

Livelihood and Struggles of Urban Workers



In Chapter 9, we read about workers in a paper mill. Most paper mill workers were like Anand – they get high wages, bonus (share of profit of the company), Provident Fund (savings for future) and other allowances. They also get healthcare and housing facilities. Such workers constitute only a small section of all the workers in India. We also learnt about other kinds of workers in the same paper mill - Umar and Pushpa, who get low wages and do not get any other allowances or facilities required for a decent living. Most workers in India are like Umar and Pushpa. In this chapter, we will learn about why and how workers negotiate with their employers for a decent life through their organisations and laws. We will also learn about an organisation working for those who work on their own.

We have learnt that government makes laws in the interest of the people. Laws are also made to protect the welfare of workers employed in fields, factories, private and government offices. Factories which are properly registered with the government are expected to follow these laws and provide better wages and other facilities required for workers. Governments also have Labour Departments, which have the responsibility to ensure that these laws are followed. If the laws are not followed, workers can file cases in courts. At times, factories protect the welfare of only a section of workers who are called the 'Regular Workers' or 'Permanent Workers' and those known as 'Casual' or 'Contract workers' are not looked after.

However, there are many factories which do not get properly registered with the

government. Let us look at the conditions of workers in such factories closely.

Working as 'Permanent Workers' in Factories

Read the following accounts of two factories in Kothur, which is a new industrial town, located about 30 kilometres from Hyderabad in Mahabubnagar district. This was recorded in 2002.

Fibrotex (not a real name), a large scale factory producing fibre glass was setup in 1976. In 2002, out of 570 workers, 140 were permanent workers; 60 workers were employed on casual basis and they were called badli workers, i.e. they replaced permanent workers in case of their absence and about 300 workers were employed daily on contractual basis.

(A permanent worker cannot be dismissed without a proper procedure and a payment of compensation while other workers can be removed easily.)

This factory has a Trade Union. Initially, it was set up with the encouragement of the company, which wanted a union that would be more agreeable to its policies. Soon, the Union developed into a strong workers' organisation as workers participated in the union actively. It negotiated with the management to fix wages etc.

All workers get wages fixed through agreements with the union and medical facilities through Employees' State Insurance (ESI) and Provident Fund (PF). The Trade Union secured other benefits also – health checkup in big private hospitals, leave in case the workers become sick, safety-wear in the work place, safe drinking water in the factory, educational allowance for workers' children, conveyance allowance and also Leave Travel Allowance (LTA). They also get loans from the company when needed and the company has also provided quarters for them to live in. The company also took interest in training workers who have been working for long in the factory, sending them to foreign countries to improve production quality. The Trade Union also made agreements with factory owners to regularize contract labourers after a definite period of work.

The Trade Union of Fibrotex was quite active in the town as well. This had helped many other small Trade Unions in other factories to grow their bargaining power with their employers.

Trade Union

A Trade Union is an organisation formed by workers to protect their interests. If every single worker has to negotiate with the employer separately, they will not be in a strong position. However, if all of them negotiate together, their position will become stronger. Trade Unions negotiate on the behalf of all workers with government and the employers. They seek to ensure proper wages, other benefits and decent working conditions for their members. Collectively, with their member workers, they secure social security benefits, medical facilities, houses, Provident Fund and pension for working. If any worker is harassed or is in need of help, the Trade Union takes up his or her cause. Unions adopt a variety of measures like negotiations, filing cases in the law courts and even strikes or stoppage of work to pressurise the employers in democratic principles.

The details of workers' salaries (in 2002) in Fibrotex are as follows:

<i>Permanent worker</i>	<i>Rs.4500 - 10,000 per month</i>
<i>Badli workers</i>	<i>Rs.3000 - 4000</i>
<i>Contract / casual labourers</i>	<i>Rs.58 per day for eight hours</i>

available only to the 140 'Permanent Workers'. About 360 workers, called badlis and contract workers, get low salaries along with PF, ESI.

- ◆ What is the difference between a permanent worker and a *badli* worker?
- ◆ Calculate the difference between the monthly salary of a permanent worker and casual labourer.
- ◆ Invite one or two factory workers who are getting ESI and PF benefits to class and collect more details about how these facilities are made available to her / him and the steps a worker has to follow to get these benefits. You may also invite a parent of any of your classmates also to talk about these things.

KRS Medicines Factory

This company (not a real name) mixes and packs medicines for another big medicine company. It employed about 118 workers of whom about 104 workers were employed as daily casual workers. That is only 14 workers were regular and permanent and were used for the skilled work of mixing the chemicals to prepare the medicine powder. They were paid about Rs. 1500 to Rs 2500 per month and had a security of employment. They also got ESI and PF. The remaining 104 workers who were engaged on a daily basis mainly did the packaging and labelling of the medicine.

