



CASUAL LABOUR OF KANPUR : THEIR LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS (1988). By K. G. Agrawal. National Labour Institute, New Delhi. Pp. 84.

THE BOOK under review¹ deals with one of the most neglected field of labour law. Such studies are very much needed in order to understand the problems of casual labour and ameliorate their living and working conditions. The present work is an empirical study conducted with the help of an interview schedule and some observations. The total number of casual workers interviewed were 135. It is mentioned that there are more than 15000 casual labourers in urban (city) area alone.² Looking at these figures, it is not wrong to conclude that the study has been conducted with an inadequate number of casual workers. A minimum of 500 casual workers would perhaps have been an adequate number where more than 15000 workers are available.

Chapter I states that casual labour is generally identified with the labour that is engaged to meet temporary labour requirements due to pressure of work or absenteeism.³ It is aptly pointed out in the introduction that employers prefer such labour in order to circumvent various provisions of law that confer benefits to permanent or regular labour. Such benefits are denied to casual labour who are employed on temporary basis. Perhaps the kind of economy we have developed in India supports the existence and increase of casual labour for the benefit of entrepreneurs whether in the public or private sector. It is for this reason that a very systematic, analytical and practical study is imperative in the field of casual labour. This reviewer feels that the present study has not come upto the mark even though it has been conducted by the National Institute of Labour which has sufficient resources at its disposal.

The urgency of such a study on unorganised labour particularly casual labour lies in the fact that this constitutes a major part of the labour force in India next only to the agriculture labour. These workers are not covered under any industrial, labour or commercial legislation. On them is thrust the work which generally regular and permanent workers refuse to do. Many of those who might be employed for longer duration are at the mercy of the employers, management or the contractors who engage them.⁴

Chapter II of the book deals with the profile of the city of Kanpur, describing briefly its history, population structure and labour force of various categories. This has not been presented in an impressive way and it only

1. K.G. Agrawal, *Casual Labour of Kanpur : Their Living and Working Conditions* (1988).

2. *Id.* at 73.

3. *Id.* at 1.

4. *Id.* at 3.



looks like a mediocre writing. Chapter III sets out sources of data collected for purposes of the study. The 135 casual workers interviewed are basically of two types, *viz.*, (i) those employed on regular basis, *e.g.*, in railways, PWD, MES and textile mills, and (ii) those described to be unattached and having to find employment on day to day basis. In the first category there were 82 workers wrongly printed as 84.⁵ of these 16 were employed in PWD, 17 in Railways, 14 in MES and 35 in textile mills at Kanpur. In the second category 53 workers seeking employment on day to day basis were interviewed. The chapter also contains very scanty and casual observations about PWD, NES, railway workers, textile mills casual labour and unattached casual labour.

The data was collected from 135 casual labourers out of which 12.6 per cent were female workers. In all 114 questions were asked in the interview schedule and complete analysis of the data and results have been presented in chapter IV of this book. Ninety tables have been analysed pertaining to the living, working conditions, wage and economic situation, migration pattern, family and social life, aspirations and apprehensions of the workers, health and medical care, *etc.* The data have been analysed according to the place of employment. As already stated the sample is too small to be relied on for the purposes of such a study. Even then it may act as a rough guide for future studies to be done in this area. The analysis of the data is very casual and its interpretation not microscopic as it fails to reveal the actual nature and magnitude of the problems of casual labour at Kanpur.

Chapter V gives in brief the conclusions of the study which may be useful to conduct a comprehensive, scientific, analytical, and practical study about casual labour in future. Some of its conclusions are very startling. *E.g.*, it is found that over 40 per cent of the casual labour belong to the upper castes and 31 per cent to the scheduled castes and less than 14 per cent to the backward classes. Whereas prior to independence in India most of the mill and farm hands belonged to the scheduled castes and backward classes.⁶ This shows what a revolutionary social change has come after India became a Republic and made the policy of reservation of jobs for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

From the study emerges the fact that only a few casual labourers keep their families with them in Kanpur. It is stated that this is due to poverty, lack of housing facilities and possession of agricultural land back home in a village.⁷ It is also found that quite a few casual workers migrate from villages to Kanpur for finding such work. The two major reasons for this are poverty and unemployment.⁸ It is also interesting to note the finding

5. *Id.* at 9.

6. *Id.* at 74.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Id.* at 75.



that very few casual labour are brought to the city of Kanpur by the contractors. Most of them come on their own in search of a job.⁹ Mostly they are not interested in joining unions and it is only in textile mills that they have done so.¹⁰ The disturbing fact emerges that the study has found that about 70 per cent of casual labour have no hope of gaining permanent employment.¹¹ It states that there is a direct relation between unemployment and increase in the magnitude of casual labour in India.¹² Finally it notes that the wage levels of unskilled labour depends upon the bargaining capacity of trade unions.

To conclude it may be said that though the study gives some important findings, it is not very analytical, microscopic and lacks indepth analysis. It may be relevant only for Kanpur and at the most may be described as a pilot study which may lead to a proper study of the casual labour in India. Perhaps the National Labour Institute, New Delhi, with the help of the Ministry of Labour, Government of India may sponsor such a study under the leadership of some competent people in the field.

*Harish Chander**

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Id.* at 76.

12. *Id.* at 4.

*B.A.(Hons.), M.A. (Delhi), Academic Postgraduate Diploma in Law (Lond.), LL.M. (Lond.), Ph.D. (Delhi), Reader in Law, Law Centre II, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi.