



## Humanitarian Trade Unionist Jhabvala's Pioneering Efforts for Workers' Rights

○ Renana Jhabvala

**S**havaksha Hormasji Jhabvala was a prolific writer. He wrote in newspapers, journals and pamphlets. He published over 30 books on a variety of topics. Most of these articles and books were on topics he felt strongly about—prohibition, leprosy, trade unionism, the *Gita*, a History of the Parsees, and the poems of Sant Kabir. He did not, however, write about himself, his own thoughts, his development, and most important, his own actions. He saw himself as a *karmayogi* and yet he rarely wrote about his own deeds. So, even though he is my grandfather, when I began to write this article I had very little about him that I could use. I was interested in his days as a trade unionist, in his experiences as the founder of many trade unions in the days when trade unionism was little known in this country.

A veteran trade union leader once said to me, “Your grandfather was the father of many trade unions and the master of none.” In our family we were often told about the hardships that the family had to face during his time in custody during the famous Meerut Conspiracy Case, which was a result of his trade union activities. After his release from jail his life seems to have changed. Most people remember him as an old man wandering in the streets of Bombay, in typical Parsi costume, with newspapers under his arm and a bag hanging from his shoulder. I have drawn on his obituaries for details of

his early years. However, I could not find much about his role as an early trade unionist. In books on trade unionism, his name appears, but usually merits a few lines. Nowhere could I find out much about the ‘father of many trade unions’, nor could I understand why he could not remain the ‘master’ of any.

Finally, I read closely his defence before the Additional Sessions Judge at Meerut in 1931. There, in his own words, he attempts to analyse his actions and the actions of those he worked with. I have used this as my primary source and have quoted him liberally. In fact, this article is nothing but an attempt to write his story in his own words. I have, in particular, concentrated on the period of his most active trade unionism, i.e. 1914 to 1929, in an attempt to understand both his own contribution to trade unionism and the foundations of trade unions in India. To my surprise I found that until 1920, that is, until the international implications of the Russian Revolution made themselves felt in India, he worked almost single handed and formed a wide variety of trade unions, many of which went on

to be the bulwark of trade unionism and the launching pads for many prominent trade unionists. It was only after 1920 that trade unionism in Bombay became a rapidly growing vital movement. It could take off only because there were already a number of these trade union organisations in the city, and the concept of ‘organise and unite’ had already taken root in the workers’ consciousness.

However, the newer trade unionism turned from a humanitarian cause into a political movement; the trade unions formed by him were ‘captured’ by new people and, more important, new ideas. At the same time the Government began to become suspicious about trade union activity and the new ideas behind it. In 1929, they arrested a large number of Bombay trade unionists on the charge of (among others) a ‘conspiracy to deprive the King of his Sovereignty.’ Jhabvala was finally cleared of all charges, and released several years later, but by then the trade union movement had changed, as had the mood in the country. And as he says:

“Imperialism has conspired with communism, and between the two a poor humanitarian like me has been crushed.”

In this article I have tried to reveal events through Jhabvala’s eyes. In addition I am grateful to Mr. Ravindra Pinge who had recorded many incidents of his life in a newspaper article in 1971. Perhaps there may be

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inaccuracies, and I invite the reader to point these out as well as provide me with any material that she may have, in order to throw further light on the events of those important years.

### Vows of Early Years

Jhabvala was born in Surat in 1884; his father was a school teacher. He studied in primary school in the Government school in Surat and later joined the Irish Presbyterian Mission School for matriculation. In order to finance his education he used to sing during Parsi marriages. After matriculation in 1901 he came to Bombay and joined Elphinstone College. He completed his BA, but studied Law only half-way, until he got inspired by Dadabhai Naoroji's ideas about *swaraj*, and decided to work for society and the poor. Although the new ideas of *swaraj* were the catalyst for him to enter public life, in fact he had been waiting for such a chance. As he says:

“Long ago when I was a young boy, that is in 1897, I had seen much human suffering in my native place for those were the dire times of the great famine, and my silent soul wept within me ... I took vows that when I grow old and capable of running my life independently I would pay back my debt to God and offer service to the poor people of my country, sacrificing a part of my own energy and time to their cause. So when I was able to gain the independence, I thought the vows must be fulfilled and twenty years thence entered into the region of fulfilling the vows.” (p. 787).

