

## EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP IN THE BUILDING INDUSTRY

*The paper seeks to examine the nature of employment relationship in the building industry on the basis of survey data for the Delhi area. The authors conclude that the peculiar characteristics of the system of employment relationship in the industry are mainly responsible for the prevalence of low wages, bad working conditions, high rate of job dissatisfaction, informal grievance procedure, and workers' lack of permanent attachment to the industry.*

**T**HIS paper examines the nature of employment relationship in the building industry on the hypothesis that it is determined by the simultaneous operation of a number of observable variables among which the more important are : (i) size of firms, (ii) technology, (iii) characteristics of product market, (iv) behaviour of labour supply in the factor market, (v) the structure of trade unionism, (vi) operation of government laws, and (vii) job relationships and work values. The analysis will be descriptive with illustrations from the survey data on building workers in the Delhi area conducted in the first quarter of 1968.<sup>1</sup> It may be noted that the scope of the survey was limited to the organised sector only and it excluded private housing.

### DETERMINANTS OF EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

#### SIZE OF FIRMS

The size of a firm may be measured in three ways : (i) workers employed, (ii) capital employed, and (iii) output. The first is the most commonly used yardstick although it is realised that with advanc-

Dr. C. K. Johri is Associate Director and Dr. S. M. Pandey is Research Officer at the Sh. Ram Centre for Industrial Relations, New Delhi.

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ing technology it has become less and less reliable. It is generally observed that large firms tend to employ more capital per worker than small firms. Thus, the economies of scale are more fully reaped when a firm grows not only by the number of workers employed but by raising the capital-to-labour ratio. This in turn is reflected, under normal conditions, in its higher turnover, *i.e.*, output. Accordingly, it follows that in the generality of cases, a larger firm will have more workers as well as more capital and consequently produce more goods and services. Ideally, therefore, output should provide a satisfactory measure of size but does not for two reasons. Because of heterogeneity output data are usually available in value terms which must be deflated in real terms with all the attendant complications of selecting a base period appropriate deflators and adjusting for changes in quality. Moreover, in the building industry a large part of the output is outside the market nexus. Most of the government buildings are not marketable and so it is impossible to determine their value. It is, undoubtedly, possible to know their cost of "production" but that can at least be an approximation of their true value and cannot be readily put on a comparable basis with private buildings. In addition, every year the building industry carries out minor and major repairs and demolitions of old structures. Estimation of these outputs bristles with difficulties.

There are similar difficulties of measuring the size of a firm by capital employed. These are present in any industry but in the building industry there are additional problems. First, an average firm does not have a home with investment in fixed capital. Most of the houses of employers also serve as offices of the firms concerned. Second, most of the capital employed is in the category of working capital and a major part of it is provided by the ultimate owner of the building. Thus, the firm handling the construction job may have very little capital of its own in relation to its annual turnover.

In view of these difficulties there is no option to using workers employed as the measure of size. This too, however, is not free from ambiguities. In perennial industries the measure used is an average of actual attendance adjusted for the number of working days. In seasonal industries there is no presumption that a man is fully employed. Hence, there should be a measure of partial employment which for the same firm may vary from one site to another. Since firms do

not maintain musters of workers it is very difficult to calculate how long a worker has worked with a firm. It is, therefore, understood that what is available is a crude indicator rather than a measure of the size of a firm. The indicator used in this paper is the average number of workers employed (see Table I). Table I brings out the preponderance of small firms in the industry. It is significant that as compared to the data reported by the Labour Bureau for 1953, there is virtually no change in 1968 as disclosed by our survey.

Two questions arise in this connection. Why does the size of firms remain small? How does the smallness of firms affect employment relationship?

The average size of firms in the building industry remains small mainly because of two reasons. First, the nature of work does not require elaborate organisation of specialised skills and talents.<sup>2</sup> The organisational inputs are essentially supervisory at an elementary level. Once work starts workers and mistris trained in traditional skills establish a natural rhythm of material flow and brick laying and other jobs requiring minimum supervision. However, more elaborate constructions involving multi-storeyed buildings and use of modern technology would need bigger organisations and greater supervisory skills. It follows that the smallness of firms is a function of the technology used and the scale and complexity of building work. Since only a small part of the total construction work at any time in this country requires modern skills and technology there is no need for larger organisations. The second reason is that this industry is generally free from restrictive monopoly practices. There is freedom of entry and exit and enough competition to keep the size small. It needs a combination of large resources, command over superior technology, some rare skills and political power to create a monopoly, but none of these is present in significant measure in the building industry.

Firms of small size are characterised by "personal approach" informal atmosphere, close surveillance, and absence of union influence. The prevalence of "personal approach" is a common feature of small sized firms in India as well as in developed countries like the U.S.A. In a study prepared at the Princeton University it is reported :<sup>3</sup>

The personal approach is, then, a combination of an informal



"family" plant atmosphere, human relations and personal sources, which may include anything from posting bail for an employee to counselling on marital problems. In each plant it is different and to each worker and each employer it is something different. Yet where it exists, it is invaluable. The technique helps to keep the workers happy and attached to the plant.

It is not clear for whom the personal approach was found to be invaluable. In the Delhi survey it was found that workers although complained a lot did not take recourse to work-stoppages. Strikes are rare in the building industry. But the personal relationship is of near-bondage and an extension of the feudal relationship in villages from which acute poverty pushed the workers out. As shall be explained later, trade unionism has not eased but rather accentuated the feudal personal relationship in the building industry.

#### TECHNOLOGY

The technology used in building industry relies heavily on unskilled labour. It is, in India, pre-eminently a labour intensive industry. Most technological advancements in the more developed countries, although known and sometimes even used on massive structures, are not employed by the industry. The relatively simpler technological developments, such as concrete mixers, power cranes, reinforced concrete, and prefabricated structures have made their way with bigger contractors in the main cities but are largely shunned by most builders. Probably the main reason is that labour is still so cheap that there is no real incentive to look for newer technology. Moreover, to the builder there is no assurance that costs will be cut and he may not be inclined to pay more just for elegance and modern finish.

The government too has been encouraging the adoption of labour saving methods. It has recognised that the industry employs large number of unskilled workers drawn from rural areas who might not be wanted if newer methods of construction are adopted. The characteristics of labour force, as revealed by the survey, are shown in Table 2. It shows that 90 per cent workers are rural in origin and about 63 per cent are wholly illiterate. Table 3 shows that there exists a

positive relationship between skill and literacy. As many as 75 per cent unskilled workers are illiterate while among the skilled men this proportion is only 36 per cent. It is evident that the general lack of literacy and education among workers cannot but hamper the adoption of new techniques by the industry. These on the other hand reinforce traditional technology no less than traditional attitudes between employers and workers. An illiterate and unskilled worker is prone to lean much more upon the bread-giver than on a trade union or a government agency for help. A technology requiring gang labour makes it easier to employ husband and wife and other relatives, and bind them to a contractor through strangulating ties of job, loans, advances, and personal threats.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF PRODUCT MARKET

A characteristic feature of the product market is the physical immobility of the product.<sup>4</sup> This is true even in those cases where prefabricated parts are used because these are bulky and the cost of transporting them is high. It, therefore, imposes a practical limitation upon the geographical area that can be served by a firm. As a result, firms and their product exist together in all population centres. Only large contracting firms have been able to transcend geographical limitation to a substantial extent, more so in the field of industrial construction and large office buildings.

The effect of this characteristic on the employment relationship is indirect. Since demand for labour is derived from that of the final product the labour market tends to be geographically fragmented. The extent of employment and the level of earnings may be expected to show significant geographical differentials. Employment relationship may also develop local traditions and usages. Moreover, depending upon the structure of building activity the composition of workforce may also vary. Unfortunately there are insufficient data on this industry at the national level to verify the relationships postulated above. Much empirical research is needed to determine how far these hypotheses are true in practice.

