeing groups of workers gathered below. Thus, when questioned about the oppression and terror inflicted upon the workers by his union functionaries, Bhatt had no answers.

Questioned about the modernisation and rationalisation agreements signed by the RMMS during the strike, Bhatt said he was aware this had happened but had not looked into the details. Bhatt's primary concern was to ensure that the 13 taken-over mills were reopened and the workers of these mills got their jobs back. His satisfaction with the process of resurrecting the RMMS was derived from the swelling crowds at Mazdoor Manzil. "In mid-1983 not 10 people came here" said Bhatt, "Now they are getting services so they come here in large numbers. It will take time to re-establish ourselves. I am confident of my ideology and approach but it will take a year or so more."

H.S.Supal, who had spent 28 years working in the textile mills, was among those who flocked to Mazdoor Manzil. He belonged to that category of workers who had remained loyal to the RMMS and returned to work early in the strike to become more assertive as the strike finally began to fizzle out. A former joint committee member of the RMMS, Supal was of the view that strikes in the textile mills inevitably prove futile. "The BIR Act does not allow strikes," he said simply. Supal criticised Samant's lack of knowledge about textile mills and, unlike those on strike, firmly believed that the industry could not afford to pay a higher wage. "The work (of representing workers) can only be done by the RMMS even though there are internal problems and failings. Now, Samant is in politics and he's stuck. But the RMMS is not in politics and its attention is not divided. Look, the RMMS has been here since 1946 many have come and gone but we have remained the recognised union," said Supal confidently. The striking workers were aware of this and disheartened by it. But this was not sufficient for them to accept the RMMS rhetoric. Those who were being victimised told another story.

Hira Daji was one victim whose tale was particularly ironical. Hirabai and I met one morning on the steps of the Sarva Shramik Sangh office, on the eve of Diwali in 1983. In one of the rooms inside, activists had been talking about the mounting anger among the rank and file, and the RMMS's forcible collection of pauti (union dues). Outside, the aged Hirabai, clutching a sheaf of papers in one hand, was looking for help. A jobber, and veteran textile worker, Hirabai had been thrown out of her job with 13 days wages in lieu of notice, on false charges of dishonesty. Ironically, Hirabai was a traditional RMMS supporter and had remained loyal throughout the over a year-long strike. She even participated in strike-breaking efforts. But there was no visible bitterness in the activists attitude towards Hirabai, for her plight was a vindication of their stand, another illustration of their just cause. It was also an indication of the important role they continued to play as workers flocked to them. As one activist said in explaining their rationale for helping Hirabai: "Now she's come to us and we still want to show that we'll fight her case."

While the situation was ripe for a resurgence of militancy there was also confusion and disillusionment in the ranks of the activists who had, till then, stood united behind Samant. In their deepest moments of despair some echoed the suspicion of left trade unions, that Doctor

remained loyal to Mrs. Gandhi – and had thus shied away from a frontal attack against her government. By the middle of September a segment of the Central Committee seriously contemplated forming a delegation to approach opposition trade union leaders and seek their help in resolving the dispute with mill owners. The delegation, consisting of some zone committee leaders, planned to meet Samant with the same request: If he did not respond favourably, the delegation planned to hold a press conference to state their position and call upon other trade union leaders to make a united effort to resolve the strike. Despite all the disillusionment, organisers of the proposed delegation insisted that they were not abandoning Samant. They were only responding to the need to include other leaders, apart from Samant.

This move was greatly influenced by the fact that those activists who had once scorned TUJAC, now believed that if they had worked to make TUJAC a more effective weapon, the strike may have presented a more formidable challenge to the government. In this context Samant's highly personalised style of functioning and P.N.Samant's arrogant, abrasive manner came in for severe attack from the Central Committee members. “In a union that's a family affair this is bound to happen”, workers remarked sarcastically. The process of disenchantment, as mentioned earlier, had begun with the formation of the Central Committee and Samant's antagonism towards it. G.S.Gajarmal, an active Central Committee member, found himself accused by Samant of confusing the strike effort and suspected of working for the red flag unions. Gajarmal concluded after receiving a tongue lashing from Samant: “Doctor is happy so long as we activists stay disunited. So long as we are stray individuals and activists around him and not an organised force it means he doesn't have to do anything (by way of drastic action to resolve the strike).”

That the strike had been, first and foremost, the workers' own struggle was still a matter of great pride for the activists. When stressing this the activists said that they had only accepted the temporary leadership of Samant. Some were even confident of keeping the MGKU alive without Samant. When the strike had begun Samant could do little wrong in their eyes. At the end, there was little that the much-flawed leader seemed to do right. The fact that Samant had continued to negotiate and make arrangements with the mill owners in their other (non-textile) units was viewed as having worked against the strike effort. Matters came to a head in late September 1983 at a meeting organised by the Central Committee activists to discuss and resolve these issues. Samant's presence was essential and he had agreed to attend.

But after waiting for five hours the workers dispersed – Samant had failed to come. The MGKU officials who finally came to the meeting in place of Samant explained the Doctor was detained by the BEST workers. But this only further disenchanted the activists. Months after Ramanuj Upadhyaya, a Vice-President of the MGKU, recalled the “separate meeting held by some activists of the Central Committee – they could not properly explain what they wanted. They were not satisfied with Samant's methods, they wanted violent methods and different action...”

Meanwhile, the Congress(1) had begun the process of rebuilding its power in the city with its MLAs and Municipal Corporators trying to make their presence felt through “mutton shibirs”, among other things. “Mutton shibirs” was a sarcastic reference by Samant supporters to the Congress(I) MLA Bhau Rao Patil's one-day “camps” for youth where the main attraction for participants was the mutton served with lunch. These shibirs were part of Patil's attempt to cultivate support and regain lost ground from the ruins of the textile strike. But the Congress(I) hierarchy had formulated a strategy to counter the negative effects of the strike, at a larger level.

On the eve of the All India Congress Committee (AICC-I) session in Bombay, in October 1983, the results of this strategy were just beginning to take shape in the early hours of October 19, 1983, officials of the National Textile Corporation (NTC), together with local police officials, knocked on the doors of 13 private textile mills to implement the union government's decision to take over the managements of these mills. President Giani Zail Singh had signed the take-over ordinance late on 18th night. One of the most interesting side lights of and telling commentaries on this action came from the response of a Deputy Commissioner of Police in Bombay. As the NTC officials were swooping down on the mills, this Deputy Commissioner called Samant to inform him of the take-over and suggest that perhaps the union leader would now call off the black flag demonstration intended to greet the Prime Minister as she arrived in the city the following morning. Whether the official was acting of his own accord or had been instructed from above is immaterial. The timing of the takeover and its purpose was obvious all, and this official had only acted on cue. But as Samant told the official, his demands were not limited to the take-over of 13 mills – the black flags would fly high.

By late October Samant also had a larger purpose than the textile strike to preoccupy him and determine the direction of his thoughts and action. The “Kamgar Aghadi” which he had announced at the January 18 anniversary rally was in the process of cutting its teeth and showing promise. The process of revitalising the demoralised workers had begun. At that stage Samant defined the Kamgar Aghadi as a pressure group to alter the government's anti-labour attitude and acts. After an over six month lull, since its announcement, the Aghadi became functional in July when MGKU officials addressed meetings in various municipal wards to urge slum dwellers and workers to join the party. After September the main strike activists were given specific tasks and posts within the Aghadi. These actions were based on the assumption that the Municipal Corporation elections would take place on schedule, in February. This enthused the activists and escalated the pace of work.

By January 1984, the zone committees of the textile strike had been converted into “ward committees” of the Kamgar Aghadi. As one of those who had undergone trial by fire in the post-strike months, Gajarmal was among the best placed to describe the Spirit of the Aghadi. From being a deeply disappointed man in April and a bitter antagonist of Samant in September, Gajarmal had returned to being a supporter of Samant in January 1984. On January 18 that year, he said: “All workers with faith in Kamgar Aghadi are active in the ward committees. Now the attention (no longer being limited to the strike) is on other issues like pavement dwellers, dilapidated houses, water, sewage and other such concerns. Workers are doing work in their areas, they have left their old affiliations behind. We (activists) explain to workers that in all other parties there is “bossism”. Here it is your own initiative, come forward and work.” Recalling the days when some had contemplated calling the opposition leadership to settle the strike Gajarmal said: “We changed our minds because we decided that so long as workers still support Samant there is no point in publicly opposing him. It would have further divided us. Now it is better that we didn't because we have reorganised under Samant, and textile workers are leaders in the Kamgar Aghadi.”

The Aghadi thus succeeded in meeting the MGKU's aim – that of giving the workers a direction and preventing them from repeatedly making futile trips to Ghatkopar office asking for jobs and money. Samant, in spite of the hundreds of industrial units under his control, had provided alternative employment to only a handful. The union, however, claimed at the end to have provided jobs to 5,000 victimised textile workers.