He started his life as part of the editorial team of a monthly magazine devoted to the ideas of *swaraj*. However after some time he decided that he could better serve the country by educating youth and he became a school teacher in Devlali, near Bombay. As a teacher he advocated the Gurukul approach, as he felt that this would bring the young closer to ideas of *swaraj* and away from materialism.

He spent the rest of his working life either as a journalist or as a school teacher, advocating and living the ideas he believed in. He had a restless nature and could not stay for long in one place, or with one school, one magazine, one newspaper. He went from Bombay to Nasik, to Agra, and back to Bombay. He worked on well known newspapers and even brought out his own. However, both his journalism and his teaching were secondary to his true mission in life—serving the workers.



Jhabvala with his family

“I am only a seeker after truth and in the search thereof, I am simply passing through various experiences of life. I undertook the work of organising the masses simply from a humanitarian and philanthropic point of view. I had been dragged into the vortex of trade unionism simply because I felt largely for the poor toiling masses of the motherland. 1300 years ago my community landed upon the soil of India. Since then my predecessors and myself have been eating the grateful salt of this country, and the little rippling voice from within has always asked me the question why if I could live happily I should not help others who are fallen, who are miserable and who are naked. The dictates of my religion are that we should try to serve others... I have always thought charitably of the poor, the weak and the ignorant, whose seething masses swell around us all over the world. It was this feeling that led me to organisation of the working class.” (pp.716-717).

### Start of Social Work

Jhabvala's first introduction to social work came with his meeting in 1911 with Gopalkrishna Devdhar, a disciple of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who taught him how to use his incomplete legal training in a systematic way to serve society. Devdhar also introduced him to Hindu philosophy, and he became so absorbed that he went to Benaras to study further. There he came in contact with Mrs. Besant and Babu Bhagwandas. Later he wrote a treatise on the *Gita*.

On his return to Bombay, he joined the *swaraj*-inclined *Bombay Chronicle*. At the same time he met a group of lawyers who were part of the Home Rule movement and members of the Servants of India Society and of the Theosophical Society. These were Barristers Baptista and Pawar, Solicitor Ginwalla, Diwan Chaman Lal and many others. He was a young man in this older group and became the most active. As he explained:

“In the early days... a group of workers like Messrs Ginwalla, Joshi, Baptista, Umar and Usman Subhani, myself and such others, most of whom were members of the Theosophical Society, was working in diverse directions wherever humanity called for some sort of service. Thus we were in the Cow Protection Movement, we were in the labour organizations, we were in the settlements of some strikes... In fact this group of philanthropists worked during the Home Rule days... I belonged to this group and while others spent money still others exercised the value of their effective influence... I worked as one of the actual workers who had to shoulder the more rough and tumble of the more physical hardships of the movement.” (p. 797).

### Beginning of Trade Unions

The turn of the century saw Bombay becoming the major industrial city in the country. The rural poor from the countryside poured into the city and became the first industrial workers. The First World War saw a spurt in industry, especially textiles, and by the end of the War there were large numbers of industrial workers living and working in miserable conditions. At the same time, the class of wealthy industrialists and officers of the Government grew more powerful.



“It was not only a time of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, it was also a time of turmoil in ideas and strategies for social justice, both in India and world-wide.”

Around 1914, when Jhabvala first started his humanitarian work, the ideas of trade unionism had been tried out and had succeeded in Britain, Germany and other countries of Europe. Trade unionism had developed as a practical philosophy, trying to deal with the excesses of capitalism. The early trade unionists saw that while workers were over-worked, underpaid and made to live

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and toil in intolerable conditions, they were also for the first time ready to organise. The factories created conditions where large numbers of workers worked in close proximity for over 12 hours at a time, thus creating bonds which did not exist before. Furthermore, unlike artisans or farmers, these workers had no possessions of their own, no land to fall back on, no trade to protect, they only had their labour to sell. For the first time there was a true proletariat class, which could bargain with the employers if they could only speak and act together. This required that they be organised and united.