#### BEHAVIOUR OF LABOUR SUPPLY IN THE FACTOR MARKET

The special characteristics of the building industry, some of them

mentioned above, have necessitated a recruitment system that is different from other industries. The main concern for a contractor is to obtain contracts and execute them. In order to complete his work he must either retain a sizable number of workers or have them available at short notice. However, since work on a particular work-site is only for a limited period of time, and the contractor may not be able to shift the entire workforce engaged on one work-site to the other immediately after the construction work is over, he wants them to commit themselves to work for him whenever required. This has given rise to the system of recruiting semi-skilled and unskilled workers through intermediaries, mainly the jamadars.<sup>5</sup> The jamadars, who may or may not be under direct employment of the contractors, are personally known to them and keep information about the requirements of the contractors from time to time. They hire the required number of workers, retain them during the period of contract, and again bring them back to the same contractor when he acquires a new contract, or take them to other contractors. They give *peshgi* (advance payment) to bind workers to them. Once a worker accepts *peshgi*, he is under an obligation to continue with that jamadar. Contractors find this system very convenient. Instead of advancing money to hundreds of individual workers, they give the same to a few jamadars who are personally responsible for its recovery. The chances of workers going away with the advanced money are very rare because they are personally known to the jamadars and, in most of the cases, come from the same villages to which the latter belong.<sup>6</sup> The contractors, thus, find jamadars as the guarantors of their money, the workers' employment, and a continuing link between them.

The recruitment practices with regard to skilled workers are of entirely different character. They are more educated and more informed about job opportunities and conveniently find out jobs for themselves. Sometimes, they are directly approached by the contractors' men and offered slightly higher wages than what they were getting from their previous employers. Many contractors in the course of interviews disapproved of this practice on the ground that the desertion of skilled workers often upset their building schedules. In these circumstances they had to pay them high wages as were offered by other contractors. This complaint of contractors forcefully brings out the truth in the contention that the market, if reason-



ably efficient, can allocate resources among competing ends on the basis of price mechanism. From the point of view of workers its effectiveness is crucially dependent upon the relative scarcity of supply in relation to demand. This explains the prevalence of restrictive practices of unions in building industry in industrialised countries, particularly in the U.S.A. In India similar results are obtained for skilled workers by the operation of market forces. The important difference between a unionised market and a nonunionised one, however, is in the stability of earnings. In the former it is likely to be more stable while in the latter sporadic and even transitory depending upon the strength of excess demand for labour.

The analysis of recruitment system in the preceding paragraphs is clearly supported by the data collected by us. As is revealed by Table 4, only 24 per cent semi-skilled workers and 19 per cent unskilled workers stated to have got the information about their present jobs directly. The proportion of skilled workers getting the information about their jobs on their own is much higher (36 per cent). Similarly, 23 per cent skilled workers received information about jobs directly from the contractors; the proportions of semi-skilled and unskilled workers similarly informed are, however, much lower, *i.e.*, 13 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. On the other hand, a much larger proportion of semi-skilled (43 per cent) and unskilled workers (56 per cent) than skilled workers (10 per cent) got employment information from mistris or jamadars.

A more or less similar pattern is revealed of the persons who actually helped workers in getting jobs. As many as 41 per cent skilled as compared with only 25 per cent semi-skilled and 15 per cent unskilled workers got their jobs on their own. Similarly, 25 per cent skilled workers as compared with only 11 per cent semi-skilled and 6 per cent unskilled workers got employment directly through the contractors. On the other hand, only 11 per cent skilled as compared with as many as 46 per cent semi-skilled and 65 per cent unskilled workers secured employment through mistris or jamadars. It is significant to note that none of the 713 workers interviewed stated to have received any help from the employment exchanges. This suggests that these exchanges do not enjoy the confidence of either the contractors or the workers.

The existing system of recruiting workers through intermediaries

has been a characteristic feature of early stages of industrialisation particularly in industries providing seasonal employments. Morris<sup>7</sup> has suggested that the middlemen or jobbers were intended to play the role of middle management cadre in India in the early phase of industrialisation. He says,

Had they not been used to select and manage the work-force, albeit in a subordinate capacity, it would have been necessary to employ other more expensive and perhaps no more efficient supervisory staff to perform the same functions. Given the fact that for a long while the technology of the industry was relatively simple, the products quite coarse and work-force skills quite elementary, no one more sophisticated than the jobber was required.