But the development of the Kamgar Aghadi and changes within the cadre of textile worker activists were taking place in the context of a crisis-plagued industry. Apart from losses incurred during the strike due to payment of standing dues, the costs of most production components had increased over the 18 month period of the strike. At the same time the cloth markets remained stagnant as the recession deepened. The production process was also hampered by the fact that many workers had not returned to their original mills long after the strike had fizzled out and production chains remained incomplete due to the displacement of skilled staff.

This did not stop the mill managements from taking a stiff stand with the returning “errant” workers. In most mills the workers were made to sign productivity agreements, which increased their work load by 15% or more. These “agreements”, which were actually undertakings, also extracted promises of “good behaviour” and obedience to all the management's dictates, failing which the workers were liable to lose their jobs without due process. Thousands of workers who retired or resigned were even denied gratuity and other benefits. Apart from such voluntary withdrawals there were large-scale retrenchments, undertaken even by the NTC mills.

Just how much of an empty gesture the take over of 13 mills had been was evident from subsequent developments. Four months after the take-over, only five of the 13 mills were working. And more importantly, only about 16,000 of the 36,000 workers in those 13 mills had regained their jobs. After announcing the take-over, and widely projecting it as a magnanimous favour to the embattled workers, the NTC effectively did nothing to assist the workers not taken back into the mills. The policy makers' attention was, by then, almost entirely focussed on the ill-health of the industry. The bureaucracy was holding forth promises of financial aid for modernisation and other measures to revive the sagging fortunes of the textile mills.<sup>91</sup>

Large-scale rationalisation was a gift of the strike to mill owners. They took advantage of this to initiate schemes for modernisation. Before these schemes could be implemented all resources had to be devoted to restore the mills to full working order. Concern for the fate of the “illegal strikers” had no place in this climate. And the climate was hostile to textile workers all over the country. The RMMS estimated that in 1982-83, about 10% to 15% of the country's textile workers had been rendered jobless. The mill owners merely said that the industry could do no better in the face of an ever deepening recession.<sup>92</sup>

Apart from frequent promises about reviving production in the taken over mills, the government had nothing to offer the workers who suffered due to the sagging fortunes of the industry. Since the mill owners, especially in Bombay, were able to retrench workers with impunity, they were not concerned about the residual support Samant still enjoyed in the mills. This support meant little because it came mainly from the 20% of badli workers who had not been taken back by the mills and had remained with Samant largely because they had no other options. The workers of the taken over mills, who were not allowed to resume duty even after the NTC took charge, were also depending on Samant. But, understandably, an equal number of workers were also depending on the RMMS.

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<sup>91</sup> *Economic times*, May, 1983

<sup>92</sup> In Bombay, at the end of December 1983, the off-take of cloth remained poor even on reduced prices. As stocks continued to pile up, it further worsened the liquidity problem of the mills. A Central Advisory Council on textiles was set up at the end of November 1983 to look into this and other problems.

The RMMS had the institutional machinery and the legal standing to press for, at least, full operation of the 13 taken over mills to ensure that most of the original workers got their jobs back. Few people, at this stage, seemed concerned about the fact that every issue for which the battle had been waged, remained unresolved and new problems had arisen. As one mill executive said simply: "There is no violence at the mill gates and in the by-lanes, so where is the problem?" Some, like the ever-zealous R.L.N. Vijaynagar, believed that the growing frustration of the "have-nots" (as he insisted on referring to the workers) would peak and erupt in dangerous ways. But he still firmly believed that the workers had been misled and taken for a ride by Samant. Vijaynagar's perception of the situation was necessarily dominated by the ill-conceived nature of the labour laws and the government's vacillation on labour issues. There was no understanding, even after two years of upheaval, of structural defects in the industrial relations machinery which created the situation. By February 1983, the strike was relegated to the rear recesses of Vijaynagar's memory. He was busy pouring over law books and helping the MOA lawyers fight the case challenging the take-over of 13 mills.

Geographically, psychologically and socially isolated from the "have-nots" who so concerned him, Vijaynagar and those of his ilk had no conception of what happened to the thousands who just dropped out, or had been forced out of the system. Those mill executives who had a sense of noblesse oblige, talked sadly of the many workers who had turned to daily hamali<sup>93</sup>, or were selling vegetables on the footpaths. Others would notice that the cobbler or fruit vendor on the pavement outside the mill looked familiar and vaguely recall that he was once a skilled textile worker. While the more sensitive among them perceived the misery of earning a daily wage in this uncertain manner, there were also those who saw these alternative occupations as proof that all had weathered the storm with reasonable success. Said the technical director of one mill: "If we were working to full capacity and needed the total number of workers they wouldn't be there. They have found other jobs even if the wages are less than 50% of what they got in the mill." There were few exceptions among this elite set who recognized that the majority of mill owners were aloof from the workers and their misery and acknowledged this to be a dangerous tendency. "How many years can they do this (deal with workers) on an ad hoc basis". Some wondered aloud.

At the same time, the only promise the leader they once hero-worshipped now held out to the textile workers was that the Kamgar Aghadi would some day be a great party of the working class. By January 18, 1984 the Aghadi had 15 offices all over Bombay. A few weeks earlier Samant's supporters had swept to victory in the elections of the credit co-operatives in the textile mills. This gave further credence to Samant's claim that he still commanded the workers' loyalty. But confirmed hard-liners of the establishment, like Bhatt, were unimpressed. Said Bhatt: "The Kamgar Aghadi is a political platform Samant has taken for himself, nothing more. I am not in a position to say whether workers are still with him (Samant)." But such criticism did not concern Samant. Neither did he appear disturbed by the departure of workers in other units once controlled by him. In many of these cases, workers abandoned Samant to make independent settlements with managements. Samant boosted his image as a trade union leader on the strength of agreements like the one at Premier Automobiles, where workers got a Rs.700 (per month) increase in January 1983. (That this was gained at the cost of agreeing to more than double the earlier work load, was not highlighted by Samant.) However, amid the deep despair which dominated the post-strike period, Samant relied on the forthcoming Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections to

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<sup>93</sup> **Hamali** is manual labour and in Bombay it most often refers to the pulling of handcarts, unloading of trucks in the wholesale markets, etc.



serve as a rallying point for his followers. Success in the municipal elections, Samant believed, would place the Kamgar Aghadi on the political map of Maharashtra.

When the State Government opted to supersede the BMC instead of holding local elections, Samant quickly claimed that this was a result of the government's fear that the Aghadi would have swept to victory in the elections. There was more than just a tinge of false bravado in such statements. In the absence of an election in the near future the Aghadi lost its central focus and also much of its momentum. The rank and file of textile workers, as peripheral participants in the Aghadi, were only marginally affected by such developments. But the drop in the Aghadi's momentum further deepened their pessimism. They felt even more oppressed by the all-pervasive power of the forces which controlled their destiny. Was victory in the greatest struggle they had ever known, to be defined as winning a few seats in the Municipal Corporation election? It was then that the revolutionary fervour of yesterday seemed an illusion – a dream that could never be a reality.

## CHAPTER 10: Lessons

Exactly two weeks before the mammoth morcha to mark the second anniversary of the textile strike, the Indian Cotton Mills Federation (ICMF) celebrated its silver jubilee at a grand function in Bombay. The President of India, the Governor of Reserve Bank of India and “captains of industry” graced the celebrations. The occasion, if not actually festive, was marked by optimism. There were promises by all to hasten the modernisation of the textile industry and Dr. Manmohan Singh, Governor of the Reserve Bank of India promised that the RBI would provide funds to make this possible. The textile strike went unmentioned and this was not surprising. For those who attended that function, the strike was a fading memory. When mill owners did recall or mention the strike it was with contempt for the workers they still believed had been easily misled. Any sense of loss or regret had to do with the monetary losses. Some mill owners were even sensitive to the irony of the fact that the annual interest payments on the losses incurred and debts accumulated during the strike were greater than the original wage demand.

But, by and large, the mill owners along with the RMMS once again began asserting their power over the workers – doing so with a vengeance. Strike activists and other “undesirable” workers were kept out at will by the mill owners. Excess workloads were imposed on the workers for lower wages. The Payment of Wages Act and Factories Act were trampled underfoot with impunity. Of the approximately one lakh workers who were either dismissed or opted out of their old jobs, thousands were reduced to penury. According to Nawjawan Bharat Sabha, so many jobless textile workers went looking for daily wage work and hamali that the rates of such labour dropped from Rs.7 to Rs.3 for 12 hours of work.