Jhabvala’s greatest skill and joy was going to the workers, winning their confidence, serving their needs and teaching them to unite and organise. He describes this process in his own words:

“The town of Bombay especially opened out a vast field for an active kind of organizing effort wherein I could best exercise the sympathy which throbbed within me... I would stand at the end of the street when the factories were whistled off and would cry ‘Ye who are fallen and miserable, come ye here and I shall help you out of the slough of distress.’ A few letters were scribbled on behalf of the distressed individuals, posted by me to their employers, and God helps those who helps themselves, strange enough a couple of them were solved and the poor illiterate flocks thought that I was a good instrument for the redress of their evil lot. Moreover my habits of life suited their temperaments, for I squatted among them and talked on those invariable points which pertained to (their) unhappiness.

“Often I ventured to take a yellow robed saint with me who attracted a larger crowd. Mr. Ginwalla, who rolled in wealth and had no issue, used to pay him eight annas per day. He sang Marhatta songs and afterwards I gave them a dose of Unionism. The result was that the flock used to hang about and whenever I entered the area of their quarters, all sorts of people, men, women and children anxiously waited for me to hear some of their grievances and get them solved. But I emphasised: ‘You people should organise into unions, as the employers do not recognise me, and you must know the spirit of unity, come therefore ... and form your union’ and so forth, and the number of members began to ascend from 5 to 50 and from 50 to 500 and onwards. Several offices were

opened and the Bombay public began to have a vision of a new and happy movement among them. I do not know if the masters were annoyed. The offices were run on constitutional lines and the accounts properly managed. It was thus that the bony framework of trade unionism was brought into being in Bombay.” (p. 787).

### Framework of Unions

Jhabvala was an active part of a group of humanitarian workers. They began to see trade unionism as their main mission. This resulted in a flowering of trade unions, and it soon became a movement. These humanitarians saw it as a movement towards harmony and ‘spiritual’ development. To quote him again:

“My aim of industrial organisation was not to foster bitterness (between employers and workers) but to raise a common platform of understanding where both could meet at a healthy centre of mutual peace and brotherly love. Certainly as the working classes were in a fallen condition, illiterate and needed some instrument of expression by which to voice their grievances... I make bold to say from my experiences that the workers were treated no better than slaves with all sorts of ancient savagery and cruelty of heart. As these days are days of civilised tyranny, there were civilised modes of oppression... as for example agreement to sign bond prior to service, unusually long periods of work accompanied by unusually low payments so that the body and soul could hardly be kept together etc.; and naturally the liberal minded

largeness of human sympathy demanded that men of education, men of enlightened culture, and men who could afford to devote their time and service to the Motherland should attempt to go among the crowd and give them an assurance that redemption was possible in the form of trade unionism. Thus I was principally able to turn myself into an agent of early trade unionism here.” (pp. 804-805).

Between 1914 and 1920 more than 27 unions were formed. Jhabvala was in one way or the other the office bearer in all the unions he was currently active with.

“Mr. Veer Wamanrao Joshi, with whom I was working with in one capacity or the other... appointed me as an office bearer in his unions and I appointed him as one in mine— therefore tradition descended from him to me.” (p.731).

**“My work was the little Unions, the starving individuals, the illiterate man, the unclad woman, the foodless child.”**

The many unions included the Girni Kamgar Union, the G.I.P. Railway Union, the Postal Workers Union, the Dock Workers Union, the Victoria Hacks Union, and later the Taxi Driver Union.

“[Each] union had an office of its own and a typewriter and some files... Several grievances were redressed... but the institutions could not make much headway. I was not a full time man and the workers demanded services all the time. I always believed that the workers own men must themselves run the institution for often I could not grasp the inner technicalities...” (p.739).

Their method was to get the workers together, and begin to act as a bridge between the workers and the employers register a union and let the union grow as a voice of the workers of that industry. Jhabvala, in particular, was a believer in the small unions:

“My work was the little Unions, the starving individuals, the illiterate man, the unclad woman, the foodless child.” (p.735).