With the rapid industrialisation, requiring the use of more advanced technology and skilled personnel, the use of labour contractors or intermediaries has tended to decline in most industries in India. However, they still occupy a crucial position in the building industry. The jamadar often performs a variety of functions in addition to recruiting and transporting workers. Besides the convenience of contractors and temporary nature of work, as discussed above, there are several other social factors that have nurtured the system of recruitment through jamadars. The data presented in Table 5 show that as many as 70 per cent of the workers are pushed to city due to "no work at home" (24 per cent) and "insufficient income at home or indebtedness" (46 per cent). It may also be noted that 67 per cent workers are low caste Hindus who all over the country are far more vulnerable than any other section of the society. They comprise a majority of landless workers and bear the greatest burden of indebtedness and penury. Ordinarily their need for employment is so great that even conditions of serfdom in industry with its many inequities are accepted.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF TRADE UNIONISM

An overwhelming majority of the building workers (82 per cent) are not organised.<sup>8</sup> The proportion of union members is higher among skilled (24 per cent) than among either semi-skilled (21 per cent) or unskilled (14 per cent) workers. In fact, as many as 64 per



cent workers are not aware of the existence of any union. The membership participation in union activities is also very low. Although 59 per cent of the members stated that they paid union dues regularly only 11 per cent attended union meetings generally, 26 per cent voted in last union elections, and only 8 per cent worked for enrolling new members.

The two most important reasons for lack of union organisation are their cultural backwardness and absence of active leadership emerging from the rank-and-file members. Another possible explanation arising from the special features of the industry is the peculiar perception of the role of union among the building workers. Thus, if the husband is a union member, the wife need not necessarily enroll herself. Similarly, if the gang leader is the member of a union, the other members of the gang do not feel any need to do so. Besides, the shifting nature of the workforce makes it difficult for unions to collect union dues and maintain rapport with the members. Lastly, the workers are more concerned with the continuity of their employment and earnings than with improving upon the working and living conditions through the instrumentality of trade unions which are hardly in a position to do so.

The splits caused by intra-union rivalries based on political, ideological, and personal factors have given rise to a number of weak and rival unions. This characterises the trade union movement in public as well as private sector. But the most peculiar feature is that the jamadar, who plays the key role in recruiting the bulk of labour and is identified as the man who occasionally makes unauthorised deductions from wages, also plays a crucial role in collecting union dues from them. He generally works as the agent of union and deducts membership fee from the workers' wages. It would be most surprising if the two images did not overlap.

#### OPERATION OF GOVERNMENT LAWS

The nature of employment relationships in an industry is, to a great extent, shaped by existing protective laws and regulations. The building workers in India do not enjoy the benefits of most of the labour laws which are applicable to the workers employed in other industries. The only labour laws applicable to the building industry are :

Workmen's Compensation Act, Industrial Disputes Act, Minimum Wages Act, and Payment of Wages Act. However the administrative machinery responsible for the enforcement of these enactments is too ineffective to protect the working conditions, health, safety, and wages of workers. The procedure for getting compensation for injuries is time- and money-consuming and the building workers, who shift from place to place in quick succession, hardly find it fruitful going through it. The minimum wages are revised under the Minimum Wages after every five years. Under inflationary conditions this is undoubtedly too long a period for wage-revisions. As a result, the real wages of the building workers have generally declined during 1951-1967. The Payment of Wages Act is all but a dead letter so far as the building workers in Delhi are concerned, there being no proper machinery established to look after its enforcement. The workers, thus, face many problems with regard to the payment of their wages. The general practice is to pay the unskilled and semi-skilled workers through the jamadars. As many as 49 per cent semi-skilled and 67 per cent unskilled workers are paid through them. As may be expected, this has given rise to many malpractices such as occasional part payment or non-payment of wages.

Although there is no legislation to ensure minimum welfare facilities of safety, health, and living to the building workers, this gap is partly filled by the model rules for the labour framed by the CPWD and other government sponsoring agencies. These rules provide for safety, first aid, drinking water, latrines, urinals, shelters, creches and canteens, etc., which in theory are obligatory on the part of the contractors. No such rules, however, exist for workers engaged on private sector building activities. The CPWD contractors also may not abide by the model rules; indeed many instances of violations were noted during the survey. The ultimate step that the sponsoring agencies can take against the erring contractor is to cancel his name from the approved list which would make him unfit in the future for undertaking any public sector project. This, however, is rarely done in practice.