Gradually, the strikers began the long and painful process of picking up the pieces of their lives. But the dream of a bada kranti seemed to lie shattered beyond repair. In the corridors of Shram Shakti Bhavan and Udyog Bhavan in Delhi the very notion of this dream was scoffed at and even ridiculed. The bureaucrats who had dealt with the strike expressed pity and sympathy for the “poor workers” but concentrated on meeting the mill owners' demands for boosting the flagging fortunes of the cotton textile industry. As far as the bureaucracy was concerned the textile strike had already been swept under the carpet of history and it had not taken much doing. Far from the explosion it had seemed in Bombay, the textile strike had not even looked like a potential explosion to Labour Secretary B.G.Deshmukh and his colleagues at the Labour Ministry. Thus, when Deshmukh was asked in all seriousness whether the textile strike had been one of the most important labour vs. state and capital confrontations of our times, his emphatic reply was “Bunkum.” (This comment was made at an interview in Deshmukh's office at Shram Shakti Bhavan on the morning of December 31, 1983.) Seeing the astonished reaction of his interviewer Deshmukh proceeded to explain: “Because all the left trade unionists used to privately say to us that Samant should be crushed. (They knew that) if Samant gets ascendancy he'll put all the others out – CITU, AITUC... (etc.). It was the law of the jungle, no principles were involved. The Bombay textile labourer is the casualty and no one is bothered about it... From Delhi we only knew that it was a fight between unions.”

In Bombay, the Labour Commissioner, P.J.Ovid, independently held a similar view. Referring to the members of the Trade Unions Joint Action Committee (TUJAC), Ovid said: “Some of them wanted to take him (Samant) to a height and drop him from the top.” The key issue for the government, mill owners and established trade unions alike had been the “Samant

phenomenon” or, as Deshmukh put it, the “Samant tendency”. In this context no one even in the left ever saw in this (strike) the seeds of a major revolutionary breakthrough – Deshmukh.

Did the textile workers suffer from delusions of revolution? Or did the left trade unions fail to grasp the immediate and historical importance of the textile workers' revolutionary zeal? Certainly, from the Marxist point of view it was impossible to see any stirrings of revolution in a city-wide strike, however prolonged and historic. As Vladimir Ulianov Lenin wrote, “Strikes teach the workers to unite, they show them that they can struggle against the capitalists only when they are united, strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary police government. (Thus) socialists call strikes a school of war but a school of war is not war itself.”<sup>94</sup> (Emphasis added.)

The textile strike was only a city-based industry strike and, according to Lenin, it is a mistaken idea that even a general strike in the country can win all. He had added that unless the workers turn their attention to other means of conducting the struggle, they will slow down the growth and success of the working class. Therefore, the communists and socialists could not be expected to tolerate or condone Samant's “on to death” style of conducting the strike. G.V.Chitnis would recall: “Both Dr. Samant and Yashwant Chavan remained adamant saying that let the strike fail we'll either win all or nothing. This was wrong, this was not a fight for state power. This wrong policy was the product of wrong politics. Samant is firmly on the side of the workers but that's not sufficient. Today there is need for correct tactics and perspective. A strike leader must be a hard realist. If he ceases to be objective he is likely to go astray.”

But what of the irrepressible upsurge of revolutionary fervour, which held thousands in its way for over a year? The strike was not, in itself, a revolution but could it not be viewed as even a minor uprising in the long and tortuous class struggle? “The process of revolutionary fervour has not started,” Chitnis said firmly and proceeded to explain why. “The bourgeoisie has not lost its hold, the government has not lost all its mass base, and have the communists got the unity to lead? Did Naxalbari ignite the working class? They split many times. Samant has come out well (from the strike) because the workers still don't think he has betrayed them. We kept our mouths shut because we didn't want to create confusion in the minds of the workers. Samant would have put the blame on us, so we allowed the strike to come to its logical end”, maintained Chitnis.

The AITUC had publicly supported the strike in recognition of the fact that “in the last 50 years no leader has had such unquestioned support, never before has there been such unity and one voice and such determination.” But the methods and professed objectives of this almost heroic leader were open to doubt and were found appallingly lacking. There was a refusal to be swept away by the popular upsurge or overestimate its dimensions. In Chitnis's view Samant had gone grievously astray and lost benefits earned for the textile workers over four decades. Most of the senior trade union leaders maintained that if Samant had accepted their advice and help and given the strike a broader political base, the pathetic situation at the end of two years could have been avoided. The very obvious and crushing cost of the strike to the workers became a rallying point for critics of Samant towards the end of the two years. And Samant's political failure was truly staggering. This was a result of his diffused political identity and narrow geographical base.

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<sup>94</sup> *Lenin on Trade Unions.*

Somnath Dube of the HMKP liked to say with confidence that if the strike had been led by the CPM the government may have taken it more seriously for then it would have had wider political dimensions. The CPM would almost certainly have got different treatment from the government, than a renegade like Samant. But, if it remained faithful to its ideological tenets, the CPM would never have conducted a strike of this nature for so long. And Samant, with all his inherent limitations and failings, was grossly ill-equipped to rise to the challenge placed before him. George Fernandes, for all his other mistakes during the textile strike, was right in saying that a struggle for scrapping or amendment of the BIR Act required a fight on several different levels. A strike, however impressive in strength and longitude, was not enough to compel the ruling party to change the law. However, this was not merely the failure of Samant, the individual, but a stark illustration of the limitation and negative implications of the "Samant tendency". Since the rise of the Samant phenomenon was, itself, the result of failings of the left trade unions they, in some sense, shared responsibility for the disastrous course of events. But not all the luminaries of the left were willing to accept this reasoning. George Fernandes insisted that the textile strike was not a reaction against the established left trade unions.

Surendra Mohan, Janata MP and veteran socialist similarly refused to accept the view that the strike was a product of certain fundamental failures of the left trade unions. The failures of the left according to Mohan, was limited to its inability to dislodge the RMMS despite great struggles. "A large majority of people, even at great cost, cannot change the status quo," said Mohan. "This was too big an area (textiles) for Samant's methods. He got a ready response because of the situation. But you cannot say, from this, that the kind of radicalisation wanted from the established trade unions is not coming out. The left trade unions are doing well everywhere and would have done well in Bombay also if not for the BIR Act and the adamance of the government. If the (government) restores to Bombay some elasticity in collective bargaining and democratic industrial relations then the Samant phenomenon should not occur"

Mohan acknowledged the failure of the left trade unions to place issues in a proper perspective vis-à-vis the strike but again added: "They didn't believe Samant could succeed and they didn't want to encourage his tactics..." But the response of the left trade unions was not determined by their aversion to Samant's tactics alone. They simply did not view the textile strike as a do or die struggle. It was another matter for the national leadership of the central trade unions to use the strike in their propaganda and project it as the decisive battle in the "total confrontation" with state and capital.<sup>95</sup> Yet the left leadership could not share the emotional fervour and conviction that imbued the fighting workers with unmatched valour. It has been argued that the failure of Samant's unwieldy style was inevitable and the fate of this struggle was thus sealed from the very outset. Militancy of Samant's kind which gives shape to discontent with the traditional trade unions and the larger political situation but does not provide any clear methodology, let alone ideology is bound to fail. But, more significantly, much of the older trade union leadership in the country seemed to think that such militancy deserves to fail. Where did this leave the lakhs of workers who, in their despair and frustration, could find hope only in such forms of unbridled militancy? For those who went by the book such spontaneous, emotional upsurges were not cause for optimism about the imminence of revolution and, instead, needed to be discouraged.

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<sup>95</sup> The non-INTUC trade unions had decided at the national convention in 1981 that the series of draconian ordinances and laws introduced by Mrs. Gandhi's government had forced labour into a position of "total confrontation" with state and capital.

In the words of Lenin: “The ‘spontaneous element’ in essence, represents nothing more or less than consciousness in an embryonic form. All worship of the spontaneity of the working class movement, all belittling of the role of ‘the conscious element’ and of the role of social-democracy means a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon workers. (Because) bourgeois ideology is much older in origin and more fully developed and has immeasurable means of dissemination... All those who talk about ‘overrating the importance of ideology’ about exaggerating the role of the conscious element, etc., imagine that the labour movement pure and simple can elaborate, an independent ideology for itself if only the workers wrest their fate from the hands of the leaders. But this is a profound mistake.”<sup>96</sup>

When their dreams lay shattered and their spirits were battered the textile workers appeared to have proved Lenin right. They had come a long way from being the vanguard of the communist trade union movement in the 1920s. After finding unions of all ideological hues lacking, and suffering decades of oppression by the recognised union, the textile workers were determined to blaze a new trail. It was this almost superhuman determination which made the strike a do or die struggle for most textile workers. And this attitude was entirely unacceptable to the leadership of the left trade unions. Even the otherwise cautious Surendra Mohan admitted that this was due to a failure of analysis. The government's whole approach and attitude may have been wrong Mohan said, but this did not explain the failure and inability of the left to adequately understand and deal with the situation. Yashwant Chavan described this as “the worst example of the darkest hour of the Indian left”. Referring to the contributions, monetary and material, made by various major internally controlled unions (like that of the Life Insurance Corporation employees) Chavan said the left trade unions could have done the same “but they did not, the leadership responded sectarianly – they were afraid of Dr. Samant's ghost. The AITUC and CITU sat back and waited for the strike to fizzle out.”

