

MANCHA SANBAD
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[For circulation among friends, wellwishers and associated friends of Mancha]

Hastings Jute Mill: a crude example of autocracy:

On 26th February, 1994, some two thousand odd workers of Hastings Jute Mill of Rishra went to work for the morning shift only to be confronted with a notice of 'Suspension of work' by the management. Spontaneously, they burst into rage. It is learnt from the Police FIR that the outraged workers broke the lock of the main gate and ransacked the security office, the GM's quarters and eleven of the staff quarters. They attacked the house of the labour officer, Ram Janam Dubey and those of the union leaders Ram Nagina Jadhav and Abdul Kuddus have not been spared. At about 8am, police arrived at the spot, Cr Pc 144 was declared and the Eastern Frontier Rifles forces were deployed. And the reign of police terror started in the residential areas of the workers.

Police Reports: From the FIR lodged at the Srirampur police station by the Mill's chief security officer Harinam Thappar, 12 names of accused are revealed. The allegations against them include provocative speeches, generating an atmosphere of tension among the workers, vandalism in the Mill complex. Police arrested Kashinath Singh, Sankar Bijoy Shah and Shambhu Shah, whose petition for bail have been rejected and remained in jail custody till 11th March.

Tripartite agreement: Earlier, on 8th October, 1993, Hastings Jute Mill (a division of Sri Digvijoy Cement) had been closed. The Mill was reopened on 22.1.94 as a result of an agreement between the Mill owner and the TU signed on 19.1.94 in presence of the Labour Commissioner of the State Government. It was agreed upon that all the workers would be taken back in phases. And this gradual process of recruitment was scheduled to be completed within 20 days from the date of opening of the Mill. A dateline of 15 days was fixed for the outstationed workers. Another clause of the agreement stated about the increase of production with " the provision of the supply of raw material", the last part of the sentence within quotes being only in handwriting. It was also agreed upon that the bonus dues would be paid and that an advance of Rs 300/- would be paid which would be adjusted in 6 installments.

Breach of agreement & autocracy on the part of the Mill owner:

From the very beginning, the Mill owner started breaching the agreement. Though the Mill was reopened on 22nd January, the production started only on 15th February. Till 26th February (the above-mentioned day on which the Mill again became closed by a 'suspension of work' notice), only 3500 out of 5000 workmen got their job back. It did not take so long a time to resume the production after a lock-out or strike in the past. On the other hand, due to scarcity of raw jute, the workers graded as 'thika' (contract), 'badli' or 'special badli' did not get back their job either. The authority tried to increase the workload by transferring workers to various departments and by decreasing the workforce in the above-mentioned manner.

Occasionally, unorganized protest were voiced from a few departments. As for example, the spontaneous protest by the workers could stop the authorities manouver to shrink the recess time from 40 minutes to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, another important incident aggrieved the workers. 200 workers had been retired on VRS, though there had been no such provision in the agreement. The union leaders, themselves well-informed about this did not care to inform the

workers beforehand. In the earlier tripartite agreement signed in 1988 by the State Government, the association of Mill owners (IJMA) and the central TU bodies, it had been stated that the total number of workers required by the Hastings Jute Mill for its 18 shifts, was 4626, whereas according to an estimate of 1991 the total number of workers in this Mill was 4811. The difference between these two figures, that is, the number of 'excess' workers is about 200.

The behind-the-scene alliance: The current of events that led to the incidence of the morning of 26th February, the trend and form of the workers' agitation on that day along with the role played by the administration and the various political parties, lead one unfailingly to suspect foul play behind-the-scene. Even though the incident of 26th February may be interpreted as the spontaneous and just outburst of the workers against the autocratic attitude on the part of the Mill owner, it may well have been planned beforehand to serve the purpose of some concerned persons. As for example, the owner started to clear its godown of the finished products right from the time of reopening of the Mill. This was carried out throughout the night of 24th February. May we then conclude that a real-life drama has been enacted with the help of the Unions and the political parties to create an opportunity for the owner to take the finished products worth Rs 3.5 crores out of the Mill? The name of the CPI(M)-backed antisocial 'langra Sophik' is surprisingly not on the list mentioned in the FIR, whereas the names of such workers who were never present there were on the list, allege the workers of the Mill. The leaders of the CITU remain unaffected though a reign of terror prevails in the area. Other factors such as the presence of the Commissioner of the Rshra Municipality, Mr Sophik at the time of incidence and that of CPI(M) MP, Mr Sudarshan Roy Choudhury next day on the spot, must also be noted.