In fact even within one large industry, they advocated the promotion of many unions:

“I believed (in one industry) in the initial stages there might be different Unions, and when they were sufficiently able to stand on their own legs and when their ideals and practices were properly shaped they could be federated into one central organisation as is done in the more advanced countries of the West... in fact in the Textile and Railway Field I had put this into practice...”(p.766)

These early pioneers were very particular about rule-based management of the union— each union was to have its own constitution, and each union’s accounts were to be managed and accounts written and passed by office bearers.

During these first five years, these trade unions grew and



prospered as workers became more conscious of the benefits of organising:

“It was in the year 1920, that in Bombay, there was a great upheaval of Labour activity manifested in a number of organisations that Messrs Baptista, Ginwalla and myself brought into being... We were in the midst of the throbbing and pulsating tide of agitation of Railway workers, Postmen, Dock workers, Tramway men, Gas workers and whatnot.” (p.783).

### The Bolshevik Revolution

The end of the First World War saw the growth of ideas of communism within the country. The Russian Revolution both inspired and repelled Jhabvala. He was inspired by the possibility of establishing a society where workers' needs were given priority, where the toiling people had fair returns for their labour, where the economy was for the benefit of all and not used to exploit the poor for the benefit of the rich. But at the same time he was repelled by the violence and materialistic ideas of the Bolshevists.

His position is well described in his speech on the anniversary of Russian Revolution in 1927, whereby he extols the Bolshevik Revolution for bringing about an awakening of the masses, a better redistribution of wealth, better living conditions and working conditions for the toiling people, and an overthrow of a system where the natural wealth of Russia was used to make a small section of exploiters rich, while the masses remained in misery. But he goes on to say that that the methods of Bolshevism were violent and their philosophy was materialistic, and that in Russia one tyranny was replaced by another. The Indian method had to



be that of spiritualism, of non-violence and of progressive change. He believed in the method of *satyagraha* based on “our own national character, national genius and our own principles of civilisation.” (pp.760-765, p. 805).

### The New Trade Unionists

The success of the Trade Unions in India began to attract a new type of activist. These were the ‘Internationalists’ influenced either by the Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union or by the Internationalism which led to the formation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the international labour movement. The older trade unionists, who came from the earlier humanitarian school, mainly from the Servants of India Society, began fading away. Jhabvala, who was still in his vigorous thirties, was left as one of the few ‘old-timers.’

“I was somewhere in the position of buffer between the old and the new in the rising activity of the Labour Movement. Older generations were dropping down like withering leaves and the newer men brandished their cudgels with all sorts of new-fangled notions. I did not attempt to study in any way the philosophical and scientific theories of these old and new stages, but let me be unpretentious when I say I wielded considerable power among the working masses here.” (p.731).

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“The old race of workers like Mr. Baptista, Mr. Joshi, Mr. Dalwi and Mr. Ginwalla had been gradually crumbling down due to one or the other reason. No one of us expected anything by way of material benefits from this movement and when I was left alone in the field I could not for the life of me manage the whole organisation and so had to requisition the help of other gentlemen that offered a ready and willing hand.” (p. 725).

Although many unions had indeed been formed, these unions had to be run, grievances attended to, negotiations and bargaining undertaken. The success of the agitations in 1920 led to a new realization of the power of strikes among the working class. Frequent wild-cat strikes were called which required the attention of the union office bearers. Jhabvala, during these years, was the most active of them—but he was totally unable to handle the growing demands.

“... during patient years of labour and toil within the 12 or 15 years the whole movement had developed considerably and the movement called for workers, workers, workers, that is those who in a spirit of self sacrifice could help in the advancement of the cause... the Labour Movement was not my own property... and I could not carry the unions in my pocket... I could not manage all the unions with their numbers of members single-handed with the help of paid clerks and secretaries.” (pp. 724-725).

Where there was no one to pay attention to a union it disintegrated, as he so vividly describes in the case of the Dockworkers Union.

“A Dockworkers Union having been started of which I was

appointed President by the men. The common method of appointments was that a general meeting of the workmen was held and the men themselves proposed certain names... Therefore this Presidentship was an appointment made purely by the meeting of the Dock Workers themselves. This union afterwards failed to receive my due attention, due to want of time and energy, and at last became a mud heap of dirt scattered by hungry fowls.” (p.795).