Indrajit Gupta, MP and President of the AITUC, was among the few to acknowledge this failure: “There were many sectarian elements among us and they didn't see beyond Samant and his anti-communism.” Gupta also took note of the fact that while the deteriorating conditions in the socio-political structure were pushing young people towards the left, the traditional left parties were not able to draw them: “The revival of the Naxalites shows that conventional movements of protest are not adequate. In some areas of Bihar the Naxalites are gaining ground over the CPI on the basis of the party's failure to halt landlord atrocities – so a shift towards violence. Parliamentary democracy is the ruin of all revolutionary forces.”

The same point was made even more forcefully by Gail Omvedt: “The fact that in their break from the bourgeoisie the workers have turned not to the traditional left, but to Samant, an independent ‘bourgeois reformist’ unionist, also shows the stagnation of Parliamentary leftism in India. It has become no longer capable of leading the most militant struggles, and communist alternatives are only now beginning to emerge. A churching is going on in the working class and a major aspect of the new workers' movements developing in India is their ‘independent’ orientation – a rejection of the fast pattern of relationships of political parties to mass organisations, in which parties through trade unions, etc., could have a revolutionary direction and a “correct line” only if they were totally under party control.... and to subordinating these organisations and their struggles to the political alliances of the parties.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Lenin.

<sup>97</sup> Gail Omvedt, *EPW*, August 27, 1983.

In contrast, Samant was answerable to no party, ideology or even hierarchy. He flowed with the wind, using the mood of the workers as his only guide. And this was the essence of the challenge to the old left, one that its oldest hero failed to acknowledge as being a challenge at all. Thus Dange contemptuously dismissed the burgeoning opposition to the traditional left parties and the phenomenon of independent grass roots non-party groups among the younger members of the left. Discussing the hierarchy of the old “revolutionary” parties Dange said in an interview in December 1983: “Parties must be hierarchical for them to be disciplined and when discipline is imposed they call it hierarchy.” A party with neither ideology nor authority ceases to be a party and becomes like a *panth*, Dange insisted. “Without authority there is no movement or progress. The revolutionary army needs obedience (a soldier in this army) cannot have the democratic right not to fight.”

But Dange, like most of his juniors who were actually in the fray of the textile strike, overlooked the responsibility cast upon them by the tenets of the ideology they espoused. For Lenin also wrote: “Spontaneity of the masses demands a high degree of consciousness from us social democrats. The greater the spontaneous upsurge of the masses and the more widespread the movement, the more rapid, incomparably so, the demand for greater consciousness in the theoretical, political and organisational work of social democracy.”<sup>98</sup> The leadership which ought to have performed this function was instead absorbed in petty politics. Dange, of course, was retired and too old to participate on an active basis. But perhaps it was his responsibility more than any other leader's to fill the “theoretical and political” lacunae, if not the organisational ones. The failure to do this further compounded Samant's organisational failures.

This was not merely a failure of analysis. The responses and actions of the established left trade unions were a product of the historical process through which the Indian trade unions had passed. The compulsive splitting of the central trade unions and the resultant competition for control of units had not only demoralised workers but also made a mockery of the professed aims of militancy. Most trade unions had concentrated on strengthening their pockets of influence and building infrastructure for the benefit of workers and the union. George Fernandes, who only a decade and a half earlier had set Bombay ablaze with his own brand of militancy, now headed a union with substantial resources and institutionalised structures. The achievements also altered the character of the union, defusing its once struggle-oriented nature. George Fernandes own colleagues talked about his difficulties in “reviving the old spirit of militancy”. Fernandes himself wondered aloud whether it had been a mistake to build the institutional structure at the cost of militancy. He attempted to give an agitational colour to his union activities by launching protest actions but with only limited success. In late 1983 he organised a 10-day national agitation of industrial and agricultural labourers on a vast variety of issues ranging from unemployment to the general anti-labour thrust of the Congress(I) government. As Fernandes criss-crossed through the country in preparation of this *andolan* he talked with reporters about the need for the rural and urban workers to combine and for the need to reach out to the unorganised sector. But even as he exhorted people everywhere to rise and battle the anti-labour government, Fernandes felt no visible sense of regret or guilt about his own role in dissipating the textile strike.

This was a basic contradiction afflicting the trade union movement at that juncture. At a time of total confrontation with the state and capital, individual trade union leaders could contribute by acts of omission and commission to undermining the most hard-pitched anti-

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<sup>98</sup> Lenin.

government anti-capital struggle and then attempt to single-handedly launch national *andolans* to unite the working class. In this context many of the gains in the otherwise lost battle of the textile workers were also ignored. Those who vigorously criticised Samant for sending the workers back to the villages had failed to note the subsequent strengthening of links between the urban factory workers and rural agricultural workers. The absence of such links and the Congress party's ability to use this to its electoral benefit had long been bemoaned but never successfully challenged. Bharat Patankar of the Lal Nishan, who was active in the process of organising textile workers in rural areas, recalled the CPI and CPM's subtle opposition to Samant as a product of their opportunism, they were afraid of losing their base because they can't visualise any struggle or union without the party. In the villages, where the textile workers returned to their kith and kin, they initiated debates on not just the strike but also on the general political reality, the propaganda of the ruling party and emerging methods of response to these forces. These links were a crucial factor in allowing the workers to hold out as they did.

The rural proletariat was not only able to support the thousands who returned there for the duration of the strike but also contributed directly to the struggle in the city and later helped rehabilitate those who could not or would not return to the mills. Even the mainstream media, which had grossly under-reported the strike, took note of this phenomenon. *The Times of India* Pune correspondent reported on a Pani Panchayat in Purandhar Taluka helping textile workers to rehabilitate their farms. Out of the 15,000 textile workers from this taluka at least 1,000 were reportedly not willing to return to the city.<sup>99</sup> The “interconnected” nature of the working class, and possible unity were on display here in a practical and noteworthy form. It has been argued that these were isolated cases and the support provided by such efforts to the striking workers was insubstantial. But to those who work in the field this was more than the traditional left trade unions and parties had achieved after years of preaching about the need for such links. Like much else in the strike, the emerging rural-urban links were indications of the potential for radical forms of political organisation of the type revolutionary parties should have nurtured but failed to. But, unfortunately, most of the lessons learnt from the strike were negative and such positive achievements were limited in scale and significance.

Veteran socialist leader, Ashok Mehta, had no stake in the battle being waged in the mills of Bombay in 1982 and was living in retirement at a rose farm on the outskirts of Delhi. Mehta observed quite dispassionately that: “The lesson of this strike was that a major strike should never be launched if you don't know how to end it or compromise. Some fall-back position should be there.” An equally detached Bagaram Tulpule wrote: “Ability to lead workers in strikes is only one, albeit an important, test of a trade unionist. The real test, however, is the ability to solve the problems involved in disputes, and a really competent trade unionist is able to secure acceptable solutions of problems without the need to resort to an extremely long strike so frequently.”<sup>100</sup>

Undoubtedly, many of Samant's struggles, as pointed out earlier, ended in defeat for the workers and often a crushing financial loss. Many small units, where Samant led prolonged strikes, were forced to close down – often in an attempt by the owners to move out of Maharashtra and Samant's reach. Samant's continuing popularity in the face of such failures had long baffled his opponents. But many of them felt that the disastrous outcome of the strike would surely signal the end of the “Samant menace”. But this assessment was based on

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<sup>99</sup> *Times of India*; December 26, 1982.

<sup>100</sup> *Bombay Textile Workers – Different View* by Bagaram Tulpule, *EPW*, April 24, 1982.

erroneous assumptions and perceptions. Whether Samant was “finished” or not was immaterial. To harp too long on the number of factories won or lost by him was to confuse Samant the individual trade unionist with Samant the phenomenon. Even B.G.Deshmukh was of the view that anyone who had challenged the law in the same manner would have earned the same response, as Samant did from the workers. As one mill owner stated with a note of helplessness: “The question is not whether Samant is good for the workers but he just is powerful.” This was an unalterable fact of life. Even C.V.Chitnis, whose assessment of Samant's holding of the textile strike was scathingly critical, acknowledged that the most phenomenal aspect of it all was his continuing popularity in the face of dismal defeat. Despite all the bad blood created during the textile strike, Chitnis said: “We still want him to be with us but with a clearer view of politics, some introspection and clearer conclusions. He's a force to reckon with.”

