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Writer

A leader is one who, out of madness or goodness, volunteers to take upon himself the woe of the people. There are few men so foolish, hence the erratic quality of leadership in the world

How government decrees death by committee

NEWTHINK



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Anyone who has lived in India knows one thing for sure: when government appoints a committee or commission to suggest something or find something out, they don't necessarily want to hear the answers. Committees are a way to avoid decisions, not to make them. Commissions may be used to harass or embarrass people out of power. They are not meant to report the truth or deliver justice.

Even politically-appointed committees are missions to nowhere.

The Sachar committee, which enquired into Muslim backwardness, was more a show pony than the real thing. I can bet my bottom rupee that if Muslims take their due share of economic prosperity, it will be through by own efforts, not the largesse scattered in the name of Sachar.

The only commissions that have delivered bang for the buck are the statutory ones — the various finance and central pay commissions. And these work only because their business is to dole out money — the former to state governments, who then go on to squander most of it, and the latter to government staff, who are largely interested only in their own welfare.

Bottomline: committees and commissions are a waste of taxpayers' money, both literally and metaphorically. On the other hand, look at all the things that get done without committees. The annual budget, a gargantuan

effort, gets done reasonably competently. The monetary policy gets done without fuss. The Reserve Bank does indeed have a panel to advise it, but this panel is kept under wraps — and that's why it works.

Put another way, committees and commissions deliver only when there is political or executive will behind them. When this is missing, they need not be set up at all.

Even in the economic sphere, where committees have at least been treated seriously, the record is average, if not downright poor. The two Tarapore committees on leading the country towards full external account convertibility never really guided policy beyond a point. Nor did the various expenditure or administrative reforms committees.

Which brings me to this year's budget. The main reason why the markets have taken it so badly is its indecisiveness. It has put critical decisions off, and decreed death by committee.

Pranab Mukherjee's budget sends several critical decisions to expert groups when he knows all the answers

Just look at the number of decisions that have been deferred through this ruse. Oil price deregulation? An expert group will advise the government "on a viable and sustainable system of pricing petroleum products." This, when umpteen working groups and high-power panels have already given their reports, including one headed by C Rangarajan, former Reserve Bank governor. How should one reduce fertiliser subsidies? Another committee will no doubt get into this business. How to give loan waivers to farmers who obtained money from private moneylenders? A task force will be set

up. A medium-term fiscal perspective for the government? Mukherjee will wait for the 13th finance commission to pronounce verdict.

It's quite clear that committees are set up because the right decisions are obvious but politically difficult, and not because nobody knows the answers. For example, in the oil sector, the problems and solutions are crystal clear. When global prices can go up and down, prices at home also have to be allowed to go up and down. If you want to hold them steady for whatever reason (subsidise kerosene and cooking gas, and also diesel), you have to compensate the oil companies for the losses. If you don't, they will go under. If you do, you have to provide for the subsidies in the budget. What is so unclear about what decisions need to be taken? Why does anyone need a committee to decide all this?

The same goes for steps to balance the budget. You don't need the 13th finance commission to tell you what to

do. The answers are right there in the economic survey presented to parliament earlier this month. The boffins who wrote the survey have all the answers. What they cannot do is handle the political fallout of cutting food subsidies or raiding fertiliser prices.

In the socio-economic sphere, you don't need a Sachar to tell you Muslims do not have a good enough share of national wealth and resources. Even without him you could have helped Muslims by focusing developmental efforts on the poorest districts, not anything else. To find a poor Muslim, you need to find where the poor live, not where Muslims live. Does it need Sachar to give us this wisdom? By making ordinary economic development sound like a favour to Muslims, the Sachar committee may have done lasting damage to inter-community relations.

It's high time we put committees out of commission.

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FASHIONABLY INSENSITIVE

Laura Ceresna, Nishant Ratnakar



Close to 1,200 garment manufacturing units in Bangalore employ nearly five lakh workers, 80% of whom are women. Yet, after 40 years of its existence, the worker still has to fight for her rights and dignity, finds Malvika Tegta



It's easy to spot a garment factory worker on an early morning in the railway station at Yeshwantapur or Nelamangala or Yelahanka. It's the unmistakable sense of urgency in her step that's become a way of life. Stop her in her tracks and ask, she will confirm your guess.

