CHAPTER V

EVOLUTION OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN KOLAR GOLD MINES

Indian scene

In India formal trade unions came into existence only in 1918. Poverty, illiteracy, resistance from the managements and lack of facilities faced by the industrial workers were the main hindrances that blocked the emergence of the trade union movement. However, workers used to express their desperations through strikes. These strikes were unplanned, spontaneous and called unmindful of the consequences. Industrial growth of an unprecedented nature was experienced in India during the First World War period. More industrial units came up and the number of workers also increased exponentially. The condition of the workers was bad due to price rise, low wages, long working hours etc. Political developments in the national and international arena like the Indian freedom struggle and the October Revolution of 1917 also influenced the working class movement.

1918 -1920 witnessed a series of strikes launched by the workers of different industrial centers. The first six months of 1920 alone recorded more than 200 strikes.\(^1\) It was out of these economic struggles against rising cost of
living, exploitation, victimisation, suppression and political agitation against foreign rule that the Indian trade union movement was born.

**Mysore State**

Though Mysore State had scores of modern industrial units by the close of First World War, labour was not organised in the State. Even in 1920 the awakening did not appear to have taken an organised form of a trade union. Indian Trade Union Act 1926 was not extended to Mysore till 1941.\(^2\) As a result trade unions had to register themselves as charitable institutions. Binny Mill workers of Bangalore were the first to be organised in the early 1920s. In July, 1926 the Binny Mills workers went on strike demanding half yearly bonus. Their agitation turned violent and in the police firing at the agitating workers 4 workers were killed. This incident led to more protests and strengthened the union movement. In 1929, Bangalore Textile Trade Union was formed and was registered as a charitable organisation.

Till 1940 the labour movement of Mysore State was confined more or less to the textile industry. During 1941 Mysore Labour (Emergency) Act was passed. This provided legal recognition of trade unions for the first time and their registration. Legitimate trade union activities thus were permitted. In 1942 this became a law, i.e. Mysore Labour Act.
Obstacles to Unionisation

The causes responsible for the discontent of workers prevalent in other parts of the country were present in KGF also. There were sporadic strikes. But they were put down by the mine management. Attempts to form unions were also strongly resisted by the British Managers. The Government of Mysore (GOM) was not extending any support to the workers in this regard.

Mysore Mining Rules

The major hurdle that stood in the way of KGF workers from uniting was the mining companies. The companies were armed with various forms of legal weapons and also different forms of law enforcing agencies to counter the moves of the workers. Gold, because of its high value had prompted the mine managers to ensure all necessary precautions intended to prevent pilferage and theft of gold by the workmen. Efforts were made as early as 1893 itself calling for special precautions.3 In 1897 the Mysore Mining Rules (MMR), a law that curbed even the rights of citizens was put into effect.

Sec. 17 of the MMR authorized the Superintendent of KGF Police to ask those considered undesirable to quit the mining area within 24 hours. It is important that extra precautions are needed to ensure prevention of pilferage. But unfortunately the laws were used not exclusively for this purpose alone.
People whom the Company suspected as trouble makers were brought into the
dragnet of these laws by declaring them as undesirables. The undesirables
included potential thieves and political troublemakers. Anybody whom the
Companies felt inconvenient for them also got included into this category.\(^4\)
Political activists and labour organisers were thus prevented from carrying on
their activities. Labour organisers were included in the list of undesirables
under the category of ‘disorganisers of labour’. Another issue noticed was that
the laws were imposed in a discriminatory manner. The white men were never
tried or tackled under any of these laws.

The companies got the support of the police. In 1900 there was a 277
men strong police force within the mining area. Government of Mysore
supplied additional forces whenever the companies demanded. Imperial
Lancers from Bangalore and Reserve Police too were made available as and
when the demand was made.

**Minor Protests**

During the early 1900s labour resistances were witnessed in mild forms.
People from outside also had raised their voices of concern on a few
occasions. Protests against MMR were raised in 1901 and 1904 in the
Kannada press.\(^5\) In the Mysore Legislative Council also issues pertaining to
MMR and its misuse were raised at various points of time. All these were feeble, isolated voices.

The abstinence of the workers from their expression of protest was due to the heterogeneous composition of the KGF labour, their geographical scatter over a vast mining area, their categorisation into company labour and contract labour, strenuous job that spanned 12 hours or even more during a day and the strict vigil maintained by the companies.

It took 26 years for the workers of KGF to express their first major resentment. The first reported major resentment was in 1907. The resentment resulted in unprecedented violence across the mining area. The cause was the molestation of a woman by a Punjabi watchman. The watch and ward personnel, police and the Europeans were targeted in the incidents of stone throwing by violent workmen at different mining areas. KGF Rifle Volunteers and Police were called in to contain the violence. The Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Kolar also intervened to restore order.

**Absenteeism and Labour Turnover**

The workmen had no time to think about and plan protests and revolts. For them perhaps one of the means available to express discontent was to
absent themselves from work or to quit the job. High rate of absenteeism and labour turnover reported in the 1930 Report of MA Sreenivasan is a pointer towards this discontent.

Comparative study on absenteeism of KGF worker with the Cotton Mill industry shows the rate disparity. Table pertaining to absenteeism is given below.

Table 5.1
Comparison of Absenteeism at Kolar Gold Mines and Cotton Mills of Major Indian Cities - 1926

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Percentage of absenteeism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>8.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahamedabad</td>
<td>7.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sholapur</td>
<td>12.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KOLAR GOLD FIELDS:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company (Underground &amp; Surface)</td>
<td>7.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract (Underground &amp; Surface)</td>
<td>22.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (Company &amp; Contract)</td>
<td>14.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: M.A. Sreenivasan, Labour in India, Socio-Economics Conditions of Workers in Kolar Gold Mines.