Samant the phenomenon was an expression of the irrepressible urge to seek alternatives and reflected a wider trend in the changing political equation in the country. As Rajni Kothari wrote in the *EPW*: “It is a context in which revolutionary parties too have been contained and in part co-opted (as have most of the unions) in which hence the traditional fronts of radical action of the working class movement and the militant peasantry led by left parties are in deep crisis, in which there appears to be a growing hiatus between these parties and the lower classes, especially the very poor and the destitute, which are not amenable to the received wisdom of left politics and in which on the other hand there is taking place a massive backlash from established interests in the form of legislative measures aimed against the toiling classes and a steep rise in repression and terror perpetrated both by the state and by private vested interests.”<sup>101</sup>

Certainly “Samantism” cannot be regarded as a form of new trade unionism which shows signs of developing as a positive alternative to the existing forms which have proved unsatisfactory. But the response to these repressive elements is taking different forms, many of them apparently “negative” and unacceptable to conventional wisdom of any ideological hue. Organisations such as the Shramik Shakti Sanghatana in Belgaum, are more actively and directly concerned with opening new avenues and approaching trade union work in a different manner. In view of the narrow perspective of traditional trade unions, the activists of the Sanghatana have attempted to work in a wider framework. Dilip Kamath of the Sanghatana has stated that the workers should be allowed to realise the limitations – cultural, social and economic – within the present system: “We realise that there is in this social system a limitation to our growth itself. But let the people themselves realise this. We have not brought out all these aspects into the workers arena as yet. And this is what I consider the real task of ‘politicisation’. Indira Gandhi comes and says everyone has one vote, so it's a democracy, and naturally the people believe it is so, and society continues to remain as it was.”<sup>102</sup>

In this context, both the traditional left unions and Samant fall short of the mark. “What are the achievements of the so-called revolutionaries and theorists? Take the Bombay textile strike. It's the best/worst example. Where have all the revolutionary theories led you to: you did not consider the health problems, the man-woman problems, all this was dismissed as

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<sup>101</sup> “The Non-Party Political Process” by Rajni Kothari, *EPW*; February 4, 1984.

<sup>102</sup> *The Shramik Sanghatana and Powerloom Workers of Velgaum* by Dilip Kamath (from Innovative Trade Union Series of Lokayan).



reformist and now where are all the trade unions in Bombay? The workers are all going behind Datta Samant. What does that mean? It's no headway there either.”<sup>103</sup>

But the Samant style, however inadequate a form of organisation, cannot be allowed to distract attention from its causes. The Samant phenomenon is a product of the effort to evolve new concepts and modes of expressing discontent with the status quo. The highly individualistic, often charismatic, trade union leader with a mass following is not an answer to the problem itself – merely a channel through which the grassroots frustrations are being vented.

Such one-man trade unions have taken multifarious forms. The spectrum extends from a giant Samant and competing R.J.Mehta to ruling party supported labour leaders like the late Lalit Maken of Delhi and the more clearly leftist (but distinctly unconnected with CPI/CPM) trade unionists like A.K.Roy of the Dhanbad area, Shankar Guha Neogi of Chhatisgarh in Madhya Pradesh and the experimental organisations of power loom workers in Belgaum, among many others. The Samant and Mehta variety of leaders lack any distinct ideology and under their often populist rhetoric have a broad bourgeois tilt. But Neogi, Roy and others like them are ideologically more definable and probably closer to a conscious search for alternatives. Since their area of activity is limited they have not attracted the attention a Samant commands though they are equally, if not more, militant.

Clearly maverick leaders of this ilk, with a strong bourgeois tilt, are not the solution. The militancy and cry for change has been loudly articulated through Samant but he has not offered any solutions or given any discernible direction to the struggle. Devoid of ideology and any internal hierarchy, Samant's free-wheeling style was his principle asset. But these very factors took their toll as workers in unit after unit were trapped in bitter confrontations with the management from which there was no escape. The lack of methodology and dependence on a few key people (like his brother P.N.Samant) within the union, also took its toll and accelerated the pace of workers' disillusionment with Samant who, in turn, was aware of these problems but unable, or even unwilling, to find solutions. As P.N.Samant admitted: “If we work systematically then we are dead.” Both P.N.Samant and Dr. Samant seemed to realise that the popularity of the union could not survive its institutionalisation. Thus, it remained as it began – a one-man show aided by a small group of confidants and supported by an army of zealous karyakartas (activists).

Even two years after the strike ended, in 1985, when Samant still controlled 4.3% of the registered trade unions in Maharashtra, he still had the same approach: “I do not run my unions like a professional... I am for new dimensions of the working class movement. Economic gain for them is my first aim. This does not suit some of my colleagues. People who left me feel that it should be run on ‘professional’ lines. This means that one should adjust to political necessities”.<sup>104</sup> While the leaders of left parties and trade unions deprecated Samant's lack of ideology, he accused them of placing ideology and politics before the immediate economic benefits of workers.

It was in this context that Samant justified his decision to fight the textile workers battle to the end. The Congress party had always broken struggles of textile workers, Samant argued, and consequently the workers had been struggling in vain for over five decades. Thus, for Samant

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<sup>103</sup> Dilip Kamath.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Datta Samant by Olga Tellis, *Business Standard*; September 8, 1985.

and his most active supporters, the time had come to win all or die fighting. By any standard of conventional wisdom this was a romanticised and irrational stand, for one must live today to fight again tomorrow. Yet, Samant's stand, however counter productive, was the result of forces he could not control or even clearly understand, and channelise.

As Rajni Kothari has observed: "Today's oppressed will need to wage their struggle from 'outside' the existing structure, not just dethroning the ruling class and 'smashing' the State and taking it over but to redefine the whole concept and structure of politics with a view to empowering the masses for a transformation at and from the very bottom of society – the grass roots."<sup>105</sup>

As this grass roots impulse seeks new channels of expression and assertion of the people's rights it can only do so with new modes of struggles. In the absence of an accompanying development of theory which meets the demands of the new conditions, the most haphazard and primitive forms of struggle are inevitable. In its own way, the textile workers' headlong charge, with a do or die determination, was a new form of struggle. Previously, strikes had always been led by big political leaders and called off on promises from the government or after achieving minor monetary gains. The determination not to allow this pattern of history to repeat itself and fight to the end was if not a new mode at least the expression of a desperate need for new modes to storm the seemingly unbreachable citadel of the mill owners-government combine.

From this arose the virtually unquestioning following that Samant acquired and retained in spite of unforgivable organisational failures and grave political tactical errors. Towards the end, when the strikers faced total defeat but Samant still refused to compromise or call off the strike, his critics accused him of prolonging the strike for the sake of his ego and "prestige". Some even accused Samant of deliberately prolonging the strike only to set a new record and find a place in the Guinness Book of Records.<sup>106</sup>

The activist cadre which kept the strike alive did not seriously and consistently begin to talk about a compromise till the end of the second quarter of 1983, at the time of the meeting with V.P.Singh in Delhi. But the meeting, as discussed earlier, was not the opening it seemed to the workers. Yet, if Samant had somehow used this or any other opportunity to make a face-saving compromise, the situation would not have been much better. By mid-1983 the mill owners' strategy of large-scale retrenchment and modernisation had fully crystallised and was already in operation. Ramanuj Upadhyaya, a Vice-President of MGKU offered this as a rationale for refusing to compromise. Referring to the mill owners' flagrant disregard for government directives and the ineffectiveness of the RMMS, Upadhyaya said: "It was right not to compromise. This would have happened even if we had made a settlement." Thus, the material effects of any compromise would not have been different from those of complete defeat. This way there was, for the activists, an element of the heroic in continuing the struggle regardless, of the impossible odds. It is more than likely that had Samant settled for a compromise, not substantially different in material terms from the eventual defeat, the

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<sup>105</sup> Kothari.

<sup>106</sup> If the *Guinness Book of Records* was his target, Samant had a long way to go. The world's longest recorded strike, mentioned in the Guinness book, lasted for 33 years. It involved barbers assistants in Copenhagen, Denmark, and ended in 1961. The book records the longest major strike as one at a plumbing fixtures factory in Wisconsin, U.S.A. – it had lasted for eight years. But the book does not mention how many workers were involved in these strikes. And the enormity of the Bombay textile strike is derived from the vast number of workers involved and their collectively successful effort to stay out of the mills for a year and a half.

workers would have accused him of betrayal in the same way that Dange was accused in 1974, for procuring a wage increase of only Rs.4.<sup>107</sup>

Samant's unyielding stand was probably most directly responsible for the fact that even after a crippling defeat he still enjoyed the loyalty of the workers. At the same time, even among the rank and file, there was a clear perception of the combined strength of the mill owners and government as being responsible for their defeat.

A study later done by the Sri Ram Centre for industrial Relations and Human Resources showed that the workers held the mill owners, the RMMS and the State and Central Governments responsible for their plight, while the MGKU and Samant were still looked upon as a friend in need. The study, covering 1,100 workers, also found how dismal a view the textile workers have of their own lives and opportunities. Most workers, the study noted, accepted their fate because the strike was part of the long on-going struggle of sheer existence.

