

THERE are many industrial establishments, big and small, which categorically deny employment to women merely because they happen to be women. The wonder is that they get away with it so easily. This discrimination has rarely attracted the attention of our vigilant press and progressive trade unions.

The most glaring example of such discrimination is that of the Modi group of industries. It is all too common for small factories in remote corners of the country to indulge in such practices. When, however, a leading industrial group which is the third largest, ranking after the Birlas and the Tatas, behaves in such an obscurantist manner, we may well wonder what further economic development and technological revolution have in store for us.

The Modis represent the modern corporate sector of the economy. Their growth rate of 27 percent is the highest in the country, and their sales figure has reached the Rs 800 crore mark. They control 23 companies which manufacture widely diversified products such as cigarettes, tyres, textiles and cement. There are at present a total of 26,382 persons employed in all the Modi companies. Of these, only 13 are women. These 13 women too are employed as executives and secretaries. Other exceptions are those women who were already working in companies which the Modis have taken over. There is not a single woman employed in any of the factories or mills. Almost all the Modi factories and mills are located at Modipuram and Modinagar, twin townships about 20 miles from Delhi. These are virtually male citadels whose gates women have never entered. Ram Avtar, an old worker I met, said he had never seen women inside the mills, except when they came as visitors. Even the sweepers in the mills are all men.

Ironically, one argument advanced by the management and the trade union leaders is that since this is a predominantly rural area, the people are "backward" and have a "low cultural standard" so it would hurt their sensibilities if the company were to employ women. When Gujar Mal Modi first established a sugar mill here in the 1930s, he set the precedent of not

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“Only Men Need Apply”

employing women, which has been faithfully followed ever since.

The hollowness of this argument can be gauged from the fact that the women living in Modinagar are more than willing to work in the mills. Of the women interviewed, two, Kaushalya and Saraswati, were already working in a spinning mill. They said that quite a few women have found employment in mills in and around Modinagar which do not belong to the Modis. The men too said they would be very glad if the women could add to the family earnings. Who is more "backward" —the people or the management and the trade union leaders?

A personnel manager I interviewed, said that the policy of not employing women has helped the Modi industries achieve greater efficiency. It has kept the establishment clean and scandal free. It has prevented the male employees from indulging in unhealthy competition to attract the opposite sex. Moreover the company does not have to waste resources in training women personnel who soon opt for marriage, and leave their jobs. Of course, in a private enterprise growing at such a breakneck speed, any employee could be asked to work at odd hours, which, he presumed, a woman would not be able to do. He said that the Modi group clearly specifies in its advertisements that only men need apply. In a few cases, when such specification was by mistake omitted, a few women did apply. Their applications were summarily rejected. Interestingly, when asked for his personal opinion, the personnel manager said he found this state of affairs "highly objectionable."

The dominant trade union in Modipuram and Modinagar is the Hind Mazdoor Sabha. Women, since they are not employed in the Modi industries, cannot formally be members of the HMS. Yet I found that women members of workers' families are very active in trade union work. I attended one hastily convened meeting which, due to police objections, had to be held two kilometres

away from Modinagar proper. There were about 50 women at this meeting. Under normal circumstances, there would have been more than 100 women.

Women not only attend meetings but have even braved police lathi charges. All the leaders and activists were full of praise for the women. Vireshwar Tyagi, a prominent HMS leader, declared that women were a great source of strength to the union during the recent crisis. Once the police came to raid the HMS office at midnight. All the male activists were in jail. Immediately a group of women collected and prevented the police from entering the office. Yet the HMS, like most other trade unions, has been insensitive to women's issues. It has never agitated against the total denial of employment to women. Nor has it made any serious effort to organise women workers in the non Modi factories, and to demand better conditions of work for them. "When employment opportunities are few", says Shri Tyagi, "the first priority has to be given to men."

What is happening here is part of a wider phenomenon of declining employment for women. At a time when more and more women are in search of employment, opportunities for them are declining. According to census reports, there has been a constant decline since 1921, both in the absolute numbers of women workers and in their proportion to men in the labour force. From 41.8 million in 1911, the number of women workers declined to 31.2 million in 1971. In the same period, the proportion of women in the labour force declined from 34.44 to 17.35 percent. The report of the national committee on the status of women, 1975, concluded that the capital intensive process of modernisation has been responsible for the large scale displacement of women from the organised labour force. As a result, women are forced to accept the most low paid jobs where they work under filthy conditions and are denied the strength of collective organisation. □