It is evident from the above table that absenteeism was high in the Kolar Gold Mines compared to the cotton mills of three other major cities of India. The rate was as high as 22.21 in the case of contract workers. The average rate for all categories of workers also was high for the KGF workers.
One of the reasons for high rate of absenteeism according to SR Despande who conducted a survey about KGF workers in 1946 was a tendency on their part to stay away from the mines if they get lucrative jobs outside. What were those lucrative jobs available outside however does not find a mention in the Report. The possible job in this case must be agricultural work. Taking into consideration the nature and type of agriculture in KGF and its immediate neighbourhoods the mine workers shifting over to agriculture in large numbers would not have been possible.

Next option for the workers who absent themselves should have been employment in the industrial establishments at Bangalore the closest city. Either lack of transportation facilities and the not so strong employment market at Bangalore of that period rules out this option also. For instance from 1894 to 1916 the progress of industrial growth in Bangalore was very slow. Chief reason was inadequacy of capital. By 1901 there were only two factories in Bangalore, an oil mill a tile factory, the Government Press and a few private presses. The major industries that provided employment for more than 100 workers during the early days is presented in the following table.
Table 5.2

Major Industrial Units at Bangalore 1884 – 1934
and their Employment Potential

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Year of Establishment</th>
<th>No. of Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Bangalore Woolen, Cotton and Silk Mills Co. Ltd.</td>
<td>1884</td>
<td>7486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mysore Spinning &amp; Manufacturing Co. Ltd.</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>3700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Minerva Mills</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>3100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Minerva Mills</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>1400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Venkatarayappa KN, Bangalore- A Socio-Ecological study, University of Bombay, 1957. p 58

Apart from the above mentioned three units there were 12 more industrial units around the same time. But all these units were having low employee strength, i.e. below 500. In contrast the employee requirement of KGF was more than 20000.

The term absenteeism is generally restricted to mean frequent voluntary absence from work without any satisfactory reason. Sometimes it is also used for frequent absence as a result of sickness. It occurs most frequently where the work is of an unpleasant nature, especially if wage rates are relatively high. Where the work is of a disagreeable kind and where the risk of losing one's job is slight, a worker who has worked part of a week may feel that leisure is to be preferred to further income.8
On studying the case of absenteeism of KGF workers under the above mentioned criteria, the following conclusions can be drawn. The work atmosphere and nature of work here was not at all pleasant. The wages of the workers were very low. The risk of losing the job was high. Under these circumstances the high rate of workers absenteeism was certainly due to some other factor – a tacit expression of workers’ discontent.

Another indicator of workers attitude towards the job is labour turnover. In KGF the rate of turn over was high. During the year 1939 it was 21.9% while during 1943 it was 19%. This rate was very high for such a well established industry. The turnover rate for contract labour was very much higher as against that of the company labour. No separate figures for these two categories are available.9

It is an accepted fact that labour turn over may be due to the workers leaving work on their own (voluntary) or workers being laid off or discharged by the employers. When times are bad workers cling to whatever job they have rather than face the risk of unemployment. When times are good and there are plenty of job vacancies, the quit rate rises sharply because workers feel safer in leaving an unsatisfactory job. Voluntary quit is a hopeful thing from the workers point of view. It is a door to greater opportunity, the way to seek better positions.10
On analysing the labour turnover scene at KGF in line with the above mentioned view the following points emerge. For the KGF workers times were always bad. Further quitting voluntarily in search of greater opportunity and better positions was ruled out because they had neither the expert skills to secure lucrative positions elsewhere nor were there opportunities available that offered better positions.

Labour turnover being an inconvenient phenomenon, the employers will have to initiate steps to reduce it. To succeed in such an attempt socio-economic development plans for improving work and living conditions of the workers, raising their general educational and cultural levels, granting them opportunities for combining studies with work, additional leave etc. are to be provided. Such socio-economic measures were unheard of in KGF. Hostile work atmosphere, poor wage, impoverishment, social segregation and demeaning hard labour were the prevailing conditions. Under those circumstances a work force that is not organised formally will find it easier to quit the job instead of resorting to direct action.

Apart from these, instances of large scale exodus under one pretext or the other was a frequent development. Spread of killer epidemics was cited as the main reason for these desertions. The Annual Reports of the companies for the years 1896, 1898 and 1927 speaks with concern the issue of shortage of
labour. In 1897 one of the companies approached the government seeking permission to get labour from Hongkong.\textsuperscript{12} John Taylor & Sons Committee in its special meeting of March, 7\textsuperscript{th} 1927 had detailed discussions on the issue of labour shortage. The situation improved later on when the companies implemented measures to provide better civic and health facilities to the labour. It was during this period recreational facilities too were provided.

**Trade Union Legislation in Mysore State**

The Indian Trade Union Act 1926 was brought into force on 1\textsuperscript{st} June 1927. The Act was extending to the whole of British India, including Baluchistan and Santhal Parganas.\textsuperscript{13} The Act was not implemented in Mysore. Reason for such move was to prevent united action by the workers and also the pressure from the various employers. But during 1940 all the major industrial centers of Mysore including KGF witnessed strong and prolonged protests by the workers. The strike was more vigorous in KGF and Bangalore.\textsuperscript{14}

The outcome of these protests was the passing of the Mysore Trade Union Bill on 24\textsuperscript{th} December 1941 and later on the Mysore Labour Act 1942. The new law permitted the registration of unions and ensured legal recognition. The primary intention of the Bill was to prevent strikes and
lockouts and to solve all the industrial disputes by conciliation and arbitration. The Act however forebade the formation of industry wise union and the Trade Union Act 1926 was made applicable only in 1951.  

The ever growing urgency felt by the workers to unionise, the move from the Government’s side to allow trade unions elsewhere after the introduction of Trade Union Act 1926, the national labour scene which was witnessing frequent protests and the appointment of a Committee by GOM regarding the introduction of Trade Union Legislation in Mysore State started exerting pressure on the mining companies. The companies soon realised the fact that they could not hold on to their resistance for long. Under these circumstances the companies adopted a new strategy in the form of encouraging and popularizing mine workers Panchayats in the different mines.  

