



C H A P T E R - I

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WORKING CLASS  
MOVEMENT IN SOLAPUR.

Nature of Working Class Movement in Solapur :

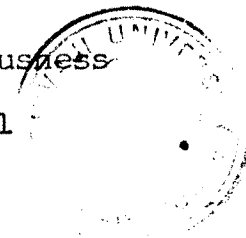
After the establishment of the British rule, factory system was introduced in different parts of the country. Solapur emerged as a major industrial centre, especially the centre of textile industry in this part of the country. In the present Chapter an attempt is made to study Mill workers movement in Solapur during pre - independence period.

The industrial working class slowly emerged in Solapur in the last quarter of 19th Century, though it was not a skilled working class, as most of the workers came from rural areas near by Solapur and also from the neighbouring states of the country. These workers belonged to different religions and castes. They were poor and their financial conditions was miserable. Most of them were illiterate hence lacked necessary technical skills. Due to these factors, the workers were exploited by the mill-owners and occasionally workers tried to resist their exploitation.

It is interesting to note here that though the working class could not develop adequate class consciousness it was greatly influenced by the contemporary political

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situation. The nationalist movement caught the imagination of the people under the leadership of the Congress party, and Solapur workers did not lag behind in taking part in the national movement. Thus though the working class in Solapur in the early decades of this century was not skilled or organised, it did show some signs of political consciousness when it supported the national movement led by Mr. Tilak. It is pertinent to note here that the Solapur working class had always remained in the main stream of national movement.

The working class in Solapur was mainly drawn from the textile mills of Solapur; some of them were established in the last quarter of 19th century.

#### Rise of Cotton Textile Industry in Solapur :-

The first mill in Solapur was started by Seth Morarji Gokuldas of Bombay in 1874. It was a result of opening of the Railway route from Bombay passing through Solapur towards Raichur in 1859. While the new Railway line provided a convenient means of transport the Ekruk tank made available water supply for irrigation purposes that was cultivated in the surrounding areas. It also increased the area under cotton cultivation. Thirdly, Solapur was an area affected by drought, therefore, labour was quite cheap, thanks to the construction of the tanks water supply to the

mills was easily available. Also raw cotton was available in larger quantities from the Hyderabad area, the Solapur weavers were famous for their skill in the profession. Due to these reasons the textile industry could strike its roots in Solapur. (1)

In 1898, Seth Laxidas Khimaji from Bombay started the Laxmi Cotton Mill and in the same year Mallappa Warad stepped in to the field and opened the Narsingji Giriji Mills. Besides the three mills started in the nineteenth century, two more mills were started in the first decade of 20th century. (2) These five mills attracted a large number of working class in the city and functioned as an important dynamic in its social, economic, and political life.

A Brief History of Textile Mills In Solapur :-

1. Solapur Spinning & Weaving Co. Ltd., Solapur :

The mill was established in 1877 with a capital investment of Rs. Eight Lakhs and employed 350 labourers during the year of the establishment. The mill got expanded and in 1934 the mill was employing in two shifts more than 6000 workers. As per the 1961 census of the 2,234 looms and 95,232 spindles installed, 1,772 looms and 82,652 spindles were working. When the mill was established the

female workers in the water wheel section were paid about Rs. 5 to 9 per month and the ~~wea~~ weavers were paid Rs. 8 to 20 per month - where as the monthly wage of an average male workers were Rs. 6 to 12 of a female worker Rs. 5 and a Child Rs. 4. The table given below shows the wage position in May 1914,

May 1921, And August 1923 in the Cotton Mills.