A Changeover: Hastings Jute Mill is simply waiting for a changeover of ownership. The Kijriwals, the jute-traders and owners of the Murlidhar Ratanlal are going to takeover the Mill from the Bangurs, the present owner. Just besides the Hastings Mill, there is the Champdani Industries Mill of the Wardhas and Wardhas too are eager to acquire the Hastings Mill. The latest information showed that through an MOU, the Kijriwals have already purchased the Mill from the Bangurs, and that the State Government has conceded this deal. Meanwhile, the workers' bonus dues have been paid. But again, the opening of the Mill has become uncertain. Because, the various Banks and Financial Institutions have raised their objection regarding the legality of the change of ownership.

Standard-OPEC: the State Government remains mysteriously silent: The Standard Pharmaceuticals and OPEC Innovations of Srirampur, the manufactures of the life-saving drug, Penicillin, and the only one of its kind in the eastern India, is closed since 30.5.91. These last three years of closure of the factory have taken the toll of workers' deaths, 35 out of starvation and 3 by suicide. And all the time, the State Government remains mysteriously silent.

The 'Standard-OPEC Bachao Committee' organized a cycle-rally from Sreerampur on 21st March, with the demand of opening of the factory. The rally started from Sreerampur which travelling through Bally, Baranagore, Dum Dum (the industrial areas of south Bengal) and many other places reached Calcutta on 22nd March, and a sit-in demonstration was held in front of the Metro Railway Station at Esplanade. At 3 pm, on the same day, the committee met the Minister of Industry, Mr Bidyut Ganguli and submitted a memorandum signed by 3500 persons of the locality and requested him to intervene in the matter. In this discussion, the minister told that he knew absolutely nothing about the present situation

regarding Standard-Opec. (Although he is the very person entrusted with these matter and it may be recalled here that he was an ex-employee of this very institution). The main demands of the workers are :

- # No worker be left outside at the time of reopening of the factory,
- # All the arrear dues be paid
- # All workers be provided with stipend during the period of closure

The story of NTC:

The workers of the NTC Mills have every reason to be worried about the prevailing condition of the Mills. The production in the NTC Mills of West Bengal has virtually stopped due to unavailability of cotton. The CCI has stopped supplying cotton to the NTC Mills and Arati Cotton Mills are acquiring some Cotton by selling their products, which is, however, meager with respect to the total demand for cotton. As for example, in exchange for 10 lakhs, CCI supplies cotton worth only of Rs 5 lakhs, the remaining 5 lakhs being deducted by CCI for previous dues. Such irregular supply or no-supply of raw materials has resulted in losses for the Mills and the workers are justifiably apprehensive of payment of their wages becoming uncertain, though the workers tried their level best to keep the Mills going and thereby to prevent loss. In the opinion of the workers, the tussel among the higher authorities has brought the NTC to its present deplorable condition. It may further be mentioned here that the PF dues of the NTC Mills is about Rs 14 crores and that of the ESI dues is in tune of Rs 2.5 crores till date.

A Novel example:

After a long struggle, the first reported victim worker of eastern region of byssinosis (an occupational disease caused by inhalation of cotton dusts) has been able to present himself before a medical board. Radharaman Paiker, an worker of Poddar Project (a textile Mill) has been suffering for some years from this deadly disease, byssinosis, which rendered him incapable of doing any work. He appealed to the eastern regional Director of the ESI, to arrange for a medical board to investigate into his disease and to asses for compensation. When no reply was received, Nagarik Mancha informed the regional Director about the matter on 16.8.93. After a long dilly-dallying on the part of the authorities, Nagarik Mancha again informed the Labour Minister and the regional Director of ESI in a letter dt 16.2.94 about the deteriorating condition of the victim. In its letter, Nagarik Mancha also warned the authorities that, if no steps were taken within one month, the matter would be brought to the higher legal institution. At last, the medical board was formed which met on 1.3.94. The compensation has been fixed. Now it remains to be seen whether the amount paid to the victim is just or not!

Wetland once again!

The West Bengal Government in an order (gazette notification no 125-CMDA/SET/I-II/94) of dt 28.1.94, prohibited all types of filling of wetlands. CMDA has been charged with the responsibility to look after this matter. It should be mentioned here that CMDA is not at all equipped with the infrastructure required to look after such matters.