**Mine Panchayaths**

Mine Panchayaths were informal bodies which were already in existence in the mining colonies. These Panchyaths were meant to sort out minor misunderstandings like personal feuds and bitterness that used to crop up frequently amidst individuals and families. In the Nundydroog Mines printed rules for the Mine Panchayath were framed. These Rules were referred to the Deputy Commissioner, Kolar and Superintendent of Police, KGF and
unofficial approval was obtained. The idea of the companies was to project these Panchayaths as organised bodies that would be performing the responsibilities of workers’ unions and thereby avoiding the formation of unions.

The system of workers Panchayaths first came into existence in 1925. Mysore Mine Panchyath was the first one. The Panchyath consisted of ten employees of the Mine, more or less nominated by the Superintendent of the Mine. Other Panchyats were formed subsequently. Sreenivasan’s Report explains the style of functioning of the Panchyath as follows;

“The Mysore Mine Panchayat is more or less purely a court and were equipped with all the pomp and circumstances of such an institution, with printed summonses, taking evidence, cross examination, assessors, belted peons dais – complete. The cases dealt with are, for the most part, petty troubles and misconduct. The parties agree to lay the case before the Panchayat and take its decision. Fines, some of pretty respectable size, are pronounced and recovered through wages. The Court sits every evening between 6 and 9 PM…”

Nundydroog Mines had two Panchayaths, one for underground and another for surface workers. Their work too was largely judicial. The Mine Superintendent was the key person in the set up. Under his encouragement frequent representations were made regarding housing, line amenities etc. Balghat Mine Panchayath was the other active one. It boasted of having
successfully approached the Management to obtain facilities like laundry, a temple for sweepers, cattle shed etc.\textsuperscript{18}

Management thus made efforts to project the Panchayats as labour Associations. But this attempt of the management failed to convince the labour. The constitution of the Panchayats and their functioning were grossly in favour of the Management. It was also true that with the members of this body being hand picked by the mine authorities genuine grouses and problems of the workers were never addressed. Issues which were inconvenient for the management were not taken up. These Panchayats were not functioning to the satisfaction of the workers and were no substitutes for workers unions.

**Attempts to Form Labour Union**

The initial attempts to form labour unions in KGF were made during the second half of 1920s. Some reference on trade unions is found in the Minutes of the Special Meeting of John Taylor & Sons Committee (JTSC), December 20\textsuperscript{th} 1927. This is the first available information found in the companies’ documents where the company managers made a mention of trade unions. It speaks about ‘another Government Committee constituted to enquire into the desirability of introducing a Trade Union Authorising Bill on lines of recent legislation in British India.’ The company was informed of this development
by the Dewan. The Meeting was of the opinion to carefully watch the future developments. However there were no moves from the State or the workers to form a union.

Trade Union issue again cropped up in 1928. During 1928-29 period, one Mr. Earnest Kirk, South Indian Labour Union, made an attempt to form a trade union in KGF. This was the first open attempt to set up a trade union. Mr. Kirk requested the mine Management for their permission to visit the Gold Fields. His intention was to discuss trade union matters. However the management did not give him the permission to visit the Fields.¹⁹

Later developments after Kirk’s visit reveal that though the companies had declined to entertain him, they were unnerved. The views expressed by company managers in the next Meeting of JTSC stand as evidence to this. It reads as follows: “The meeting concurred in Mr. Taylor’s opinion that no good purpose will be served by continuing to refuse to see Mr. Kirk having regard to the advisability of knowing what he is about rather than remaining in ignorance of any activities which he might embark upon in the neighbourhood and which the Mining Companies are powerless to prevent.”²⁰

This Meeting also decided that Mr. Kirk had to be given an audience. But whether any meeting with Mr. Kirk took place is not traceable. The
minutes of JTSC meeting for the following dates does not contain any reference to any such meeting. However Kirk’s attempts to form trade union was taken up by the Company with the GOM. The Company got the full support from GOM in dealing with Kirk. Finally the efforts of Kirk were successfully thwarted. The following observations found in the JTSC Meeting of 6th February 1930 stands as an evidence for the help obtained from the GOM. “Mr. Kenneth Taylor after mentioning the general gratification felt at the attitude taken by the Government last year when efforts made by Ernest Kirk to introduce official Trade Unionism on the Field were successfully resisted.”21 Thus the companies with GOM on their side were able to block the first attempt for the formation of a workers’ union.

Even though there were no formal Trade Unions on the Field and the companies were in complete control of the labour, there were some forms of organised activity going on in the Field. The companies were apprehensive of labour protests at any moment. The February 1929 JTSC Meeting had a discussion about strikes. The main issues taken up were the possibilities of strikes and the immediate procedure to be followed in facing the strikes. The conclusions arrived at were that no rules and regulations could be laid down. Since the circumstances for each strike were different they had to be dealt with accordingly. This development brings to light the point that the workers discontent and possibilities of revolt were gaining momentum. By now the
pressure on the companies on the formation of trade union was mounting. The companies were ready to block all such attempts. The attitude of the companies in this regard can be gauged from the following passage.

“An important point is that whilst it might be difficult to conceive a policy of successful opposition to the introduction of Trade Union methods in concerns such as Railways, Factories etc. there are special considerations in the case of Mines which are “wasting assets” with no guarantee of any prolonged life consequently the period of unrest which must always accompany the introduction of Trade Union methods can ill be spared. It is different in the case of Railways when there is time to reap the ultimate benefits. Again these Mines are peculiarly open to attacks of sabotage and to damage which bring in their train not only considerable financial loss but even the graver element of danger to human lives. A policy of strong resistance to the introduction of Trade Union if such is again attempted is indicated even at the expense of sharp struggle.”