#### **JOB RELATIONSHIPS**

The semi-skilled and unskilled workers on work-sites are supplied

and controlled by one or more jamadars. The work engineer of the firm generally lays down the work specifications and the task of completing the work is assigned to the mistry, who, in turn, assume the role of supervisors. In some cases, the contractors have their own work supervisors. A mistry is supposed to take work from the workers working under him and, in case he is not satisfied, he may request the work engineer or the contractor for substitutes. Thus, mistry report to the work engineer while semi-skilled and unskilled workers report to the mistry, jamadar, or head jamadar, or labour-in-charge of the company through their respective jamadars; whereas other highly skilled and technical workers report either to the work engineer or directly to the contractor or sub-contractor as the case may be.

This kind of relationship among the workers, mistry, jamadars and contractors affects the work-performance as well as workers' attitude towards their jobs. The data presented in Table 6 give an overall picture of the state of job relations, as viewed by the respondents themselves. The responses given by the workers may be interpreted to mean that generally they maintain good relations with mistry, jamadar, contractor, and fellow workers. But a closer look at the data would indicate that the best relationship exists only among workers. As many as 83 per cent respondents said their relations with other workers were good, 15 per cent as indifferent, and just one per cent each as bad and as "no response". There is no ambiguity on workers' reactions on this score, but in respect of mistry, contractors, and jamadars there are evidently attitudinal blocks that have interfered with free expression. How else does one explain the high proportion of ambiguous response under "indifferent" or "no response"? If these two are added it would seem that 36 per cent have indifferent relationship with jamadars, the same proportion with contractors, and 28 per cent with mistry. These statistics might be construed to mean that workers are equally indifferent towards both contractors and jamadars. But this is a strange reaction considering that with the former they have hardly any contact while with the latter it is close. We are inclined to take the view that with contractors 36 per cent workers may be genuinely indifferent while with jamadars it is a case of evasion which probably conceals more than reveals.

It is, however, possible that workers' good relations with jamadars are due to their satisfactory grievance handling reputation. Table 7



shows workers' perception of the attitudes of the first person to whom the complaint is made. According to this table jamadars are ranked as sympathetic by 86 per cent respondents. Only two per cent consider them as unsympathetic while 12 per cent are indifferent. It may be noted that a majority of unskilled workers make their first complaint to the jamadars (see Table 8). As many as 73 per cent unskilled workers approach the jamadars first. The semi-skilled and skilled workers follow in the same order. For the entire sample the jamadar is the first step in the informal grievance procedure that exists on most building sites for 53 per cent workers, contractor for 27 per cent, and mistr for 9 per cent. The remaining approach "other persons" and an insignificant proportion the union leader. The contractor usually acts as the second stage in grievance handling but in a majority of cases the complaint is satisfactorily resolved at the first stage itself.

It is evident that in the paternalistic style of management in the building industry the jamadar plays the key role. He does ensure that by and large the workforce is reasonably contented with their lot and subserve the economic needs of the contractors. There is no presumption that workers accept either wages or working conditions as satisfactory. Far from it; and yet they do not allow their discontent to affect discipline at the work-site or erupt into frequent outbursts. One possible explanation is that the entire family works and lives together. Indeed many workers come to work and stay together and share their joys and sufferings in slums much as they would do in villages. Despite acute economic hardship and material discomfort the fact that they live and function as a community probably helps them to overcome and even anticipate suffering. While this style of work and living functions to the economic advantage of contractors and jamadars in so far as it reduces the strain of adjustment to city life it has also handicapped the growth of trade unions as well as the germination of higher aspirations for themselves and their children. The system has created a vicious circle to keep the illiterate rural people backward and undemanding and seek more from each other rather than from their employers and the government. They have remained unaware of the possibilities of converting their strength in community solidarity into a modern organisation capable of initiative and concerted action. Until they reach this stage of development

the jamadar must remain their creditor, helper, supervisor and tormentor.