The workers did not, as some critics of the strike believed, confuse the strike with the struggle for state power. But they did believe that even within its narrow confines the strike was a test case of national importance. This made the eventual failure of the strike all the more painful. And that the strike was a wasted opportunity was evident to anyone who believed in the workers' cause. Yet any effort to determine just how this historic moment in the working class movement could have been used to optimum advantage was doomed to fail in the face of unanswerable "ifs" and "buts". When they first plunged into battle, the textile workers believed that they could change the course of history. Perhaps this exaggerated optimism was an inevitable by-product of the emotional fervour which gripped workers at the time. But even those who did not share the euphoria acknowledged that a partial victory would strengthen the textile workers' position against the MOA and the RMMS – as never before in the history of the industry.

The established trade unions had, of course, found a major rallying point for their propaganda through the textile strike. Even if one ignored the rhetoric and dispassionately assessed the limitations of a single-city, single-industry strike of this nature, its importance could not be underestimated. Victory could have given textile workers all over the country a rallying point for demanding higher wages and encouraged militancy among workers in other industries. Correspondingly, failure was expected to suppress militant forces. Whether the eventual failure actually had this effect is difficult to determine. But certainly, it firmly discouraged head-on clashes with the state and managements. And if the strike was a story of missed opportunities, the failure to make the new militancy workable, was the biggest missed chance.

The workers' area committees, which sought to function with a non-hierarchical structure and with the unity of all segments of the working class, were an expression of the new militancy. The committees worked successfully for over a year and did wonders to the morale of activists and through them to the rank and file. But when the Central Committee (a loosely organised federation of the area committees) differed with Samant and sought to assert its

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<sup>107</sup> Of course, Samant refused to acknowledge that the strike had failed. Even in 1985 he said in an interview (*Probe* magazine, March 1985): "It has become a fashion to say that the strike failed. Just see what the working class, at least in Maharashtra, learnt from it. Problems of the workers cannot be solved unless workers have political power... Just because mills have been taken over doesn't mean the strike failed... There is no Dr. Samant in Gujarat or UP, but the mills have closed in Ahmedabad and Kanpur..."

views, primarily on the need for a compromise solution to end the strike, it was slapped down by Samant. (This process of disillusionment with Samant has been described earlier.) Within two years of the strike there was no discernible trace of the Central Committee or area committees. Sceptics took this as a sign of inherent weakness and a limited purpose existence. If a more perceptive and visionary leadership had been at hand the stirrings encompassed in those area committees could have been moulded and boosted to greater purpose. But the very nature of Samant's leadership reduced such hopes to futile fantasies.

This would imply that Lenin has the last word on the spontaneity of the working class. Yet even after a crisis of this magnitude the trade unions were unable to meet the challenge posed by this spontaneity or to harness their militancy. Even two years after the strike ended, Samant stood as the only leader who could provide some semblance of an alternative to the RMMS. Much of the activist cadre refused to consider the struggle futile even while acknowledging that the strike was a failure.

Why was this so? One reason was the manner in which the workers' outlook and understanding of the political reality had changed. As P.N.Samant put it: "Textile workers may have lost, but not the working class. It had gained, become cautious and clear about the position and attitude of the government." Yeshwant Chavan noted with satisfaction that the workers would never again harbour any illusions about positive state intervention in confrontations with capital. The frequent criticism, that Samant and Chavan preferred the strike to fail, was thus not far off the mark. It was not that the leadership set out to seek failure but that it preferred, rightly or wrongly, the total annihilation to a compromise which would degrade the valiant struggle.

For some, the struggle had become a mode of existence. Others like Salaskar, who had a CPI background, marched ahead with an unshakable belief in the inevitability of revolution. Even at the lowest ebb, when Salaskar could not find words to describe the *nirasha* (disappointment), he continued to firmly believe that the workers must "keep fighting till eternity". Similarly, Gajarmal clung to the belief that the working class struggle is never futile: "*Sangharsh jari rahe ga* (the struggle will go on). We have learnt a lot about ourselves, relations with each other as workers and with family members."

But not all the thousands who participated in the struggle shared this conviction and in the end the tragedy of the textile strike was all personal. The ordinary individual who constituted the "rank and file" was caught in the morass of impotence vis-à-vis the whole world. And the outsider felt the despair inherent to this situation more acutely than the activist or workers. From this end of the spectrum the prolonged, uncompromising struggle had all the components of a suicidal charge.

Viewed in retrospect, it is possible to see the prolonged duration of the strike as a product of a subconscious death wish, a certain nihilistic tendency.

This nihilism was a result of the ever-worsening condition of the oppressed in a political context which denied them legitimate and peaceful means of articulating and solving their problems and challenging their oppressors.<sup>108</sup> The catch phrase of this phenomenon was based

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<sup>108</sup> This reality was portrayed in cinema as well. In Govind Nihalani's film *Ardha Satya* the hero eventually overcomes his sense of impotence by killing the mafia don who is his tormentor. The hero, a low ranking police officer, then voluntarily surrenders to the law. That single spontaneous act of violence – the killing of the mafia

on the struggling under-dog's perception of the now in situation and the belief that “I am going down any way but I'll take you (the oppressor) with me.” The textile industry suffered but not to the same extent as the workers. Just as the killing of one man does not end the oppression or destroy the oppressive class, the year-and-a-half long strike did not eliminate those who had tormented the workers in the mills for decades. Nor did it visibly diminish the power of the ruling party.

Yet, Gajarmal and Salaskar and hundreds of others were convinced that the fight could not have been futile. They believed that from the ruins of this cathartic experience would arise a force, a new reality – to ensure a more explosive future.

Thus, despite the evident despair of the present it is important to look beyond it and understand that it is one more excruciatingly painful step forward on the tortuous path towards new organisational forms and a new polity. The challenge lies in sustaining these creative impulses and giving them organised expression. This process is likely to be directly aided by the overwhelming complacency of protectors of the status quo. “Our people are used to misery, they don't revolt, they're below the poverty line anyway” – Vasant Hoshing. And yet, such views are not baseless and therein lies a more insidious threat. In the words of P.N.Samant “everyone has adjusted himself (accepted) that it is going to go on like this, and so decided to give up and make the best of it. This is killing everything. Why do we adjust when we should be fighting?”

If they did nothing else the textile workers gave a living example of how it is possible to stop “adjusting”, start fighting and, at any cost, continue fighting. This could be condemned as a romanticised interpretation that promotes nihilism. But nihilism was a product of the times. If the interpretation is somewhat romanticised that is because the alternative is cynicism of the type espoused by the status quo which breeds a convenient but dangerous pessimism. It is such pessimism that successfully stifles any emerging initiative and organisational-ideological forms which threaten to challenge the status quo.

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don – is a personal triumph for the disillusioned young man even as it is an irrevocable step towards self - destruction.

## Epilogue

It was the eve of Indira Gandhi's first death anniversary. K.P.Kamble stood at the entrance to Siddharth Nagar, carefully writing out a message on the community notice board. As one of the neighbourhood leaders, Kamble was calling fellow residents of the slum to a function the next day to mourn the assassinated Prime Minister. The irony of his action was not entirely lost on Kamble. Here was the man who had once articulated the evils of "Indira raj" and dreamt of a bada kranti. Less than four years later he was back to performing the role of a Congress(I) functionary.

In that single gesture of Kamble's a whole age seemed to pass and fade, time itself seemed to roll back. Momentarily it seemed that the 58.42 million man days lost in a historic strike had never been. But though history can be forgotten or ignored, it cannot be undone. And Kamble was among the thousands who had learnt to live with daily humiliating reminders of a battle lost. Even as the bitterness and despair lost their sharpness, bada kranti still seemed impossible – a perennial pipe dream. Had Kamble entirely abandoned his aspirations and fallen in with the reality of the status quo?

This status quo had ensured mass retrenchment and dislocation of workers and reduced the daily work force from 1.69 lakhs to 1.21 lakhs. Where there had been a total 2.24 lakhs on the rolls prior to the strike there were now just 1.4 lakhs. This was the reality of mass retrenchments and rampant repression by the RMMS, of permanent workers made badli and forced to bear innumerable humiliations. It was the reality of disillusionment with the inaction of Samant's MGKU, whose activists: "Don't do anything – they're scared. Even those who were elected to the credit societies<sup>109</sup> don't do much," Kamble said angrily.

The mood had been different just a year earlier, in November 1984, as the Lok Sabha elections approached. At that point some of the old fervour of 1982 had been revived. The elections, Samant declared, were an opportunity for the workers to reassert themselves. At mammoth rallies, which rivalled the crowds of the strike period, workers enthusiastically responded to this call for a new battle. Many saw in the election an opportunity for revenge. When the Congress(I) chose not to nominate a candidate for the Bombay south central constituency, which covers the textile mill area and where Samant intended to contest the election, the textile workers saw this as an admission of defeat.

The joyous and enthusiastic response of textile workers to Samant's campaign made his victory a foregone conclusion. In a constituency of 6.5 lakh the textile workers were the largest force. The only possible competition was seen as coming from Wamanrao Mahadik, former Mayor of Bombay and the Shiv Sena-BJP candidate from that constituency. But there were also two muslim candidates, one put up by the break away faction of former Chief Minister A.R.Antulay and one independent, who hoped to capitalise on the approximately 1.5 lakh muslim vote in the constituency.