Around this time the GOM was under pressure from the labour all over the State regarding legalisation of Trade Unions. The Companies were cautious about such an eventuality. They knew that if the GOM decided to grant this demand of labour the KGF Companies would be forced to adhere to the GOM’s directives. Hence it was decided by the JTSC to adhere to the policy of taking no action on the trade union issue which may estrange the Government’s official sympathy enjoyed by the Companies.
Strike of 1930

The Companies were thus able to prevent the formation of labour unions and keep the workers under tight control. This situation however changed as a major strike broke out in 1930. Without any formal organisation or visible leadership to guide them, the workmen could organise a prolonged strike. This strike was the major turning point in the labour history of KGF. A detailed narrative of this strike is imperative for this study.

Reasons for the Strike

Although the industrial relation prevailing was satisfactory, this unprecedented strike which lasted for 20 days took place in April 1930. Workers of all the five mines joined hands for the first time in the history of the Fields. The reason for the protest was the establishment of the Labour Registry Office and the new rules introduced by the companies. As per this the workers were to give impressions of all their fingers and other identification marks. Further their length of service and other particulars were to be recorded. They were also subjected to thorough medical examination to ensure fitness for mining work.23

The workers did not approve this and suspected that the collection of finger impressions was taken for the purpose of binding them over perpetually
for mine work under some pretext or the other. This news spread throughout
the Fields. Following this an anonymous notice in Tamil was found fixed to a
rock in Oorgaum Mine workers colony on the morning of April 1st 1930. The
notice stated that on the death of a registered coolie who met with an accident
in the Balghat Mines, the claimant, his widow was denied compensation by
the Company. The reason cited for non payment was that the deceased owed
money to the Company. The notice exhorted all the workers not to give their
finger prints and to stop from work. Heeding to this call, about 1000 workers
went on strike in the Oorgaum and Nundydroog Mines on 4th April.24

On following the strike from beginning till its end one can come to the
conclusion that the strike was the culmination of the nearly 50 years of
simmering labour discontent. The registration process and finger prints were
only a spark that ignited the flame. Various factors like loss of dignity,
disparity in the treatment of native labour25 and their European counterparts,
differential treatment that prevailed between company labour and contract
labour, low wages, high level of indebtedness amidst the workers etc. together
snowballed their simmering grouse into a spontaneous, well focused long
drawn strike.
Efforts to Settle the Strike

A special meeting of JTSC was held to resolve the issue. The meeting modified the registration procedure and decided to limit the finger prints to the new labour. Superintendents of each Mine issued a notice in this regard. This notice did not convince the workers and 7000 odd workers of the two mines stopped from work from 5th April. On the 6th April, the District Magistrate in consultation with the Chief Inspector of Mines and the Mining Superintendents, made arrangements to return the finger print forms to allay the suspicion of the workers. This also did not work. Instead, on the 7th April, all the five mines stopped work and about 16000 employees went on strike and started holding meetings.

Conduct of the Strike

In Mysore Mine the striking workers turned restive and the Police had to use force to disperse them. But in the afternoon the crowd besieged the Madrasi Watchmen Lines in the Mysore Mine and prevented the watchmen from going to work. This resulted in a melee and the Police opened fire to restore order. 44 persons were injured due to gunshot wounds and admitted in the Civil Hospital, Robertsonpet. Injuries of two men were serious. Extra Police and Military were immediately requisitioned from Bangalore and the
whole Field was thereafter efficiently and systematically patrolled and pickets were posted in sensitive places.26

The next move by the workers was to formulate their grievances and submit a memorandum to the Company. The following were the demands:

1. Abolition of the Central Labour Registry Office
2. Finger print forms to be returned
3. Pay for the period of strike
4. Privilege of electing representatives from each mine to put fourth their grievances.

The Managing Committee of the Mines after considering these demands issued a fresh notice on the 15th April. The notice communicated the following:

1. Altering the name of the Central Labour Registry to Employment Office.
2. Abolishing finger prints except under the old rules where underground men working in Reduction Works only give finger prints.
3. Substituting a mine disc in place of the Central Labour Register disc.
These decisions did not satisfy the striking workers and many workers left the Field to their villages. On 20\textsuperscript{th} April the representatives of all the five mines sent a joint petition to the Chairman of JTSC, urging the following:

1. The complete abolition of the Labour Registry Office and finger printing in any form.
2. The creation of Provident Fund Scheme for the work men and
3. Granting of at least ½ pay for the strike period.

Counter Measures by the Management

Stern repression was the next course adopted by the authorities. Prohibitory orders were passed till May 15\textsuperscript{th}. Meetings were prohibited. On 24\textsuperscript{th} April, about 250 men went to work underground in Balaghat Mine. When this news spread, the strikers gathered round the Taylor’s shaft and demanded to bring the men up. The crowd became unwieldy and the situation got grim and tense. The Police resorted to firing to disperse the mob, injuring 20 people.

Settlement of the Strike

The company Management and the local authorities were clueless. There were no identifiable leaders to negotiate with or to be won over. Finally the Dewan of Mysore had to intervene. The Dewan came down to the Fields.
Under his instance, a meeting of the representatives of the workers, company Management, Government representatives and representatives from general public and others related to the mines was convened on April 27th. Workers were represented by 20 men from each mine and from the public there were local advocates, excise contractors, money lenders and labour contractors. The Meeting finally resolved the crisis and an agreement was reached.27

The strike was called off on the 27th evening. The terms of agreement were abolition of the system of obtaining thumb impression and the Labour Registry Office. Sick pay and Service Gratuity scales were revised. Rent of huts also was revised.28

**Labour Enquiry Committee**

An important outcome of the strike was the appointment of an enquiry Committee by the GOM to study the situation of the labour on the Field. GOM appointed one of its civil servants Mr. MA Sreenivasn as the one man Enquiry Committee. The Dewan himself took this decision. The Committee was directed to under take the study and submit a report within a week or two.29 This Committee conducted an exhaustive study and submitted its Report to the GOM after six weeks. The Report contained a series of recommendations for the improvement of the conditions of the workers.
Recommendations of the Committee