Year	Men			Women		
	Rs.	a.	p.	Rs.	a.	p.
May 1914	14	3	11	5	3	11
May 1921	25	13	0	10	5	9
August 1923	22	3	10	8	9	7

This mill was phased out by 1956. (3)

2. Narsingji Giriji Manufacturing Co.Ltd., Sclapur :

The mill is one of biggest mills in the whole of Asia. The mill was established in 1898. Upto the year 1905 the mill undertook the production of cotton yarns while in 1906 a large number of spindles and looms were installed in the mill. The mill was closed down in 1957 due to ~~the~~ loss and about 4500 labourers lost their jobs. The

Government therefore, intervened and took over the management of the mill and administered it with the co-operation of the workers. In 1977, there were 3500 labourers and 1,170 looms with 55,000 spindles working in the mills. (4)

3. Laxmi Cotton Manufacturing Co.Ltd., Solapur :-

This is the only textile unit manufacturing cloth of fine texture and is the biggest of three composite units in the district. Established in 1898, the mill was under the managing agency system since 1901. As per the 1969 census there were 1,219 looms and 56,272 spindles and over 4200 workers were employed in this mill. Among the three composite mills, Laxmi-Vishnu is the only mill under taking modernization of machinery and production with the help of medium term finance from Maharashtra State Industrial and Investment Corporation. The mill is now equipped with ninety automatic looms (in 1977). (5)

4. Vishnu cotton Mill Ltd. Solapur :-

The mill was established in 1908, there were 1,495 looms and 54,280 spindles and two thousands workers were working in this mill. (6)

5. Shri Jam Ranjitsingji Mill, Solapur :-

The mill was established in 1909 and in composite

unit in 1961, it operated 512 looms and 22132 spindles and employed more than 2000 workers. The production of the mill was confined to cotton yarn till 1926. In 1977, there were 1500 workers and 511 looms with 28,000 spindles working in the mills. (7)

In 1903 there were three cotton mills in Solapur town, which employed 4930 persons, the number of cotton mills in Solapur increased 5 in 1911 which absorbed 9,439 operating. There were 1,08,408 spindles and 500 looms in these cotton mills in 1903, which had paid up capital of Rs. 29,93,000. The year 1911 witnessed an increase in spindles and looms in these mills to 2,22,724 and 2890 respectively. The paid up capital also similarly increased to Rs. 65,78,150. (8)

In 1921, there were six cotton mills in Solapur town and one cotton mill at Barshi town. The mills at Solapur had 17,132 operatives and that at Barshi town employed 1,223 operatives during the same year. In 1921, there were 2,44,868 spindles and 4,479 looms in all the cotton mills. (9)

All the mills in Solapur were working in good condition the total labour employed was over 32,000. In 1921 Solapur was described as a great milling community, superimposed upon an old Indian town. After the first world war, the mills in Solapur earned great reputation for their



g product which had demanded in Africa and hence they earned big profits upto 1927-28. (10)

When the second world war broke out the textile industry again began to make bumper profits.

It shows that textile industries were earning profits. With the development of the textile industries simultaneously, the number of textile workers was also growing. The size of working class gives a very clear idea of its rise. (11) Early in the twentieth century the number reached to 30,000 - 31,000 including textile mill hands coolies, dockers, seamen, transport workers metal workers etc. (12)

Main Features of Mill Workers during Pre-Independence Period :-

Conditions :

In preindependence period the condition of mill workers were very bad and since the employment was their primary need, they were ready to work on low wages. But because of these low wages they had to seek the help of money lenders and to borrow money from them on exorbitant interest rates hence a large number of workers were indebted.



During this period, the cotton textile industries were making huge profits but it was earned at the cost of workers as their **Living** standards did not improve. Following features of the working class could reveal the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the employers to earn the maximum profit :

- i) Low wages of the workers.
- ii) ~~A~~ very long working hours.
- iii) No facility <sup>for</sup> of leave, holidays of housing.
- iv) Bad working conditions as most of the mills did not have ventilation.

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Wages were low, they were frequently reduced, payments were irregular, payments were weekly, but sometimes they were not paid even for fifteen days, working hours were not fixed they had to from sunrise to sunset, workers were working from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m. with a break of an hour for lunch and rest at noon time. Working hours for children and the women were the same, leave was generally denied, sometimes even sick leave was not granted, labourers were not allowed to go on leave to meet their parents even though they were lying on the death bed. Holiday was neglected and only a fortnightly holiday sanctioned. The rules of factory act were completely violated in respect of holidays. Festival holidays of workers were generally denied. Absentees were

severely punished with fine, reduction in wages, discharge from service, or beating and keeping in darkness. (13)

The old Gazetteer of Solapur district published in 1884, has furnished a vivid account regarding the steam factories in the district which is summarised below :-

Besides hand spinning and weaving mills, the property of the Solapur spinning and weaving company limited, began working at Solapur in March 1877. This company had a nominal capital of Rs. 8 lakhs in 1884, on actual capital of Rs. 6,78,500 and was managed by Messers. Moraji Gokuldas and company of Bombay. The machinery, driven by two engines each of factory horse-power worked 20,888 spindles and 170 looms and employed 850 hands at a monthly wage expenditure of about Rs. 7,700. About half of the staff was paid fixed wages and the rest were paid by piece work of the hands who were paid by the piece a weaver was Rs. 9.20 and frame fenders Rs. 8.12 of the persons who were paid fixed wages, the man earned Rs. 6 - 12, while the women earned about Rs. 5 and the boys earned Rs. 4 - 9 a month. The total amount paid as wages in 1883-84 was Rs. 36,200. The workers worked from sunrise to sunset, half an hour being allowed for rest. Two or three holidays were given in a month. Of 17,58,000 pounds or 784 yarns of cotton the average yearly consumption in the mill, about two thirds came from Barshi and one third was bought in the local market. The daily out turn of yarn was

5,500 to 600 pounds. Most of the out turn was used locally, bought by local dealers, distributed over the chief market towns and was used by hand loom weavers. A portion was worked into cloth, the chief kind being long cloth and occasionally seets dangri, soil cloth and towels. Besides being used in Solapur the cloth went to Barshi, Bijapur and the Nizam's territory. In addition to the weaving mill at Solapur, there were at Barshi two steam press houses were started in 1966 and another in 1876.<sup>(14)</sup>

It shows that the industries were earning profit, but the conditions of the workers were very bad. The mill owners resorted to excessive exploitation of the poor workers. Efforts of the maximization of profits, resulted in deplorable conditions of the workers.

## 2) Migratory Characteristics of the Workers :-

The early working class in Solapur was mainly the migragant peasant class, which had left its land due to <sup>the</sup> hanging sword of femines. These workers came from different regions and rural areas nearby Solapur. Most of them came from the Nizam State, Karnataka and Andhra and some of them came from U.P. also.<sup>(15)</sup> Many workers in Solapur belonged to different castes and religions group including Maratha, Lingayut, Telgu,

Momin, Muslims, Kamathi, Mochi, Rajput etc. The Solapur labour has not been affected over any communal regional linguistic and such other issues that stood in the way of proprietor - labour relationship.<sup>(16)</sup> For example on 26th December 1932, there was a danger of communal riots between Hindus and Muslims. But it was averted with the support of the trade union leaders of the workers.<sup>(17)</sup>

#### THE MILL WORKER'S MOVEMENT IN SOLAPUR :

~~During~~ The activities of the working class in Bombay had always influenced the workers of Solapur, <sup>during</sup> Pre-independence period. The first information of the strike in Solapur dates back to the end of 1890. There was some protest strikes in Solapur in 1902, 1903, 1904. These were the unorganised isolated incidents.<sup>(18)</sup> During the world war I, there was peace on the labour front, but discontent was brewing as price were rising; so also the profits. There fore immediately ~~after~~ the conclusion of war there was a strike of textile workers in Bombay in 1919, which was followed by a number of strikes of workers in the country. Along with the general strike in Bombay there was a strike of textil workers in Solapur. It was a general strike and involved about 16,000 workers. It took place on 26th January 1919. As a result of the strike workers received an increment in wages and some other concessions.<sup>(19)</sup> At that time increasing

of the wages and 55% dearness allowance were the two main demands of the workers. In the beginning, they tried to *back up* convince their arguments, by petitions and discussions with the management which was ready to meet their demands - Therefore Com. Chand Saheb the leader of workers went to Bombay, There he met Mr. B.G. Tilak, Mr. Tilak extended his full support to the workers and their strike.<sup>(20)</sup>