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<sup>109</sup> Each mill has a Credit Co-operative Society which gives loans to workers. The office bearers of these societies are elected by the members. Even after the strike Samant's supporters won elections in several of these societies.

Samant comfortably swept to victory, with a margin of 72,614 votes over Rosa Deshpande, S.A.Dange's daughter who had stood as an independent supported by the Congress(I) and surprisingly beat Mahadik to the second position. But the Kamgar Aghadi itself did not fare as well.

The three other candidates put up by the Kamgar Agadi were defeated and two even lost their deposits. Samant himself won the south-central seat only on the strength of textile and dock workers. In two of the six assembly constituencies included in the south central. Lok Sabha constituency, the largest number of votes was won by an independent, Seraj Mirza. These were the Chinchpokli and Nagpada constituencies, which have a large Muslim population. Samant stood third in Chinchpokli and fourth in Nagpada. Predictably the highest concentration of votes for Samant was in the Parel Constituency, which has the most dense cluster of textile mills.

Samant was quick to claim the victory as a vindication of the textile workers' stand and heralded it as the beginning of a movement which would make the Kamgar Aghadi a force to reckon with in Maharashtra politics. More than ever before Samant now talked of fighting the workers' cause through political power. Even while the textile workers rejoiced in their victory, Samant began to make plans for the forthcoming Assembly elections. While the textile workers waited for the fruits of their labour in getting Samant elected, the leader himself got absorbed with newer and bigger challenges. The following months marked a new decline in the already shaky romance between the workers and Samant.

The textile workers expected Samant's election to be more than a symbolic victory. He was expected to use his position as one of the few opposition members in a parliament overwhelmingly dominated by the Congress(I), to directly benefit the textile workers. Samant was now perceived as being in a stronger bargaining position and was thus expected to do something about the continuing repression faced by workers in the mills. Instead many activists found Samant taking a more and more dismissive attitude towards their requests and demands. This process of disillusionment was quite similar to the experiences of those active in the Central Committee.

The distribution of Assembly tickets alienated many otherwise zealous Samant supporters. By passing many deserving activists Samant chose to give the ticket for one of the key textile mill area constituencies to his wife Vanita Samant. Similarly P.N.Samant, who continued to be unpopular with the rank and file of textile workers, was given a ticket. In all, 26 candidates were put up by the Kamgar Aghadi. Only three emerged victorious: Vanita Samant, Sharad Khatu and Dadoo Atyalykar. Since all three victors were elected from textile worker dominated constituencies, it was evident that Samant did not have an electoral base outside this realm. (Notably, however, P.N.Samant was defeated once again.) The Kamgar Aghadi's success in even these three constituencies came as a surprise to many. A few days before the election Samant's principle assistant in the textile sphere, Vidhyadar Budbadkar had defected from the Aghadi to Sharad Pawar's Congress(S), amid much fanfare and publicity. Budbadkar had claimed at the time that about a 100-odd leading activists were also leaving with him, and it was expected that this would jeopardise the Kamgar Aghadi's prospects.

Budbadkar's claim was partially true. A large segment of what remained of the Central Committee, had left the Aghadi, but they did not leave with Budbadkar. The fact of the Aghadi winning even three seats was largely due to the residual support which Samant still enjoyed and the incredibly high level at which he had maintained his personal credibility with

the rank and file. But such credibility was eventually no substitute for sound organisational planning and cadre building. Though Samant never built a cadre as such, he had always had the advantage of a strong and zealous activists corps. Within two months of his Lok Sabha victory Samant had managed to alienate most of these activists by various acts of omission and commission. Just how much this cost Samant in real terms was clear from the results of the Bombay Municipal Corporation elections in April 1985. Of the 85 candidates put up by Kamgar Aghadi for the BMC elections, only 4 emerged victorious. This election failure was largely due to Samant's own actions. As Kamble put it: "Doctor was seen as only forwarding his own people. And then the real activists were not there to take small meetings all over and ask for votes."

Just what was wrong with Samant's manner of functioning was aptly illustrated in a remark by Justice B.Lentin of the Bombay high court while setting aside an order of the Industrial Court granting permission for the closure of Mukesh Mills. The judge, while admitting a writ petition filed by the RMMS, noted that MGKU had filed a similar petition claiming to have the support of the majority of workers and protesting about the mill owners' failure to formally inform it about the closure notice. Justice Lentin noted: "What was MGKU doing all these years. When indisputably it was aware of the closure application... Strangely enough when it came to appearing before the authorities, MGKU displayed a remarkable coyness, which its ebullient leader is not said to possess."

G.V. Chitnis identified Samant's methods of functioning as the main cause for the growing alienation with activists: "Dr. Samant insists that he is sole boss, only he matters and all others serve as time for elections came and they wanted tickets, the confrontations became inevitable." Yet Chitnis, like many others, did not see the departure of Budbadkar, and later other lieutenants, as a trend of any significance. None of these men had strong enough independent bases to matter.

But what did matter was the total disillusionment of the shop floor activists with Samant. Thus, when Samant called for a token one-day strike in the textile mills, in October 1985, to oppose a recent interim award granted by the Chief Minister, it was a total failure. Of the 57 functioning mills only three felt any impact of the one-day strike.

The call for the token strike was not a fresh initiative by Samant but merely a reaction to the situation created by the RMMS. Since the last wage agreement with the MOA had expired for a fresh agreement without any success, when no agreement was reached by August 1985, the RMMS President, Haribhau Naik, and General Secretary, Manohar Phalke came under pressure from their predecessors. Bhai Bhosale and Vasant Hoshing, who had been ousted from office by the INTUC leadership two years earlier, engineered a no confidence motion against the new leaders at a meeting of the Joint Representative Board. This compelled Naik and Phalke to take a tougher stand. Thus a strike ballot was taken by the RMMS in early September. Of the 88,000 workers who voted 80,000 or 94% voted in favour of a strike. The RMMS used this poll as evidence of its hold over the textile workers and went on to make history by issuing a strike notice. That was the first time in its 40 years history that the RMMS had actually given notice to go on strike.

Forced into a corner by the faction fight, Naik and Phalke then asked for the help of Chief Minister Shivajirao Nilangekar-Patil. This saved the RMMS from the embarrassment of actually going on strike. An interim award of Rs.70 was made by the Chief Minister and the



actual agreement was left to a committee to settle. The figure was a compromise between the Rs.50 being offered by the MOA and the Rs.125 first demanded by the RMMS.

It was this interim award which Samant opposed and called a one-day token strike to protest against it. Once again history repeated itself and Samant rode alone. The left trade unions had been urging Samant to give a joint call for a token strike in September. According to Chitnis, a strike call at that juncture would have boosted the workers' morale and shown the MOA that the workers were back on their feet and willing and able to fight it out. The token strike action was required before the award had been made by the Government, as a pressure tactic. Instead Samant waited till after the award had been made. And then he did not seek the cooperation of other trade unions to help give support, encouragement and reassurance to the workers. "What can you say for a man who refuses to learn something even out of such a big strike", said Chitnis. Samant's decision to hold the textile workers' token strike on October 8 also interfered with the TUJAC's plans for a *bandh* on October 15. The decision to call that *bandh* had been taken in August, with Samant's consent. But when he decided to call a separate strike on October 8, TUJAC called off the *bandh*. "It was not possible to have two such actions within a week," Chitnis explained. "In the present situation it is not possible to take textile workers on two strikes in such a short span. This is 1985 not 1982."

The passage of time had taken its toll on the workers' romance with Samant and eroded what had once seemed like an invincible base of active support for him. In October 1985 there were not enough enthusiastic activists to stand at the mill gates and urge workers to stay out on the designated day. The RMMS only needed to take in about 100 to 150 workers to discourage the majority from even contemplating any defiance. Moreover, almost all the workers had signed undertakings of good behaviour when they returned to the mills following the strike. At the same time the MGKU lacked strong activists inside the mills who would try to win the workers' confidence on a day to day basis. While the RMMS continued its old practice of collecting union dues virtually at the same counter where wages were paid to workers, the MGKU did not launch a sufficiently strong drive to collect dues from the many textile workers who still gave it tacit support. By mid 1985 there were also no traces left of the mill or zone committees. Thus both inside and outside the mills the workers found no active outlet for their frustrations with the RMMS.

Yet, quite inexplicably, Samant still retained some respect. His public meetings were still well attended even though the crowds could not rival those of three years earlier. The most obvious reason for this was that in spite of all his mistakes Samant alone represented some semblance of an alternative to the RMMS, which had given the workers fresh cause to hate it following the strike. But Samant and his friends predictably refused to acknowledge any slackening of support. Yashwant Chavan insisted that there was no erosion of the textile base of the Kamgar Aghadi.