The gist of this Report was that the miners of KGF were deprived of many aspects needed for leading a decent living. The recommendations of Mr. Sreenivasan were related to comfortable housing, improvement of amenities in the lines and colonies, relief from indebtedness and ruinous interest charges, the improvement of labour’s earning capacity, provision of education, especially Technical Education, sick and PF benefits, promotion of temperance and other welfare work.\(^\text{30}\)

The author of the Report did not recommend a direct increase in wages. For this he had an explanation. He felt that increase in inflow of cash by all means will not benefit the workmen in using it for improving the quality of life. This was so because there was a high tendency to spend more money on liquor and unnecessary things. Incidence of drunkenness and consumption of ganga was observed to be very high. Per capita consumption of toddy and arrack in KGF during 1928-29 was 26.4 seers and 5.5 drams respectively. This was much higher than the state average. It was also found that KGF accounted for 75% of the total consumption of country brewed beer in the State.\(^\text{31}\)
Impact of the Strike on the Companies

The strike forced the Companies to change their attitude towards the Indian labour. The issues raised by the agitating workers were discussed in detail by the Companies in a series of special meetings of JTSC. Mr. Kenneth B Taylor, Partner of John Taylor & Sons came down from London and camped in KGF from September 1930 to February 1931. Mr. Kenneth B Taylor’s Mission 1930-31 took certain specific decisions which were intended to appease the workers.

The first round of special meetings of JTSC was held between 25th September 1930 and 28th October 1930. This round had seven meetings in all. In the opening meeting of this series, KB Taylor conveyed to the members a message of appreciation from the London based Partners and Directors, which read as follows;

“During the strike in April the burden of responsibility of the Committee was realised to be very heavy one, and they had faith in your efforts to effect a proper reconciliation. The work of the staff, and the loyalty of the Anglo Indians and loyal Indians was much appreciated. It was difficult to express their full appreciation by letter so I was asked to convey this message to you. Although the termination of the strike was not one which any of us
desired nevertheless it was probably wise to settle. (emphasis added) It is our duty to see what lessons have been exposed out of the strike and to ascertain the legitimate grievances the coolies may have had.”32

Another worrying factor for the managers was the alleged rumors rife amidst the workers pertaining to the dissatisfaction and discontent on the workers conditions. The apprehension of the Companies was that these rumors will lead to further labour troubles. To allay the rumors it was decided to draft a public notice in Tamil explaining the various measures contemplated by the companies in improving the conditions of the workers and circulate it in the Fields. The urgency of this action was so important that the Managers did not want to waste time till the proposed public notice is printed, the printing of which in the normal course would have taken a day or two. The Managers were not ready to take any risk. It was decided to give a verbal notice in each Mine at the time of the morning Roll Call the very next day itself. 24th Oct. Meeting of JTSC resolved to act on this line.33

Measures to Improve the Conditions of Labour

The JTSC Meetings of 27th and 28th October 1930 decided to implement various measures that improved the conditions of the workers. Accordingly, the wages of the underground contractors’ coolies wages will be
paid directly through the Mine Office from 1st December, 1930. All such coolies will be entered on Company’s Rolls. Working on double shift will be discouraged. Payment of wages will be made fortnightly in place of the hitherto existing weekly payment system. Attendance bonus will be paid to the underground contract labour on par with that of the company labour.

The issue of housing was also discussed. Various measures to improve/modify the then prevailing system was taken up. Main issues covered were: complete substitution of thatti huts by brick or masonry huts, to provide additions like kitchens, pandals, double roof and re-roofing with Mangalore tiles.

In the matter of housing, the Government Report of 1930 had envisaged an outlay of 189000 Pounds for improving the existing huts. The Managers decided to take up this task at a rate of 10000 Pounds per annum for all the companies till the completion of the scheme.

Decision to give sick pay to convalescents after discharge from hospital was taken. Sanction of convalescent leave for both company and contract labour at full sick pay was the other decision. For the implementation of welfare schemes it was decided that various mine level committees will be
constituted under one Central Committee. The constitution, finance and functions of these committees were also formulated.

Granting of service gratuity under a revised scheme for all eligible workmen was decided. Revision of pay was the other important decision. Plans for providing improved facilities by erecting washing places, putting up electric lights at various points in the different colonies were the other developments.

**Defects in Implementation of the Recommendations**

Many of the decisions taken by the Companies at the first instance sound genuine. But later developments make one suspicious about the concern of the Management for labour.

The improvement of housing was planned at an annual cost of 10000 Pounds for all the Mines put together. This allocation was in place of an earlier estimate of 189000 Pounds. If the revised plan was to be carried out and assuming that there would not be any escalation in construction costs, the whole exercise would take 19 years to complete. It is ironical that such a long period was envisaged for solving an issue which the companies themselves knew was a prime cause for labour discontent.
For the preparation of a Memorandum meant for submission to the Government regarding housing the following were suggested. “In our Memorandum to the Government it is not intended to commit ourselves to a specific programme or specific expenditure but we feel it must certainly indicate in general terms what we are prepared to do.”

The Companies then ensured that there would not be any commitment or specific programme. While revising the proposals for the improvement of housing, JTSC in its meeting considered various cheap cost saving measures. In place of Mangalore Tiles for the roof insulating layers of cement mortar and sawdust are considered. This was against the suggestions given in the Government Report.

Another case of the companies’ dishonesty and double-talk pertained to the issue of the Government Report prepared by the one man enquiry. The companies were not happy with this Government Report and successfully blocked the publication of the original Report. The observations made in the Report on silicosis was the reason for the companies’ opposition to the Report.