It's almost 8.30 am and she has to make it to her factory gate by nine. Just two hours ago, hundreds like her have poured onto the city's railway platforms after a long journey, from Anantapura in Andhra Pradesh, or Mandya, Hosur, Srirangapatna, Maddur or Tumkur in the State — some 120 km away, others 60. A majority are women, who have woken up at three or four in the morning, have cooked break-

Advantage meant greater productivity and hence higher targets that brought with it all manner of mental harassment

fast and then taken off to catch a train to Bangalore. They get off in huge groups, brush their teeth, perch on the steps, eat breakfast, comb their hair and head to work to the garment factories nearby. Of the average Rs3,000 they earn a month, a third is consumed by this daily to and fro alone. They make up for a fourth of the industry workforce: semi skilled or skilled. If they form the migrant and local workforce residing close to factories (migrants making up an approximate 50% of the industry workforce), then it is the rent that claims the amount.

Taken together, they number 5 lakh and work in the 1,200-odd garment units in and around the city, concentrated in areas like Peenya, Kamakshipalya, KGF, Kanakapura, Bommanahalli, Mysore road, Yelahanka, Doddaballapur, Tumkur, Ramanagara and Byappanahalli.

Once past the factory gates and into the halls of opportunity, a batch of workers gets down to assuming their inanimate role in tight clockwork that is a production batch. One specialises in making collars, the other sleeves, and so on, to meet often unrealistically demanding targets like 100-120 shirts an hour (the rate depending on the garment). Standardised interiors — thanks to brands that demand compliance to international standards — may suggest such a

physical work environment, but workers say otherwise. "We feel so pressurised with the targets that we refrain from drinking water so that we don't have to waste two minutes going to the rest room. We eat our food in a hurry and get back to work," says Yamuna, a tailor, who's been working in the sector for the past 20 years. And tailors, say industry body experts, are in high demand and fairly indispensable. But even she admits that non-completion of targets means working overtime, for which she can't always be sure of being paid. Add to this the fact that there is little or no job security, as D Nagarathamma found out after being fired for missing out a number on a shirt.

For a four-decade-old industry that is one of the biggest employers in the State, with an annual turnover running into thousands of crores, it's ironic that it has a remarkably skewed balance of power — its workers are in the most preliminary stages of organisation.

While it was really the end of the Multi Fibre Agreement in 2005, which left industries fend-

ing for a share of a global demand based on cost advantage, it was the worker who was to become Atlas in the scheme of things to come. For a highly labour-intensive industry, advantage meant greater productivity and hence higher targets that brought with it all manner of mental harassment. Sure, post the year 2000, brands like Wal-Mart, Nike, Marks & Spencer, Gap, Matalan, refused to buy from a unit employing child labour or those that function in sweatshop-like conditions. "But if you lift the lid on the garment manufacturing sector in Karnataka, it is still a very violent industry," says Gopinath K Parakuni, general secretary, Cividip-India, Bangalore, a non-profit organisation rallying for worker's rights and corporate accountability.

Without proper organisation and awareness of rights that characterises workers in this sector, the bargaining power more or less rests with the management. And

workers say the management tries its best to keep it that way.

A look at the composition of the workforce and the low level of unionisation — about 2% — is easy to understand. This is a sector in which women form 80% of the workforce. They are mainly in the age group of 20-25 and are first-generation workers who have "jumped from field to factory". A majority are primary wage earners of their households. "The women stay away from unions for fear of being seen as anti-establishment," says Mohan, a researcher with New Trade Union Initiative, of which the Garments and Textile Workers' Union (Gatwu) is a part. Rukmini is the perfect example. Two years ago, when she joined Gatwu as general secretary, she was suspended from

work. So she could not propagate workers' rights in her factory anymore. She, however, continues to get her monthly salary from the company.

Yamuna's story is another such. In 2002, when her previous company's management "had got the DA amount from the government but was not paying it to the workers", she organised the others — one of the first organised initiatives — to ask for their due. That was after she got involved with NGOs and became aware of her rights. "There was a revolt within me and I started educating other people as well. Soon, the management became wary of me and started questioning me," she says.