About 56 of them were women. These daily workers were engaged by a labour contractor who was told everyday by the manager as to how many workers to engage. These workers mainly came from nearby villages and were usually illiterate. The women workers had to work for about 12 hours a day and were paid just Rs.30 whereas the men were paid Rs.42 for the same work. This is much below the minimum wage fixed by the government for there kind of factories. The managers do not allow the workers to form any Trade Union and threaten that they will close down the factory if any union is formed.

These days, a large number of companies are adopting policies similar to this company, reducing the number of regular workers and replacing them with contract and casual workers.

- ◆ Why was no Trade Union allowed to form in KRS Medicines Factory?
- ◆ Why do you think were there more women in the 'contract worker' category rather than in the category of 'permanent workers'?
- ◆ Is it fair to pay women workers less than men for the same kind of work?
- ◆ Do you think it would have been different if the workers had been educated and literate?

Working on Construction Sites and Brick Kilns

Bindhani, her husband and ten year old daughter work in a brick kiln in a village in Ranga Reddy district. She comes from a village in Odisha where they have a small plot of land. They had taken a loan of Rs. 20,000 and could not repay it. They were at the verge of selling their land when a contractor who was recruiting workers for brick kilns in Telangana approached them. He offered them an advance of Rs. 10,000 so that they could repay a part of their debt. They would have to work for six months in a brick kiln and they would also be paid additional wages and provided with a hut to live in. The work would start in December and end in June when they could return to work on their land. That is how Bindhani and her family came to work in the kiln. They are not alone. About two lakh such workers from Odisha come to Telangana to work in brick kilns. It is also common to see thousands of worker families from Telangana go to other states like Karnataka and Maharashtra to work in kilns of those states.



Fig 19.1 Construction Labour

Bindhani wakes up around four o'clock in the morning to prepare some kanji. Her husband is still sleeping as he worked till 2 o'clock in the morning. She wakes her daughter up and both of them get ready to work. They have to fetch water and mix sand and clay and prepare the clay for making bricks. They begin work around 5 AM in the morning and work non-stop till about 9 o'clock when they take a break for tea. By then, her husband too joins them and he puts the clay in moulds. Once the clay has been shaped into bricks, the daughter smoothens them and marks the seal of the company on the bricks. These are then allowed to dry, then loaded on bullock carts and taken to kilns for baking. The work goes on continuously till about 2 o'clock in the night. Bindhani and her husband work for nearly 14 to 16 hours. They don't want to stop work

because they are paid according to the number of bricks they make. They are paid about Rs 108 per every thousand bricks they make. They normally manage to make about 1000 bricks a day. If they fall ill, they will not be able to earn anything. In this way, they work day and night for nearly six months – on some days they just can't work as they grow too tired or ill. They usually eat broken rice and dal and on some days some vegetable. At the end of the six month, they often just manage to clear the advance they got and actually have to go back empty handed. Sometimes, they manage to take home about four or five thousand rupees.



Fig 19.2 Cotton Pickers

Such is the story of lakhs of brick makers and other labourers who engage in different activities all over the world. They are given advance by a contractor; they are taken to far off states whose languages they do not know; they work day and night for five to six months with their family and children and earn just enough to clear the advance they had taken. In some cases, even when people are too tired to work, they are forced by the contractor to work. They live like bonded slaves. Whenever these workers bring their plight to the government, government officials intervene and 'free' these 'bonded labourers' from brick kilns and contractors and send them home. Since they have no other employment opportunity at home, they are again forced to take advances from the contractor and come back to the kilns again. There are no Trade Unions that fight for their rights as they are migrant workers spread out in a number of sites.

- ◆ Can you calculate how many days will it take them to clear the advance of Rs 10,000 they got from the *sardar* (Contractor)?
- ◆ What is the average wage for one person per day in this work?
- ◆ Why are there no Trade Unions in brick kilns?
- ◆ Do you think that the government should help workers to form Trade Union among brick kiln workers?
- ◆ In what way can the government help brick kiln workers to improve their working conditions?

- ◆ What kind of machines, tools and sources of power are used in brick production?
- ◆ What kinds of skills are needed for this job? How are they acquired?
- ◆ Why do you think are they made to work in distant states?

Ensuring Workers' Rights - A Global Concern

Ever since the Industrial Revolution about which you had studied in Chapter 8, workers all over the world have been fighting for a dignified life and a just share of their produce. They have fought for several kinds of securities and rights:

1. **Right to productive and safe employment:** so that every worker can work according to his or her skill and capacity and work under safe conditions without endangering their health.
2. **Right to leisure and rest:** so that they have time to rest from their tiring work and also have time to attend to other cultural and social interests.
3. **Right to employment security:** so that every worker knows that he/she has an employment which will ensure her/him a livelihood and will not be arbitrarily thrown out of work. If it is inevitable for a company to remove a worker, he or she should be paid adequate compensation for the loss of work.
4. **Income security:** so that every worker has adequate and regular income to take care of the needs of their families and savings for living a dignified life in their old age.