In this connection KB Taylor along with an important Company official, Ralph Nye met the Dewan on 19.12.1930. This meeting was attended by 20 other Government representatives. Taylor expressed the displeasure of
the companies and argued against the publication of the Report. This Meeting generated a lot of confusion in the Government. The Dewan had presented the Governments view from which it appeared that they accepted practically the whole of Mr. Taylor’s arguments but they still felt that if nothing is published it would give rise to dissatisfaction and provide a dangerous handle for idle rumor.35

There was also a move to divide the Report into two parts and publish only one. The final decision then was to redraft a condensed Report. Such a Report will be submitted to the companies for their notes before publication.36

The companies did not want the original Report to be published because the Report had categorically mentioned that the lung related disease found in the KGF miners was silicosis which is compensatable. The companies wanted to avoid the additional expenditure that this would cause. Though the author of the Report had conclusive proof on the prevalence of silicosis, the Chief Medical Officer categorically denied it. Ralph Nye then convinced Mr. MA Sreenivasan and got some such parts omitted. Nye was reported to have stated that “as some portions of the Report, if published might lead to labour unrest they may be omitted from the Report.” The Government accepted this suggestion.37
Victimisation

Victimisation of the workers who had played an active role in the strike was also witnessed. The Superintendent of Balaghat Mine in 1931 referred some agitators to the Police and recommended their removal from the Mine’s property. These men were marked down at the time of the strike. According to the Superintendent they were found showing renewed activity.38

Rewarding the Loyal Persons

While victimisation was happening from one side, on the other side there was extension of doles and rewards to the loyal persons. Here Panchayath office bearers were the beneficiaries. These were the men who had supported the cause of the companies during the strike. As recognition of the services rendered during the year 1930 at the end of each Panchayath year they were given two weeks leave on full pay plus a TA of Rs. 5. Apart from this they were awarded silver medals also.39

Labour After the Strike

The post strike developments in the labour front were more vibrant. The strike and its success gave the workers courage to react and also to spread the message of unity. Efforts in this direction can be traced in the frequent distribution and circulation of anonymous hand bills in Tamil all over the
Fields, highlighting workers problems and the need for united protests. Apart from this there was the regular exchange of views and ideas over the word of mouth individually and in informal groups. The views so exchanged used to get wide publicity all over the Field. The companies preferred to call these as mischievous common gossip/ rumor.

The companies were very much disturbed by this new upsurge in the awareness of the coolies. But they were helpless and found it hard to curb these activities. The Detective Department and other supporting arms were unable to detect the source of the hand bills and also prevent their recurrence. They also expressed the fact that rumor cannot be stopped. The counter move that was decided upon under this helpless situation was, “to counter malcontents and ill wishers who will excite the workers by instilling suspicions in the workers’ minds, every possible propaganda was suggested and thereby make the coolies understand and not to get carried away.”

It has to be assumed that most of the issues that were raised through the hand bills and rumors were pertaining to wages and improved living conditions. This conclusion is possible from the statements made by KB Taylor in the final Meeting of JTSC. The statement reads as follows. “The companies were of the opinion that the newly introduced changes were favouring the labour. The companies had done all they could do to settle the
reasonable demands of labour. As such any combined or mass demand for increased pay must be resisted.”

The strike also gave the workers courage to work for their cause as a group. In groups they started approaching the mine authorities to put forward their demands. One such incident was that of a group of 100 company timber coolies approaching the Superintendent of Oorgaum Mine. They demanded for a raise in pay and permission to work on Sundays. The raise demanded was from 8 Annas to 9 Annas since the same category of coolies in the other mines were paid 9 Annas and they were permitted to work on Sundays. However this demand was not conceded to. 42

Other Strikes

Inspired by the success of the 1930 strike, rest of 1930s witnessed many sporadic strikes. These were protests against injustices like European officer’s abusing the workers or to express solidarity when a colleague was harassed or removed from job under different pretexts by the management. Such strikes were conducted for safeguarding the workers’ dignity and not for economic benefits. These strikes lasted for a day or two.
During 1935 a strike which lasted for 5 days was conducted between 30\textsuperscript{th} July and 3\textsuperscript{rd} August. The strike originated in the Mysore Mining Company in protest against the newly introduced attendance bonus rules. This rule curtailed Sunday work and also the provision to combine off days according to the workers choice.\textsuperscript{43} Efforts made by the Management and the District Magistrate to settle the strike failed. The strike witnessed unprecedented violence. Stones were pelted at the company officials and the security personnel. The Panchayath Court House at Mysore Mine was torched. In the police firing two workers were killed. Finally the strike was called off only when the new attendance bonus rule was withdrawn.

The Company Management and the Government were moved by the intensity of the protest. Though there was no direct discussion of the Strike by the JTSC some indirect references are found. In one of its meetings the Committee expressed their approval of the way in which the Watch and Ward Establishment had carried out their duties during the strike period.\textsuperscript{44} The second reference is a comment by the DC Mr. Rama Iyer in a meeting with the JTSC on 31\textsuperscript{st} Jan 1936. This Meeting was on the strengthening of the Police force on the Field. The DC stated that , “to increase the strength of the Police force on the Field at the time when most needed namely in the early stages of any disturbance……in the event of any such violent attack as has been experienced at the time of the disturbance in August last.”\textsuperscript{45}
It was observed that the authorities were frustrated by the refusal of the workers to choose representatives to formulate and present their grievances. The company was in a dilemma of choosing between granting the workers the right to form union or risking frequent leader less strikes. By 1939 solidarity of the workers without any organised body was so strong that even a threat of general strike was sufficient to make the companies concede the demands of the workers. In Nundydroog and Champion Reef Mines there were occasions like this during 1939 July where the companies had to reverse some of its decisions affecting the worker, suspecting workers protests.

The short protests during the 1930s showed that workers are no longer in a mood to accept the poor working conditions and dictates of the company. The company started realising the fact that to reduce frequent protests that hampered production some identifiable leaders are required to negotiate with and settle the labour problems. This was possible by permitting formation of unions. However the fructification of this realisation had to wait and one more protest was necessary by the workers.