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Even then the owners did not concede the demands of workers. To press their demands, the workers took out a morcha on the gate of the mill. The police opened fire on them and seven worker's were killed. This strike is popularly known as "Bhimrao's strike."<sup>(21)</sup> Depiute this fact, the socialist leader Mr. Pannal Surana wrote that it was not 'Bhimrao strike, and the strike was held in 1928.<sup>(22)</sup> But it was not corret as our evidence show that the strike organised in 1920 was called Bhimrao's strike as Bhimrao was the leader of this strike. ' This strike became so famous that even Com. Lenin made reference to it in his speeches'. The workers had to surrenders in this strike, because of repression and terror struck by the mill owners. This strike continued for three months and as a result the workers got 35% dearness allowance and Jowar.<sup>(23)</sup>

But this event was responsible for attracting the attention of the workers to the need of powerful organisation for the struggle against the mill owners. Mean while the

All India Trade Union Congress was established in 1920 and its conference was held in Bombay. Com. Chand Saheb attended the meeting as a representative of Solapur mill workers.<sup>(24)</sup>

Some strikes of 1920 ~~strikes~~ were penalized by the mill owners and that led to another general strike two years later. The second general strike took place from 8 to 24 March 1922. Earlier the workers made demands asking for reinstatement of workers dismissed in the 1920's strike, recognition of the union and early consideration all representation made through their union. The number of workers involved in strike was about 18,000. Immediately after the strike the mill owners declared a lockout which they lifted on 17th March. There after workers began to drift into the mills and in a few days the strike ~~was~~ petered out.<sup>(25)</sup>

In 1928, the Girani Kamgar Sangh was established in Solapur under the leadership of Bakhale and Joshi. But both of these leaders were not militant enough therefore workers rejected their leadership.<sup>(26)</sup> About the same time as the 1928 the general strike in Bombay there was general strike of textile workers in Solapur. It began as a strike in one mill namely, the Solapur Spining and Weaving Mills. The operatives of the mills were complaining for over two months about low wages. As there was no relief about 3000 of them struck work on 21st April 1928. The strike formed an ' Advisory Board ' to

represent their grievances. There was a union which was a branch of the textil labour union of Bombay. But the management refused to talk with it. There were some talks between the management and the strike leaders some concessions were assured and some workers resumed work. But as many issues were left undecided a strik broke out again. It spread on this occasion to the other four mills also. The dispute in the Solapur spinning and weaving mill ended on 2nd July, but the dispute in the other mill continued upto 6th October!(27)

The strike was partly successful as some of the demands of the workers were conceded. As a result every month a workers was getting 16 seers jowar and 4 seer of pulses and deameas allowance.(28)

In 1928 the Lal Bawata Girani Kamagar Union was established in Bombay. Mean while the city workers fully resisted the Simon Commission and drew the attention of all country men towards them. Continuing their political activities.(29)

In July 1931, there was a general strike in the textile mills in Solapur. All the five mills in the city were affected. Before the strike a statement of workers grievances and demands was submitted to the millowners. In the first couple of days there was some rowdyism by striker. Later the situation was quite. It was disturbed again when mill owners started

recruiting new workers more particularly from the criminal tribes settlement. There was vigorous picketing and a number of meetings and processions were also organised. The district magistrate prohibited them after the first few days. He also issued an order prohibiting Mr. Beke, the General Secretary of the union, from making speeches in the city and its outskirts. A conciliation committee of prominent persons in the city was appointed at a citizens' meeting on 9 July to secure a settlement. The effort did not succeed and the strike had to be called off without securing any benefits.<sup>(30)</sup>