## THE OUTCOME OF EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS SYSTEM

The principal outcome of the employment relations system can be easily anticipated. In the negative sense it is the general absence of formal rules and procedures and written agreements between employers and workers on their respective rights and responsibilities. Where formal rules exist, they are often ignored or violated largely due to absence of sanctions behind them. The rules framed by the government are never enough—not even an army of inspectors can enforce them. This is true of not just the building industry but many small-scale industries as well that are not properly unionised. In the absence of popular sanctions from a strong union statutory obligations are not enforced and the small inspectorate has too many other more compelling responsibilities to bother about infractions of law in the numerous establishments scattered all over the city. More concretely, the outcome is briefly described in respect of (i) working conditions, (ii) wages, (iii) workers' satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with their jobs, and (iv) their proneness to leave the industry.

### WORKING CONDITIONS

The working and living conditions of building workers are appalling. Workers live in sub-human dwellings and work in extremely poor conditions. Even minimum necessary facilities of health and sanitation are not provided to them. The model rules of the CPWD and other government sponsoring agencies require the contractors to provide their workers with suitable shelter for rest and meals, supply of wholesome drinking water, reasonable sanitary facilities, residential accommodation, facilities for obtaining food or cooked meals, reasonable washing and bathing facilities and special facilities for women employees. The research team spent considerable time in observing the working and living conditions of workers on the work-sites covered by the survey and found that the above rules were rarely adhered to by the contractors.

The rule that was most violated was with regard to creches which

were absent on all the work-sites visited by the researchers. One could often see little undernourished children crawling around in dust and mud or playing near heaps of crushed stones, brick stackings, or stacks of iron bars, or trailing behind their working mothers. Another rule that appeared to be generally ignored by the contractors was the provision for shelter.

Although the rules provide for separate washing and bathing facilities for men and women, this is hardly done in practice. Besides, the water taps which are used for drawing water for construction purposes are also used by workers for washing and bathing. On many work-sites, the same water taps were found to be used for drinking purpose also. Many of these taps were in extremely unhygienic conditions. Similarly, latrines and urinals were found neglected on big and small work-sites alike. A few latrines were found near some of the work-sites, but were kept in very dirty conditions for want of cleanliness. The rules also provide that the contractors should provide their workers with huts with the minimum height of 7' and floor area at the rate of 30 sq. ft for each of the family members of the workers living with them. Adjacent cooking place with an area of 6' x 5' should also be provided for each family. However, like other rules, this rule too appears to be neglected by the contractors. A majority of workers live in thatched huts or have shift tents made by themselves.

#### WAGES

The building workers, particularly the semi-skilled and unskilled workers, usually get low wages. In fact, as many as 88 per cent unskilled workers get less than 3 rupees per day; 94 per cent semi-skilled workers get less than 5 rupees, whereas 77 per cent skilled workers obtain a daily wage rate of 5 rupees or more. The data presented in Table 9 reveal that while the proportion of skilled workers rises in the relatively higher income brackets, that of semi-skilled and unskilled workers declines. It also shows that the proportion of workers who work for more than 24 days in a month also rises in the relatively higher income brackets. Most of them are of course skilled workers.

Due to low wage rates and uncertainty of work availability, building workers have to supplement their earnings with loans. As is



shown in Table 10, 60 per cent skilled, 82 per cent semi-skilled, and 78 per cent unskilled workers were indebted at the time of investigation. The proportion of indebted workers declines as income rises. Another significant finding is that as many as 48 per cent workers are indebted for 500 rupees or more. The proportion of workers having to pay the debt of 500 rupees or more also declines with higher incomes.

#### JOB SATISFACTION

A majority of workers (61 per cent) are dissatisfied with their jobs. The data in Table 11 show that 44 per cent skilled workers, 59 per cent semi-skilled, and 70 per cent unskilled workers are dissatisfied. A larger proportion of skilled than either semi-skilled or unskilled workers are satisfied with their jobs. Thus, skill and dissatisfaction are inversely related. The relationship between skill and job satisfaction is found to be statistically significant.