**Benefit of the Strike to the Workers**

The 1930 strike and the other strikes that followed helped in improving the conditions of the workers. During 1931 a scheme was put forth for the welfare of labour. Additional living houses, sanitary improvements, play
fields, refreshment stalls, washing and bathing facilities were provided during the year. A Central Welfare Committee was established and travelling cinema was set up. The cinema gave two shows during evening hours every week in the different mines. These cinemas were intended for lecture on health, hygiene, temperance and safety first. Maternity houses and clinics were opened. Annual sports for labourers and their children were also organised. From March 1936 an Inter Mine sports competition was introduced.47

**Strike 1940, July- August**

After the 1930 strike the strike of July-August 1940 was the next major one that engulfed the entire Fields. It commenced on 17th July and continued till 12th August, 1940. As per the company records the behaviour of the men was orderly. A settlement involving some increase of wages was arrived at.48

The Annual Report of the Mysore mining Company mentioned that the strike was in opposition to a newly introduced improved gratuity scheme the benefits of which were misunderstood by the workers. The opportunity was seized to formulate various demands including one of general increase in wages. The question of increase in wages was already under consideration prior to the outbreak of the strike and the companies could make an early and
favourable announcement. But due to the preventive activities of organisers of the strike it continued for a longer period.49

The strike paved the way for the birth of formal Trade Unions. The strike started on the 17th July 1940 and it was the Oorgaum Mine workers who struck work first. The very next day Champion Mine, Nundydroog Mine and Mysore Mine workers joined. Though the companies offered increase in wages the workers did not relent.

The 25000 striking workers demanded a minimum wage of atleast Re.1 for underground and 12 Annas for surface work; Management to collect 1 Ana on pay day to pay the disabled or retired workers during each fortnight; service gratuity to those who had served for less than 10 years and a war allowance. More demands were added later on, like recognition of a labour union in the area, institution of provident fund, 15 days leave with pay and abolition of contract system.50 This time their demand was firm and clear. They wanted the right to form unions.

The strike gave new direction to the workers’ move towards floating a trade union. Quite different from the strikes of the 1930s clear cut identifiable leaders had emerged and they came out in the open. KC Philip and SR Shanmugam were the leaders from the workers camp. A local merchant AT
Lakshmana Mudaliar also came on to the scene openly extending his support to the cause.\(^5\) During the strike period, the leaders of the strike were externed from the Fields. Unable to function within the KGF they started functioning from Kuppam, a place 20 kms. away and which was outside the prohibited area. An office was set up and meetings were held. The workers walked the distance to attend these meetings. These meetings helped in giving proper guidance to the workers. The morale of the workers was thus kept high.

While the resolve of the workers was strong and clear, the companies and the State made efforts to break the strike. Government brought out handbills giving ultimatum to the striking workers to return for duty or else face the consequences. The workers did not heed to the threat and stuck to their position. On 18\(^{th}\) July Mysore Lancers and Infantry took control of the strategic places on the Fields. Presence of a strong police force also failed to dampen the determination of the strikers.\(^5\)

To overcome the situation and resume work the companies adopted a new strategy. On 26.7.1940 the companies brought out a pamphlet announcing an increase of one Anna in wages. This was rejected by the strikers. The next day Dewan of Mysore, Sir. Mirza Ismail came down to the Fields. He addressed a huge gathering of the workers at Oorgaum Gymkhana Ground. The Dewan reiterated the new offer of the companies. The workers were in no
mood to accept it. They in one voice vociferously made it clear to the Dewan that they wanted Union. The workers then prevented the Dewan from leaving the Meeting venue by lying down in front of his car. The Dewan was allowed to leave only after obtaining an assurance from him that he would consider their demand.53

From then onwards the developments towards the formation of Trade Unions were swift. On 29.7.1940 the workers chose SR Shanmugham54 and KC Philip as their leaders. KC Philip was to function as the Secretary. Though the striking workers had faith in the assurance from the Dewan, the authorities had different ideas. They were not prepared to give up easily. This was made clear when both the leaders were arrested during the same night and whisked away. The workers too were prepared to face the unexpected deceit. They organised a huge protest march the next day. The Government to quell the protests promulgated Defence of India Act and prevented possible uprisings. Many workers were arrested and kept in custody.

By August 1940 workers in large numbers started leaving the Fields. They left for their native places. They were under the impression that the strike would continue for long and perhaps got scared that they too would be sent to jail. Those who decided to stay back braving the repression let loose by the Government took up odd jobs in the neighbouring villages to earn a living.
There were no visible signs of the strike ending. The strike soon attracted the attention of the labour leaders and social workers outside KGF. Prominent among them were PRK Sharma and VV Giri. On his entry into the scene Giri played a significant role and argued for the cause of the workers. He opened up a line of communication with the Dewan and the First Councilor, N Madhava Rao. The demands of the workers were discussed.

The strike was finally called off on 12th August 1940 on the following conditions - Release all the arrested workers on resumption of work; there should not be any victimisation and constitution of a committee to examine the workers’ demands.

The strike, even though failed to fetch major benefits for the workers, heralded change in the course of the movement. The most important outcomes of the strike were,

- formation of a workers union and
- appointment of Commission of Enquiry by the Government to look into labour matters.

**Labour Scene After the 1940 Strike**

By the middle of 1940, a formal Trade Union had gained shape and the KGF Workers Union was established on 23rd October 1940. Membership
campaigns began throughout the Fields and enrolment was taken up. A subscription of two Anas per month was fixed and collected. These funds were used for meeting the needs of the external workers and leaders. Awareness creation on Trade Union matters was also taken up. Secret meetings were held in the colonies. During weekends public meetings were organised under the tamarind tree at Boodgaur, a place outside the limits of the Fields. VV Giri inaugurated this meetings session. Leaders from Madras also addressed these meetings. Workers in large numbers attended the meetings. The newly formed Union was not recognised by the company and it had to function from the Kuppam office which was already set up during the strike period.

**Matthan Commission**

GOM appointed the one man Commission of Diwan Bahadur K Matthan on 6th September 1940 to enquire into the conditions of KGF labour. The Commission was to review the progress and the adequacy of the various measures of labour welfare adopted by the mining companies since 1931 in the light of the existing conditions. The other aspects to be enquired into by the Commission were, the specific representations made by the workers during the 1940 Strike and the benefits gained by the KGF workers out of the various labour legislations that were in force in the State. GOM also sought suggestions for promoting the object of such legislative enactments.
In October 1940 the Dewan Bahadur Mathan arrived on the Fields. The enquiry continued till mid February 1941. Workers during the enquiry had submitted a charter of 102 demands to the Commission.\textsuperscript{59}

The Commission made detailed enquiry into the issues like - Terms and conditions of employment; level of wages; system of contract labour; recognition of labour union; necessity for enacting further labour legislations; provision of housing; medical relief and other amenities.

On the conclusion of the enquiry a Report was submitted to the GOM on 23.5.1941. This Report later on was the basis for the Labour Legislations enacted for the State of Mysore.

**Recommendations of the Matthan Commission**

Recommendations of the Commission were categorised into two;

(i) Those related to legislation and public administration, to be dealt by the GOM, and

(ii) Those to be dealt by the companies.

The recommendations, that required governmental action, were recognition of Labour Association and legislation required in this regard; appointing a Labour Commissioner for KGF to guide the movement;
amendment of the Workmen’s Compensation Act, so as to enable a worker sustaining injury from accident to receive compensation from the date of accident, instead of after a waiting period of seven days; revision of arrangements regarding silicosis; Commissioner of Labour to assist workmen in case of Workmen’s Compensation Act, where ever necessary; extension of Mysore Maternity Benefit Act 1937; repealing of Section 3 of Act XIII of 1935 amending the Civil Procedure about attachment of wages by Civil Courts; giving wide publicity to the salutary provisions of the Money Lender Act (XIII of 1939) among the labour population to create awareness.

Ultimately some positive measures that benefited the workers were implemented. Most significant among them was the enactment of The Mysore Labour (Emergency) Act, XX of 1941. This Act came into force in August 1941. This has been since placed permanently on the Statute Book by the Mysore Labour Act, 1942 (Act XIII of 1942).

Some of the recommendations that were to be acted upon by the companies were implemented. Attendance bonus, underground outfit allowance, leave with pay, leave without pay, gratuity, construction of huts, grant of medical certificate and provision of lights and other conveniences were the recommendations acted upon. Details of these and the recommendations are made available in Appendix II.
Legal Sanction to the Workers’ Union

The KGF workers in general and their protests had by now captured the attention of the outside world. They had also established fraternal links with their own class outside the Fields. Labour of the Fields had advanced considerably in awareness and holding organised protests. The workers realised the significance of the newly introduced Labour Act. They started approaching their leaders with their grievances and representations. The leaders were not in a position to act upon such representations because to act, a recognised union was necessary. Pressure was mounting on GOM to fulfill this demand.

Finally in August 1941 GOM sanctioned to the KGF workers the right to form unions. GOM also decided to provide representation to the workers in the Legislative Assembly and Council. On August 31 1941 the externed leaders made a triumphant return to the Fields. By the end of the year and in early 1942 elections were held and legally organised unions were formed. In place of one union for all the mine workers, separate unions for each Mine were formed and thus there were four unions.

The unions so formed were, the Mysore Mine Labour Association (MMLA). Champion Reef Mine Labour Association (CRMLA), Nundydroog
Mine Labour Association (NDMLA), Oorgaum Mine Labour Association (ORMLA). The other unions formed during the 1940s were Kolar Brick Making Company Labour Association, KGF Electricity Department Labour Association and KGF Hospital Workers Union. This Union was formed in 1945. The Kolar Gold Fields Domestic Servants` Union (Appendix III) was formed in 1946.

**Conclusion**

Trade union movement of Kolar Gold Mines has evolved over a period of time. Protests of different dimensions which were by and large peaceful paved the way for the development of the movement. There was stiff resistance from the mine Management and the State Government against the formation of trade union. The workers finally overcame all these resistances. Two major strikes, one during 1930 and the other one during 1940 contributed considerably towards the formation of the union. The first union was formed in the year 1940. Since the labour legislation did not permit trade unions, this union had to operate from a far off place. With the passing of the Mysore Labour Emergency Act 1941, formation of unions got legitimacy. In accordance with this Act, separate unions were formed in each of the four mining companies.
References


4. Ibid. p. 65.

5. Ibid. p 68.

6. Ibid. p 69.


18. Ibid. p. 57.


20. Ibid. p.18.

21. Ibid. p.18.

22. Ibid. pp. 18, 19.


24. Ibid.

25. The daily physical search conducted on the native underground workers by the Punjabi security personnel when the workers came out of the mine after hours of hard physical exertion was a big insult and humiliation. The native workers were even made to undress. But the European workers were spared from all such exercises.


30 Ibid. pp. 94 - 96.


33 Ibid. pp.6,7.

34 Ibid. p.23.


36 Ibid. p.54.


39 Ibid. p. 65.

40 Ibid. p.66.

41 Ibid, pp. 74,75.

42 Ibid. p. 43.


48. Directors Report, Nundydroog Mines Ltd, 1940.


52. Ibid. p. 219.


54. It is said that SR Shanmugam during the strike period in the presence of a big crowd fixed a bamboo pole in the centre of the High Grounds at Marikuppam and made his wife remove her mangalsuthra and hung it on the pole vowing that the same will worn again by her only after the unions are allowed for the mine workers. (*Interview with KS. Meshack, 1.9.2005*).
