

FRONTLINE

BOOKS

Published: July 10, 2013 12:30 IST | Updated: July 9, 2013 12:35 IST

HISTORY

Labour history of Madras



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- **Author:** D. Veeraraghavan
- **Publisher:** LeftWord Books, 2013
- **Pages:** 358
- **Price:** Rs.750

Veeraraghavan paints a detailed portrait of the life of workers in colonial Madras in the inter-War years and places labour history in the broader context of the freedom movement. By M.V. RAMANA

A HUNDRED years ago, on December 18, 1913, some carpenters working at the Railway workshops in Perambur, Madras, returned a little late from lunch. The management, in the words of *The Madras Mail*, “mulcted in their wages”. The next day the carpenters put up a notice appealing to all workers not to return to work at the prescribed time after the lunch break. Accordingly, after the lunch break on December 19, 1913, workers, with very few exceptions, returned late. Soon, news spread that all of them were to be fined half an hour’s pay. A riot broke out and the workers physically attacked members of the management and all the European officers. The officers opened fire, killing a couple of workers and injuring a few more. Eventually, the police arrived and dispersed the crowd. No cases were filed, and the police and the District Magistrate justified the shooting by the European officers as an act of self-defence.

The Railway Company reacted much like governments today do: it blamed the strike on a foreign hand. The foreign hand that they pointed to was someone called Rogers belonging to the Amalgamated Society of Railwaymen in India and Burma, one of the earliest formed trade unions in the subcontinent. The evidence offered by the Company was simply that the strike broke out on the same day Rogers landed in Madras. It turned out that the workers in Perambur had not even heard of him. In the end, as newspapers such as *The Hindu* and *The Indian Patriot* demanded a public inquiry, and even police officials blamed “upper subordinate officers” for the trouble because of their treatment of workers, the management relaxed the lunch period rules.

Even though I grew up in Madras (at a time when it was still known as Madras and not Chennai), and I used to visit Perambur quite often, I had never heard of this episode of labour militancy. For good reason, it turns out. To the extent that I could find out from Google, what some call the repository of all information in today’s world, the earliest documented account of that strike goes back to a 1990 article in the journal *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* by T. Thankappan and D. Veeraraghavan. I was well out of Madras by the time this article appeared, and thus it is not so much of a surprise that I did not hear about the episode.

The book under review, *The Making of the Madras Working Class*, is by one of those two authors, D. Veeraraghavan, and describes the Perambur strike and many such events as part of a magisterial history of the emergence of the industrial workers in Madras into a working class. The late Professor Veeraraghavan—Dilip to his friends—taught in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, from 1988 until his untimely death a few years ago. This book grew out of his PhD thesis and is a remarkable achievement, providing reams of documentary evidence (clearly the result of countless hours spent in the Tamil Nadu Archives building in Egmore), painting a detailed portrait of the life of workers in colonial Madras, and placing labour history in the broader context of the freedom movement.

Inspired by E.P. Thompson

The origin of its title is the classic work by that extraordinary British historian E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. In that work, Thompson argues: "I am convinced that we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period. This book can be seen as a biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its early manhood. In the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers."

In a similar manner, Veeraraghavan analyses the period from 1918 to 1939 and documents the growth and maturation of the labour movement in Madras. The book follows a chronological order, which also marks off broad trends. The first couple of chapters give the historical background and deal with the early struggles, such as the one in the Railway factories in 1913, which often featured "the sudden outburst of violence and destruction" that Veeraraghavan traces to the lack of "institutional safety valves of grievance settlement procedures". Many of these grievances arose from the poor conditions of living and work. Veeraraghavan's descriptions of these are at times shocking; they are also shocking in that some of the described conditions persist even today.

Rise of unions

The crucial step that marked a shift in the tenor of labour struggles was the formation of unions. Even though the initial impulse for the creation of unions was often humanitarian, and their activities were mostly peaceful and non-confrontational, their "very existence with a leadership independent of the management was considered", by the government and the employers, "a grave threat to law and order and unhindered war production". Veeraraghavan also notes the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which made leaders "realise the revolutionary potentialities of the working class".

The history of the consolidation of the unions is also one of multiple strikes and struggles. Several of these strikes, especially during the early years, were of great significance. For example, the 1919 strike by workers of the Madras Electric Tramways marked the first time that an employer recognised a workers' union and accepted its demand for arbitration. Veeraraghavan notes that these struggles led to the spread of working-class consciousness and a spirit of solidarity among workers; in many instances, the role of the government in defending the capitalists was exposed.

Another chapter describes the relationship between the labour movement and the freedom struggle, especially with the Home Rule movement. Veeraraghavan's history includes numerous mentions of several leaders of the Indian national movement, including Mahatma Gandhi, Annie Besant, Subramanya Siva and V.O. Chidambaram Pillai. These leaders realised, if only in limited ways at times, the importance of workers' struggles, especially since they were waged against British employers. Leaders of the labour movement also emphasised their centrality to the freedom struggle: in the words of one prominent leader, B.P. Wadia, "it is necessary to recognise the labour movement as an integral part of the Indian National Movement.... The latter will not succeed if the Indian working class is not enabled to come into its own."

Divisive factors

Another chapter describes the problems of organising workers who come from different caste backgrounds and the exploitation of these differences by employers, and therefore a series of losses for the labour movement. In 1921, for example, Binny and Co. crushed the union's strike "with the assistance of the state, by promoting communal divisions among the workers". There were also major differences between the more militant workers and the more moderate leadership. For example, workers at the Madras Electric Supply Corporation had formed a union headed by G.S. Arundale, who was "a staunch believer in class collaboration" and "against strikes, conceding the use of the strike weapon only as a last resort". Therefore, when Tramway workers went on strike in January 1920, he stopped the Electric Supply workers from going on a sympathetic strike.