Even more significantly RMMS President Haribhau Naik readily admitted that he was not satisfied with his union's efforts to win back lost ground with the textile workers. Naik added: "I don't want to say that Dr. Samant is finished, but he has lost his popularity and I don't think now workers will want to support him." Naik's acceptance of Samant's continuing presence, at whatever level of intensity, on the textile scene was in itself an admission of failure. Perhaps P.J.Ovid, Labour Commissioner, put it most perceptively when he had said: "It's not that they (workers) have faith in Samant, but rather that they have no faith in the RMMS."

The Labour Commissioner estimated that in mid-1985 Samant's trade union strength was about 25% of what it had been in 1980. This was regarded as a direct consequence of the failure of the textile strike. The relatively tranquil labour situation in Maharashtra was also attributed to the textile strike. Prior to the textile strike, there had been an average of about 25,000 workers involved in strikes and lock-outs at any given time. In November 1985 there were 12,300 workers in some 57 units affected by strikes and lock-outs.

Ovid himself had become a minor celebrity in the field of labour relations. At conferences and seminars on labour related subjects he was often introduced to audiences as the man who tamed Datta Samant. This, according to Ovid, was part of the wider impact of the textile strike. It became an object lesson for managements and governments faced with "illegal" strikes. The handling of the Bombay textile strike came to be viewed in these circles as a fool-proof strategy for tackling such situations. Simultaneously, workers recognised that the government would not intervene in their favour. For this and other reasons, the reckless and almost wild enthusiasm, with which workers entered into hard-pitched battles with managements three or four years earlier was now absent.

There was general disillusionment with long and hard-pitched strikes. Other unions that may have once been tempted to ape Samant's style now avoided doing that. Ovid claimed that managements had also learnt to respect the workers' legitimate demands and arrive at settlements. But newspaper reports simultaneously told of how joblessness had increased while strikes and lock-outs had decreased. Ovid denied this and said that his department did not permit retrenchments. The statistics as made available to Ovid may in fact have shown no decline in employment, but the temporary and contract workers were usually ignored by the statistics collection machinery of the Labour Commissioner's office.

"If the textile strike had been settled honourably it would have made an immense contribution to the class struggle. (As it was) only a record was created, but it did not strengthen the general movement. It gave a big set back to the textile workers' movement and also to the general movement. It's become a reference point for discouraging workers from going on strike," said Chitnis.

Managements in Maharashtra began to follow what Ovid called the "textile policy", (intending no reference here to the Government's new policy for the textile industry announced in mid-1985). "Most managements are fighting Samant out," Ovid said, "they either change Unions or make direct settlements. The workers know that with doctor they are not likely to make an agreement."

Samant with characteristic bravado refused to acknowledge any such failings: "It has become a fashion to say that the strike failed. Just see what the working class, at least in Maharashtra, learnt from it. Problems of the working class cannot be solved unless workers have political power. Just because mills have been taken over doesn't mean that the strike failed... There is no Datta Samant in Gujarat or UP, but the mills have closed in Ahmedabad and Kanpur."

Yashwant Chavan was a trifle more candid in his assessment: "The textile strike revealed to workers both their power and limitations. (There is a need for) ideology, strategy and guidance. Leadership has come to the textile workers, they created an authority for themselves in the working class. If the Bombay textile workers had tried for all-India co-ordination or to build up among the power loom and handloom workers then that leadership would have been concretised. But their own leaders didn't articulate this. That's where ideology, sharpness of

assessment and ability to impart it too workers, matter. Dr. Samant's election gave (textile workers) a vantage point for acting as the leading detachment of the working class.”

This role made it incumbent upon the textile workers to try and co-ordinate all those who were striving for change everywhere. But, as Chavan himself acknowledged, Samant's victory was not being used for this or any similar purpose. “If the textile workers movement is to be successful, it must integrate itself with the power loom workers,” Chavan said. “These two sections of workers must co-ordinate their activities. We said this during the strike, just as we took the strike to rural areas. But Shramik couldn't follow it up, (there are) no human resources.”

Yet the future, though not rosy, was also not full of despair – even for those who suffered no illusions. Chitnis was hopeful not only for the textile workers but also for the Communist unions which he swore would rise again some day. “We can fight the battle only politically now. The textile policy, growing unemployment, the favouring of industrialists, depressing wages, rising prices and rising work loads together with rising consciousness will create conditions favourable for putting the textile worker back on his feet again. Since it is going to be political, we'll have a role to play in it. I don't say we alone, all those who share this perspective should join.”

The fighters themselves were not so confident. Kamble saw no possibility of resurrecting the spirit of 1982 for another 25 to 30 years. “The enthusiasm is not there in the textile workers. We were the pride of Maharashtra (working class). What dreams, what hopes there were... and what happened? Because there was no result at all there's complete disappointment. There is both respect and anger for Samant. Indian people have always struggled. But now that's changed, the instinct to struggle has declined. Man prays when he has someone to inspire and encourage him... in that sense it is all over for the textile workers.”

And what of a bada kranti? For Kamble it was a thing of the past. “Then my blood was boiling, there was josh (zeal), now it's all gone. Man changes with time, the perception of the self changes and the fire in the belly becomes the determining factor. Once we held God and leader in the same weighing scale... now the leaders are openly abused and considered thieves. People are happy about Rajiv Gandhi today, but what about tomorrow? It could be like us with Samant...”

To juxtapose this profound sense of disillusionment with the almost ritualistic expressions of respect, like organising Indira Gandhi's death anniversary function, was to appreciate the ironic nature of a strange reality. Even as they went about the business of living, often behaving as though the strike had never been, a lingering sadness lurked within Kamble and thousands of others like him. They knew that given the cycles of history the textile workers would rise again at some distant point in the future. But as Kamble lamented: “Not in my time, and what use is a struggle after I am gone?”

The joy of collective struggle had faded into the bitter anguish of dealing individually with the burdens of defeat. But was the legacy of the strike all sad and defeatist? The dominant order was determined to ensure that it should seem so. But the true legacy of the strike was one of continuity and survival in the face of staggeringly unfavourable odds. True that a Lata Shelke now worried more about marrying off her younger daughters than fighting the *seth log*, a Gajarmal concentrated on his work at a rural development project near Pune, while Kamble struggled on in his old mill. True also, that not all of them could consistently believe

in the continuity of struggle. Yet this realisation hovered in the background, just beyond the disillusionment and despair. Even while another major struggle seemed impossible in the near future, the need for struggle, eternal and unrelenting remained constant.

## Glossary

Aghadi	Front, as in political party
Agni Pareeksha	Trial by fire
Andolan	Movement/Political struggle
Bada Kranti	Big revolution
Badli	“Temporary” in the textile mills – leave vacancy employees, those workers who are employed on a daily basis and not entitled to most of the rights that “regular” workers have
Bhabi	Sister-in-law, elder brother's wife
Basti	A cluster of chawls and hutments. Chawl tenement building of two or three floors housing, usually, the working class or lower middle class
Chowki	A point where several roads intersect
Dada	Marathi word for elder brother. Also a term for local strongmen
Dharna	A protest action which requires the agitators to squat at a relevant place for several hours or even days
Diwali	An important Hindu festival
Grampanchayat	Village body
Girni Kamgar	Textile worker
Goonda	A goon, an unlawful character
Hamali	Hard manual labour, usually on a dally wage basis
Jail bharo	(Literally) Fill the jails. Another term for courting arrest
Kamgar	Worker
Kholi	Bombay parlance for a place to live, usually a hutment or one room tenement, literally a room
Kulak	Rich peasant
Lal Bavta	Red flag. A term commonly used when referring to the communist parties or trade union
Mahamandal	A federation or larger body of social or political group (mandals)
Malik	Owner/Boss
Morcha	A protest march
Mazdoor bhai	Fellow worker or comrade
Mumbai	Marathi for Bombay
Madat pheries	(Literally) Help rounds – term for the fund collection processions organised in different localities by strike activists
Pauti	Union membership fees, literally a receipt
Police chowki	Police post
Police patil	Police constable in a village
Rasta roko	A protest action involving blocking the roads and stopping traffic

Samyukta	United
Shramik	Worker /labourer /toiler
Seth log	Mill owners
Sarpanch	Village head
Samiti	Committee
Sanghatana	A struggle group, in Shibirs Training camps
Utpadan roko	(Literally) Production stoppage

## **Back Cover**

On 18 January 1982 the two and a half lakh workers of Bombay's 60 textile mills went on strike. For the next 18 months they defied all predictions of early defeat. Disregarding conventional wisdom they refused to retreat. This effort resulted in the biggest and longest strike in the history of India

Yet, a struggle of such magnitude rapidly faded from popular memory. Those who remembered dismissed it as a failure. But was it a failure?

This is the story of thousands who once stood on the threshold of a new tomorrow and dreamt about changing destiny. It is an account of why the struggle was waged and how the dream faded but survived.