In another company, she started persuading people to pool in money

to be deposited in a bank so they could draw from the pool in case of an emergency. "The manager dissuaded us, saying they would make a loan available, if needed." But when she did take a loan from the management, they pushed up her production targets. "For ten days, I did not have food and water. I got TB. One day, when I could not meet my target, the HRD called for me on the PA system. I told them 'don't torture me, I will give your money back', but they did not listen. When I argued, the management called the security and threw me out," she says.

Verbal harassment at work for not meeting targets is the norm and sexually loaded comments are tools that supervisors — majority of them males — use as a vulgar display of power. Says Mallika:

"Supervisors look down on us as if we don't do an honest day's work. They treat us like dirt." When her friend, D Nagarathamma, once revolted and complained to the general manager, he assigned a security guard to keep track of her every move. "He lodged a complaint against Mallika and me in the police station saying we were obstructing work. We were detained for three hours in the manager's office. They were asking us to promise never to represent the workers again. Only then would we be allowed to go," she says. When the two did not return from meeting the manager, their friend, Madina Taj, and others went to enquire after them. "By then, the management announced to the 2,000 workers at the factory that the union leader was asking for Rs50,000 as bribe to bury the workers' issues. The workers turned against us and the company issued suspension orders against us," says Madina.

Cases of sexual harassment, both overt and insidious, are also rampant says Gatwu chief Jayaram KR, who has known the industry since 1979, when he started as a child labourer in one of the factories. He introduces us to Geetha, who had filed a sexual harassment case in the High Court and won, re-

ceiving a compensation of Rs60,000 from the management. "I was asked by the manager to give into his demand or leave," she says. She refused and was illegally re-trenched. "Sometimes, when you don't please them, they put higher targets on you, and don't give you leave off work. With children to take care of, you can't even kill yourself," she says. Parakuni says that it's not uncommon for pregnant women to be assigned jobs that require them to stand all day, like ironing, for example.

A big daily shutting population is also a cause for low unionisation. They wake up every morning at four, leave work at 6.30 pm, reach home at nine at night, and then there is barely enough time to cook and sleep by 11 pm and it's back to work the next day. There isn't time

Verbal harassment, involving sexually loaded comments, are tools that supervisors use as a vulgar display of power

for much else. "They can't afford to eat nutritious food and work in high stress situations. The rate of TB among the workers is very high," says Jayaram.

Some causes of the workers' plight are systemic, some others, of their own making. Sometimes job hopefuls are so eager to get work that they use their sibling's documents and start working in their name. If the worker gets married and the parents approach the factory to claim compensation, they don't get it because they are not even aware that their daughter was working under someone else's name. Blame it on the lack of initiative or the lack of opportunities for women, Jayaram says that in his 30-year-odd career he hasn't known a lot of women who have sought promotion. Take Shakuntala, for instance, who has been working in the industry for 30 years and still makes Rs3,200 per month.

There's hope after every election that capitalises on their numbers. But the figures often don't translate into security. Only lately did a one-and-a-half-year long campaign manage to push the government to increase minimum wage (see box) in March, although two years late. Almost four months gone, and implementation is yet to come. The Atlas, however, isn't ready to shrug.



RALLYING FOR SUPPORT: (From left) Madina Taj, Mallika, D Nagarathamma and Yamuna at a garment factory workers' meeting, near Mysore Road

THE WAGE ISSUE

On March 2, 2009, a government notification increased basic minimum wage for different categories of garment workers, though the unions are not happy with the amount of hike. A skilled tailor in Bangalore will now get a minimum wage of about Rs128 a day (including DA), as against the present Rs108 a day. But, even after revision, wages of workers in Bangalore remain lower than their counterparts in places like Delhi and Mumbai.

Once the wage increase is published in the gazette, as it has, it is not reversible. History has been witness to the fact that whenever there are minimum board wage revisions, the managements go to the court to stay it. Currently, they have been lobbying with the government to hold the wage hike, citing recession. While recession has hit the industry, experts assess that Bangalore has received a large share of world demand that China lost due to its strengthening currency. A worker confirmed that factories are running on full steam, running shifts throughout the week. Industry voices say that they are keeping people employed just to retain them, in anticipation of an increase in demand in the US and EU around Christmas.