Veeraraghavan then describes the setbacks suffered by the labour movement during the 1922-1933 period. In part, this was a result of the collapse of some of the big strikes of the previous few years. But it was also a period that saw an absence of militant political action even within the freedom movement, after Gandhi called off the Non-cooperation movement following Chauri-Chaura. One of the few exceptions to that trend was the visit of the Simon Commission in 1928 and the heroic actions of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. Several strikes during this period ended in failure although there were some successes.

Rise of the Left

The key development in the post-1933 phase was the emergence of the Left forces, including the communists, as a significant part of the labour movement, and this is the focus of the penultimate chapter. Veeraraghavan describes how various future leaders took their first steps; prominent names included M. Singaravelu, Jeevanandam, and P. Sundarayya (who went on to play "a leading role in the Telangana armed peasant uprising"). Important among them was Singaravelu, who interacted with leaders such as S.A. Dange and M.N. Roy, and started the Labour Kisan Party of Hindustan with a radical programme. The Left group started with an anti-Congress, anti-Gandhi attitude but then moved towards working within the Congress, as members of the Congress Socialist Party. But Veeraraghavan argues that the Congress itself was moving rightward during this period, and that limited the extent to which the Left forces could be effective.

The last substantial chapter deals with the period from 1937 to 1939 when Congress Ministries were in power. In Veeraraghavan's estimation, this was "the most important phase in the development of trade union movement and working-class consciousness in India". An important advantage for the labour movement in Madras was the appointment as Labour Minister of V.V. Giri, who was one of the founders of the All India Railwaymen's Federation, and who subsequently rose to become the President of India in 1969. Giri's appointment "emboldened the workers to revive their militancy", and in August 1937, he addressed the Madras Labour Union, where he declared that the government would not permit employers to harass union activists.

At the same time, that period also "demonstrated the limitations of the labour policy of the Congress Ministry" because the Ministry could not do much when managements of companies denied the just rights of workers. Strikes during this period also underlined the "uphill task workers' unions would have to face when they confronted an employer capable of using, state support, money power, newspapers, [and] unscrupulous tactics of 'divide and rule'".

Veeraraghavan concludes with a short chapter that sums up his findings. According to him, the "inter-War period marked the birth of organised labour movement and its growth and consolidation in the city and its environs. Trade unionism had come to stay, however

much loathed by the employers and the government.” But the movement could not transcend that stage and progress to a revolutionary class consciousness for reasons that had to do with the characteristics of the national liberation movement; the strength of the moderate labour leadership for historical and political reasons; the successful repression by government of leftist factions of unions; and the multiple cleavages of Indian society.

The book is full of interesting insights. Let me mention three of them.

Although economic demands for wage increases and overtime pay, and so on, formed a part of many strikes, Veeraraghavan’s account shows that an equally important driver for workers’ struggles was their desire for dignity. The notion of dignity extended to cover control over their workplace and their right to be represented by an organisation of their choice, that is, a union. These were key areas of struggle because the capitalists “as a class were, even if hesitant, willing to grant the economic demands, but were adamant in their refusal to recognise the union as the representative of the workers. They were also equally stubborn in refusing to accede to workers’ demands for control over their working conditions.”

Another feature of the history laid out by Veeraraghavan is the role played by international and national figures from outside Madras. For example, the first communist group in Madras was organised by a Pathan, Amir Haider Khan. An “ex-seaman turned communist”, Khan had “travelled extensively and come into contact first with the Ghadar Party and then with European communists who arranged to send him to Moscow for training in revolutionary work”. He eventually was deputed to work in Madras by the Communist International, and he organised a small group that included Sundarayya. Through people like Khan and many others, unions drew “on the experiences of unions abroad”.

Also interesting for me was the use of religion in organising workers. Illustrative of this is Veeraraghavan’s description of how the first union was formed in Madras.

Two people who played key roles were Selvapathi Chettiar and Ramanujulu Naidu, both of whom ran shops in Perambur that were patronised by mill workers. Chettiar also managed a religious institution that would conduct religious discourses by guest speakers. Moved by the stories of suffering the mill workers would tell, the two friends started recording the grievances of workers and preparing petitions. Eventually, on Vijayadasami day of 1917, they organised a meeting involving about 30 workers where a Vaishnava preacher gave a discourse on the Mahabharata and explained the need to start a labour union. From thereon, after a series of meetings, the Madras Labour Union was formally set up on April 27, 1918.

Veeeraraghavan’s detailed account of this critical period offers insights similar to those in E.P. Thompson’s book and is an outstanding contribution to labour history. While the book will naturally have a greater appeal to someone familiar with Madras, it should also be of interest to a much larger readership (a nice map of the city from the period under study would have helped).

Like many good books, Veeraraghavan’s treatise makes one want more information about the subjects covered; in my case, I wanted to know more about the many individuals who figure in the book. Fortunately, the book includes a short appendix of 10 pages with brief biographical notes about several of the dramatic personae. More would have been better.

Many of the themes covered in the book remain relevant to our times. Just as there were challenges in those days to organise, today’s multinational corporations with their neoliberal strategies offer great challenges. Veeraraghavan’s insights in the book, and the inspiration offered by his passionate commitment to the cause of the working class, will certainly aid in addressing these challenges.

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Nuclear Energy in India (Penguin, 2012).