5. **Work security:** so that when they fall ill or meet with an accident, they can get proper care and get paid for the period of illness.
6. **Skill improvement:** so that they can improve their skills and capabilities while at work.
7. **Collective voice:** so that they can form unions to express their problems and needs without fear and negotiate with the employers as a group rather than as individuals.



Fig 19.3 Knife Sharpeners

Over the last two hundred years, workers all over the world have fought to get these rights recognized, even though they may not be implemented in all places. In most countries, the governments have agreed that these are basic needs of workers and made laws that ensure workers these rights.

Read the previous sections again and colour the whole box (in the next page) against rights and benefits available to workers. If only a part of workers are covered, shade a part of the box depending on the proportion of coverage. Cross mark the box if no right/ benefit is available.

S.No	Rights	Fibrotex	KRS Medicine Factory	Brick Kilns
1.	Right to Productive and Safe Employment			
2.	Right to Leisure and Rest			
3.	Right to Employment Security			
4.	Income Security			
5.	Work Security			
6.	Skill improvement			
7.	Right to Collective Voice			

Informal Work and Workers in Towns

In Telangana and other Indian states, towns and cities are becoming bigger and bigger. People are rapidly shifting from villages to these towns. But many of them do not get sufficient regular employment there and do a variety of odd jobs. They sell vegetables or other items, make and sell snacks, work in tea stalls, or small factories, stitch clothes, load and unload in markets, work as domestic maids etc. Many of them produce goods at home – weaving clothes, papads, pickle, doing embroidery, etc. and are engaged through ‘puttingout’ system. Most of these activities do not get registered with the government. Workers of these kinds can be called informal workers and the nature of such work is called informal work.

What is common about all these areas of employment is that



Fig 19.4 Workers laying cables

they require very little capital or skill training but the employment is both irregular and very low paying. As such, these workers are in a very vulnerable position. Unlike 'permanent workers' in factories and offices who get employed and paid regularly, these workers do several jobs in a day - they may distribute newspaper in the morning, work in a tea shop during the day time and cook in some houses in the night. This keeps them busy throughout the day without any rest. In most cases, all members of their families, including children, work to earn. So, the children usually remain uneducated. When faced with financial problems, they try to cut their expenditure by taking children out of schools or cutting down on food or medicines. Even after all this, they are not able to meet their needs. They are forced to take small loans from friends and relatives and at times, from moneylenders. Almost all of them are heavily indebted to these moneylenders and often have to work for them.



Fig 19.5 Road Laying Work

Most of them do not have any Trade Unions to defend their rights. As we mentioned earlier, the number of such workers is constantly increasing in the country. They are increasing not only because people are moving in from villages, but also due to the closing down of large factories and mills. The workers of these factories now have to join the ranks of the casual workers.

Looking at these problems, some trade unionists of Gujarat formed what is considered the largest trade union of the informal workers in the world. Let us find out more about it.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

In 1971, a small group of migrant women cart-pullers in Ahmedabad's cloth market approached Textile Labour Association (TLA) to help them in improving their housing facilities. TLA was the oldest and the largest textile workers' union with which Mahatma Gandhi was closely associated. The Union helped these

women to form SEWA in 1971, which later became a Trade Union in 1972.

Since then SEWA grew continuously, with women working in different occupations becoming its members. SEWA members have no fixed employer relationship and depend on their own labour for survival. They barely have any assets or working capital.

Any self-employed women can become a member of SEWA by paying Rs.5 as membership fee. The SEWA helps self-employed women in addressing their grievances, improving their work culture and to become financially self-reliant in running their businesses. Hawkers/vendors selling vegetables, fruits, fish, eggs, food items, household goods, new and old clothes, workers working in houses like weavers, potters, bidi and agarbatti workers, papad rollers, readymade garment workers, artisans; manual labourers and service providers like agricultural labourers, construction workers, contract labourers, handcart pullers, head-loaders, domestic workers, laundry workers, cattle rearers, salt workers, gum collectors etc. can become members of SEWA.

About 13 lakh workers in 9 states in India are now members of SEWA. SEWA also runs a bank cooperative for its members and provides health insurance facility. SEWA also helps its members in marketing their produce and ensuring them fair wages. Do you think such organisations could be of some help in improving the conditions of hundreds of women who are self-employed in selling vegetables on roadsides, in market places and on the streets in Telangana?

Keywords :

- 1. Compensation
- 2. Provident Fund
- 3. Badli Worker
- 4. Wages
- 5. Casual Worker
- 6. E.S.I.
- 7. Regular Worker

Improve your learning

1. Compare the condition of a worker in brick kiln, a permanent worker and a contract worker in a factory.
2. Can you make a list of jobs done by casual and self employed workers in your area?
3. Make a list of different types of unions discussed in this chapter. Fill in the table:



Sl. No.	Company in which union was working	Type of labour	Main problems	Suggested solution
1.				
2.				
3.				

4. Talk to a Trade Union member (leader) and find out why did he/ she join the union, what are their rights and duties as a union member.
5. Write a letter to the Labour officer of your Locality, complaining about the conditions of workers at their work places.