In 1934 the Lal Bawata Girani Kamagar Union was established in Solapur. Com. Randive was present as a Chief guest.<sup>(31)</sup> The year 1934 is known as a glorious period in labour movement in Solapur. The mill owners decided to reduce the wage of workers, of claiming that due to world wide depression, they were forced to do this. All over the country, this policy was adopted. The leaders of the labourers challenged this action of the mill owners and appealed to the workers to strike the work. This strike continued for five months and it was started from Solapur. The mill owners with the help of British Government tried to suppress the strike. The leaders were arrested under different charges, Com. Sane, Com. Manaxi, Sane, Com. Karhadkar, Com. Nandelkar were arrested and given punishments. There was a lathi charge



on the morcha of workers and the police opened fire. A corporater Dr. Antrolikar extended his support to the strike. In this strike the labourers had to face many hardships and difficulties. The collector of Solapur declared section 144 in the city. Therefore the workers had to hold their meetings at places like Hipparge and else where. The speeches delivered by the leaders influenced the workers and they resolved to continue the strike. The mill owners ran the mills with the help of police. (32)

During this period, the leaders of the workers faced a lot of trouble. They were not allowed to hold the meetings or to meet the workers. Even then the leaders continued their struggle and did not dis-band the union. But at last because of the cruelly reign of terror and repression the workers had to surrender. (33)

According to Government of India the act of 1935 , elections were held in Bombay on <sup>a</sup> limited Franchise. At the time of elections the National Congress party and the labour union came together to contest the elections. Both candidates Com. Khedgikar and Dr. Antrolikar got elected with big margines. The representatives of mill owners were also contesting, the elections but they were defeated. The mills were kept open even on the day of elections so that the labourers would not be in a position to exercise their

voting rights. But the workers cast their votes and defeated the candidates of <sup>the</sup> capitalists. (34)

In 1938, Japan attacked china and the congress leaders decided to send a batch of volunteers for medical propose. Dr. Kotnis from Solapur also went in this batch. The citizens and workers in Solapur were happy to send their representatives in this batch of volunteers. (35)

Meanwhile the congress ministry of Bombay state appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Shri. Jairamdas Daulatram to inquire into the problems of working class. The committee in its report suggested that the mill owners should discontinue the practice of cutting the wages of workers. On 14<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1938 there was a strike in Solapur to demand the release of political prisoners. The leaders and the supporters of strike were arrested Mr. Gangaram Chavan was given the sentence of flogging. The flogging of Mr. Chavan created a great resentment and anger in the minds of the people all over India. (36)

In the elections of 1937, the trade union leaders made <sup>a</sup> compromise with Indian National Congress party to enhance the cause of national liberation. But the congress government of Bombay passed an act that banned the strikes in the industry. The agitated Solapur workers went on strike

against this act on 7th Nov. 1938. The strike was a great success. They asserted that the right to strike was the basic right. (37)

On 26th December 1938 there was a danger of communal riots between Hindu and Muslims. But it was averted with the support of the trade union leaders. Mahatma Gandhi greatly admired such an exemplary conduct of labour leaders in his paper 'Harijan'. (38)

In 1939 due to the evil effects of the second World War prices were rising and government followed anti-people policies. The workers went on strike to protest against such policy. In Jan. 1940 the Bombay conference of the AITUC was held and some demands of the workers were conceded and dearness allowance was granted. (39)

British Government did not like these activities of the workers as they thought that due to these things they jeopardised war efforts. Hence they, arrested the communists and worker's leaders in the country. Com. Dange, Com. Randive Com. Mirajkar were arrested at Bombay. Com. Karhadkar, Com. Minaxi Karhadkar, president Com. Sane were arrested in Solapur. Even then the union won two seats in municipal election of 1942. (40)

The Solapur workers took part in the quit India movement and supported the cause of the national liberation. Thus Solapur workers waged a struggle against injustice and fought many battles in the case of national freedom movement.

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