In interpreting data on job satisfaction it is necessary to keep in mind the methodological aspects of enquiry. The respondents were asked a straight question: Are you satisfied with your present job? with three choices: yes, no, and don't know. If someone said "no" he was asked to give reasons with the following five options: (i) uncertainty of work, (ii) low wages, (iii) arduous nature of work, (iv) desire for change from building industry, and (v) any other (please specify). Most respondents gave multiple responses. In the "any other" choice many respondents gave such reasons as: (i) "It is not a respectable job", (ii) "I have to do it out of compulsion", and (iii) "I want to take up a job in some other industry."

At the coding stage all the multiple responses were added and grouped into four categories. These (iv) and (v) were lumped together as "other reasons" and (iii) was given an extended meaning to include risk and hazard. The data pertaining to causes of dissatisfaction are presented in Table 12. It gives the total number of responses and the number of workers expressing dissatisfaction for each category of personnel.

Table 12 shows that the highest proportion of them attribute dissatisfaction to "low wages" (36 per cent) followed by "arduous nature of work" (25 per cent), and "other reasons" (23 per cent). Surprisingly "uncertainty of work" is the cause of dissatisfaction for

only 16 per cent respondents. Evidently work uncertainty is an inseparable part of his way of life and so is not much of a source of dissatisfaction to an average worker. It is equally obvious that "low wages" is the most important cause of dissatisfaction for all categories of respondents although it is the highest for semi-skilled workers and lowest for the skilled with the unskilled in between. Significantly all classes of workers accord the same ranking to the causes of dissatisfaction.

#### WORKERS' ATTACHMENT TO THE INDUSTRY

Apparently due to low wages, bad working and living conditions, very low social status of building work and other reasons, workers in general have not developed a feeling of attachment to the industry. In fact, as many as 75 per cent of the workers are eager to give up their jobs in the building industry and go to any other trade or occupation (Table 13). However, a larger proportion of semi-skilled (72 per cent) and unskilled (79 per cent) as compared to skilled (66 per cent) workers are keen to take up jobs elsewhere. Analysis of workers' responses with regard to the trade or occupation to which they want to shift shows that 24 per cent prefer office or factory jobs; 14 per cent would like to go back to agriculture; 11 per cent would like to do their own business; 5 per cent would take up miscellaneous jobs; while the remaining 22 per cent have no idea of what they want to do. There are significant variations in workers' responses according to skill. Thus, 16 per cent semi-skilled and an equal per cent of unskilled workers as compared to only 7 per cent skilled workers would like to do agricultural work whereas only 8 per cent semi-skilled and 11 per cent unskilled workers as compared to 12 per cent skilled workers would like to do some business of their own. Similarly, 29 per cent semi-skilled and 24 per cent unskilled as compared to 21 per cent skilled workers would prefer office or factory job.

The data on the whole show that the degree of attachment, or the willingness to work in the same industry, is positively related to skill. The skilled workers have made the highest investment in acquiring skills, put in the greatest effort to achieve their status, and have accordingly the utmost stake in the industry. It is, therefore, surprising that a majority of them would prefer to leave. Is it then

possible that their as well as other workers' perceptions were unduly affected by the recession in the industry? Slumps do tend to lower morale and induce people to look around for more satisfactory work opportunities. But we do not have sufficient evidence to conclude that the transient factors influenced workers' attitude to a significant extent.

It may be noted that workers distinguish clearly between an immediate job change and the long-term transfer to other industries or occupations. Table 14 sets out data on the relationship of skill and perception of next job change. It shows that 67 per cent workers expect to work in the building industry and only 7 per cent think of moving out of it. The fact that 33 per cent did not know what they would do next may be largely due to uncertainties in the industry itself. On the other hand it is much more significant that 43 per cent respondents expected similar jobs with the same employers and 11 per cent parallel jobs with others. Three per cent each expect to be promoted with the same employer or with others.

These statistics provide an interesting indicator of an anticipated turnover. The sum of "similar job with other employers" and "better job with other employers" as a percentage of the total may be taken as a measure of anticipated turnover within the industry. This is an expectational variable of considerable significance because it highlights an important dynamic factor in the industry. Judged by the survey data the ratio stands at 14 per cent. There is no presumption that this figure is reliable; many more surveys will be needed to obtain one in which confidence can be placed.

