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Burnpur

IN the mineral belt that cuts across the borders of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa which is the hub of India's heavy industry—coal, minerals, steel and copper—the one name that is to be conjured with is neither that of Mahatma Gandhi nor that of Jamshedjee Tata nor even Rajen Mookherjee but that of a very different kind of man, the late Abdul Bari, one of nature's born labour leaders, a character thrown up by industrialisation and in some ways in advance of his times. Unless the spell that is still exercised by his name is grasped, one would no more be able to follow the labour dispute in Burnpur, than one could hope to understand Congress politics without knowing the part played by Mahatma Gandhi in the national movement. This is indeed a tall claim to make. Hut factory workers anywhere between Kulti and Tata-nagar would be surprised, if one doubted it, No labour leader in that industrial belt can obtain a listening unless he swears by Bari. Hence, whatever he the dispute, and whichever the policy, whoever contests for power and leadership will have to be or profess to be Bari's follower. It is no accidental coincidence, therefore, that both Shri Michael John, the labour leader of Burnpur and Tata Workers' Union and Shri C N Vyas, the lender of rival Action Committee, are Bari's lieutenants.

The contest is virtually for the succession to the gadi left vacant by Ban's unfortunate assassination in March 1947. But it is not a contest between two wings of the labour organisation, the Asansol Iron and Steel Workers Union, which the late Abdul Hari had founded and through which he had laid the relations between workers and employers on the firm foundation of the Bari Award, won at the end of 1946, after a three months' strike. Other elements and factors have entered into the situation. And though non-implementation of some of the provisions of the Bari Award has been put up now and again as one of the causes of action or matters of dispute, it is not the essence of the matter. For the subsequent developments in the labour situation at Burnpur one has to look elsewhere. The succession of Shri Michael John is undisputed at Jamshedpur where 31,000 members of his association owe him allegiance. Michael John has not only been able to wrest from the Tatas advantageous terms for the workers, the management itself has found in him a stabilising influence which has enabled industrial peace to be restored and maintained uninterrupted after an early spell of stormy labour troubles. Why have Michael John and his Union fared so differently at Burnpur? To this there is no simple answer. The strength of John's following is itself in dispute. The version that is usually attributed to the management and supported by official Congress is that his following continues to be large and overwhelming. A minority of trouble makers are holding the management to ransom by the well-known tactics of intimidation and gangsterism. The Action Committee is blamed for creating the present unhappy situation. If that is so, lockout should serve to restore conditions where saner counsel may have a chance to prevail and a settlement can be arrived at in due course. Indeed if the Government is consistent in following the lead given by Pandit Nehru in Parliament in spirit as well as in letter, and there is no back stepping, an early termination of the present deadlock can be expected with reasonable certainty.

It is difficult, however, for outsiders to get at the truth. And in any case, where the strength of the following of a labour leader or of

a Union is in dispute, the only decisive answer can be obtained from an open election and until that is held, it must remain undetermined. This would be the case even if the facts of the situation were clearer than they are in this particular case. For, it may be noted that in Parliament Shri Harihamath Shastri, the General Secretary of INTUC of which Michael John is the President, merely wanted to know whether it was a fact that John's meetings were attended, by an overwhelming majority of workers who condemn unreservedly the suicidal policy of slowing down production. The INTUC leader asked the question, but did not give or get an answer.

If the above analysis is correct, two questions arise. Why did the West Bengal Government watch and wait and allow the situation to get to the point where it was possible for a handful of men to undermine production in the country's most important key industry? The preventable loss must have run to crores of rupees in money terms and a lot more in terms of human suffering and unemployment. The other is, how could a handful of miscreants obtain such control over the situation as to win from the overwhelming majority of loyal workers complete compliance for their obnoxious, obstructive and anti-social policy of slowing down production and eventually to the point of dictating how much should actually be produced? That a compromise should have been reached at any stage under the sponsorship of, or in collaboration with, the Government for raising production from 20 per cent to 35 per cent would naturally provoke any one, as it provoked Pandit Nehru to a downright condemnation of the whole thing.

Pandit Nehru strongly supported the action of the West Bengal Government in giving its approval to the declaration of a lockout. It is to be hoped that by extending his approval to the final decision, he has not condoned the earlier vacillations of the West Bengal Government to which the management of the Indian Iron and Steel Company had occasion to draw attention in their statement to the press. They had been stopped by the West Bengal Government from correcting inaccurate statements appearing in the press on the ground that "certain political leaders" were endeavouring to bring about normal conditions at Burnpur with the assistance of the Government. There's the rub. The

Burnpur Union is affiliated to the Congress. The West Bengal Government is run by the Congress. But there are Congress leaders who do not see eye to eye with either. It is an open secret that the West Bengal Government and the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee are backing different labour leaders with the result that *vis-a-vis* labour, far from the Government and the management presenting a united front, the Government is hampered, obstructed and checkmated by the members of the Congress party who are outside the legislature but are not willing to take a back seat.

Now, lockout is entirely a negative step but can be effective enough if the assumption is correct that the vast majority of the workers are against slow down and such other tactics and, therefore, once the subversive elements are thrown out, the rest will themselves press to be taken back. That the All-Bengal Action Committee of the Burnpur workers have issued a joint statement that the workers are willing enough to resume full production, if the Government and management concede their right to a fair and free election and agree to reinstate the discharged workers, suggests that the lockout may already have had a sobering effect. Others who do not share the confidence of the management in its efficacy will regard the lockout as a gamble which may or may not succeed. But even if it be a gamble, why was it delayed so long since the West Bengal Government had no better counsel to offer? Indeed the management may well complain that neither did the Government act nor did it allow the Company to act and all through the period, it signally failed in its primary function of maintaining compliance with the law on the part of the workers who had rebelled. The result was overt encouragement to lawlessness and violence.

From the discussions in Parliament and from the statement issued on behalf of the All-Bengal Action Committee for Burnpur workers, it appears that differences have now been narrowed down to and pinpointed on "free and fair election". On this question, however, the Commerce and Industries Minister could have been more illuminating. To quote his exact words: "Elections to the Union was not a matter on which Government can take any action. It was not as if the Election Commission of India can order the elections". It is not a question,

as the workers view it—the disgruntled workers, if you like—of impressing upon the Union leadership the need to hold elections which have not been held for the last three years, in contravention of the Constitution of the Union which provides for annual elections. In fact the President of the Union has agreed to hold the elections this very month. But that's not it. The provisions relating to the recognition of Unions under the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 do not apply to West Bengal. In the circumstances, the Action Committee cannot claim recognition and for the matter of that, no other Union, except the one recognised by the management, stands any chance of gaining recognition. And thanks to the prestige of the Union that is associated with the magical name of Abdul Bari, no one seriously thinks of sponsoring another Union. In the circumstances if the election is confined to those whose names are on the rolls of the Union, many who had not paid their subscription for the last three years, having lost their faith in the leadership of Michael John, will be automatically disenfranchised, flow the problem of labour representation can be satisfactorily solved in the circumstances is not easy to see but it has to be faced sooner or later, and sooner the better, if democratic methods are to have a chance.

Here comes the great divide. Sir Biren Mookherjee belongs to that rare and almost non-existent type in India—the complete industrialist, who has been brought up in steel, has steeled himself for the heavy responsibilities that have fallen on his shoulders and has dedicated his life to this one all-consuming mission. Scotsmen in the tropics forget the Clyde side and when old methods of dealing with labour based on personal relations are resented as smacking of paternalism, the psychological transformation is not easy. And it is not made any easier when problems of labour are handled by those who have little appreciation of the problems of industry, of the technical complications or of costing, particularly when price control and ramifications of Government control in all spheres relating to the industry rob the management of freedom of action and expose them to factors beyond their control. One hopes that the gap can still be bridged but in case it cannot, more effective methods would be adopted for maintaining production. That responsibility undoubtedly falls on the Government.