The fact that only 6 per cent workers expect promotion shows remarkable realism. Partly this is also an implicit admission of the low potential for betterment on the part of workers presumably for reasons of their being illiterate and backward. This is further supported by our finding that most respondents, in all categories, attribute wage differentials in order of importance to skill, efficiency, experience, and training. Furthermore, the greatest desire for training was expressed by the semi-skilled workers.

Pulling the threads of the foregoing discussion together we can make a few generalisations. First, although a majority of workers are dissatisfied and would like to leave the building industry, if possible, only a minority expects to make a change in the immediate



future. Second, dissatisfaction is not related to frustrations caused by unfulfilled expectations. A small minority expects a betterment while a majority of them know that they just have to stay where they are and are also aware of the reasons for it. They are clearly dissatisfied with their whole environment, wages and working conditions and see the hopelessness of it all. Third, there is not much resentment, as may be expected, not even significant bitterness in interpersonal relations, but, quite surprisingly, smoothness, amity and an apparent desire to make the best of whatever is available. There is acceptance of job hierarchy, of those having authority and a remarkable understanding of why some got higher and others lower wages.

### CONCLUSIONS

The portrait of employment relationship in the building industry shows that it is still in a pre-industrialised age. The industry operates on the strength of traditional relationships and reinforces through employment practices the social values that strengthen them. There are no formal rules, little awareness of their importance, less awakening on the need for unionisation in defence of their common rights, and a general acceptance, together with the dissatisfaction and a yearning for change that goes with it, of the system as it operates.

The study brings out the irrelevance of much of the theoretical literature in the field of industrial relations for an industry of this kind. It shows that the industry is caught in vicious circles of extreme backwardness feeding employment relationships that have long been abandoned in other sectors. To our minds the key factor is workers' illiteracy from which stems weak awareness of human rights and the will to achieve them. Normative questions as to what can be done for building workers raise serious doubts on the practicability of assumptions underlying suggestions for promoting collective bargaining, or even more effective enforcement of industrial laws and the CPWD rules. The most effective remedy probably lies in raising the level of literacy and a more purposive intervention of outsider leaders in the interest of better future for workers.

## REFERENCES

1. This study is part of a larger study on "Employment Relations in the Building Industry in the Delhi Area" conducted at the Shri Ram Centre.
2. See William Haber and Harold M. Levinson, *Labour Relations and Productivity in the Building Trades*, Bureau of Industrial Relations, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1956, pp. 23-25.
3. Sherill Cleland, *The Influence of Plant Size on Industrial Relations*, Princeton, Industrial Relations Section, Department of Economics and Sociology, Princeton University, 1955, p. 36.
4. See Haber and Levinson, *op. cit.*
5. See K. N. Vaid and Gurdial Singh, *Contract Labour in Construction Industry—A study in Rajasthan*, New Delhi, Shri Ram Centre Press, 1966.
6. John T. Dunlop, for instance, finds that the labour contractors, mostly tribal leaders, are widely used for recruiting the labour in many countries of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. See his *Industrial Relations Systems*, New York, Henry Holt & Company, 1958, pp. 344-45.
7. Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India*, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 131-132.
8. For a detailed account of trade unionism, see S. M. Pandey and C. M. Vikram, "Trade Unionism in Delhi's Building Industry", *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 3, January 1969, pp. 298-321.

TABLE I

Table showing size of building establishments inspected during 1953 and 1967-68

Size of units (Average No. of persons employed)	May-December 1953		December 1967-March 1968	
	Number of units	Percentage	Number of units	Percentage
1	2	3	4	5
Less than 25,	38	29	22	26
25- 74	49	37	33	38
75-124	14	11	10	11
125-174	8	6	10	11
175-224	8	6	4	5
225 or above	15	11	8	9
TOTAL :	132	100	87	100

Sources : For columns 2 and 3, Government of India, Labour Bureau, *Labour Conditions in the Building and Construction Industry in India*, Simla, 1954, p. 53.

For columns 4 and 5, data collected from the 87 work-sites in Delhi and New Delhi.