At the same time there was a growing need somehow to bring the trade unions together, so as to be able to act unitedly. It was necessary to ‘organise, unite and federate.’ There were basically three ways that Jhabvala participated in the federation or uniting of these many small trade unions. First, the formation of the Trade Union Congress in 1920: “ We brought into being a body called the Trade Union Congress in the office of Mr. Ginwalla with Mr. Chaman Lal and myself as Secretaries. Mr. Lajpat Rai... became the first president.” (p. 784).

Secondly, the formation of the Central Labour Board:

“In the year 1921 when the philanthropic group about which I made mention above had got a sufficient number of trade union organisations we thought it desirable to amalgamate all of them into one large organisation under the name of Central Labour Board, the plan being... a Central Council of Management presiding over all the affiliated unions permitting each individual union to manage its own affairs... I was from the very beginning associated with this body as its Secretary, while Mr. Ginwalla was its President. This body was recognised by the Government of Bombay and it was through the agency of this

organisation... that some amount of healthy legislation was also suggested to the Government of India... A happy consequence of this kind of activity was the passage of the Trade Unions Registration Act as well as nomination by the Government of labour representatives to the Legislature and the Municipal Corporation. It had its own constitution and its Board of Management consisted purely of representatives of the unions

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affiliated under its auspices. I also used to carry on some of my pet propaganda... namely Purity Mission and temperance among the masses... This organisation was largely controlled by me in my capacity as Secretary and sometimes it appeared that the Central Labour Board and I were both one and the same.” (p. 802). The third, formation of industry



wide federations, began to take on an All-India shape. For example, the Railwaymen’s Union as gradually built up from a local union to an industry-wide union to an all-India one.

“It was the year 1917 when the great General Strike took place on the whole of the G.I.P line... that Mr. Baptista and Mr. Dalvi and Mr. Ginwalla were the prime movers of the faint idea of the Railway Workers Union in Bombay. But somebody had to be found who could devote a considerable part of his time and energy to the running of the institution... they found in me a ready hand and... the derelict ship which had no mast, no helm, no sail was gradually put into shape and we began to have by 1919 something like a union worth the name of the G.I.P Workshop Men. Gradually the men (of the running line) also began to come to me by 1925-26, when I was able to have another railway organisation called the General Employees Union wherein all sorts of employees from the lowest sweeper down to the highest Station Master were allowed to become members.” (p. 739).

Later the various unions were federated into one large federation:

“Later we had a big conference sometime in 1928 at Bhusaval under my presidency... and the two diverse unions were federated into one and all the separatist tendencies were kneaded all together and leavened into one mass of federation under the new name of the G.I.P. Railwaymen’s Union.” (p.740).

**Politicisation of Trade Unions**

The growth of the labour movement in Bombay, the many growing, demanding unions, the formation of new federations, meant

that there was a desperate need for new people to run these organisations. However, as Jhabvala remarked, the old breed of philanthropists were gone and the new, younger people came with ideologies of their own. These were people whose ideas were political and for whom the trade unions were part of a larger change guided by political ideologies.

At the same time the labour movement itself was getting more narrowly political, in the sense that the office bearers of the unions realised that in order to gain benefits for their members they too needed to have a voice in the Legislatures. Universal suffrage, and representation of labour in the Legislature and Municipal Corporation, had always in any case been one of their major demands.

It was natural therefore, that the union leaders would begin to take part in the larger political parties. Of the existing parties, ideologically and philosophically, Jhabvala felt closest to the Indian National Congress. He agreed with their philosophy of *satyagraha*, non-violence and reformism. In fact, in 1928, when labour was to be represented for the first time in the Bombay Municipal Corporation, he stood and won on a Congress ticket although Congress' philosophy was close to his line of thinking, it had no inclination to organise labour in Bombay. To quote him again:

“The Congress... in the past was not actively working in the direction of mass organisation even after the Gauhati Congress (where a resolution on mass organisation was passed), so that I have taken the liberty of administering a slight rebuke to that organisation in this article... while the whole article is soaked in pure Indian Nationalism. (1) Mahatma Gandhi has perhaps

best understood the economic poverty prevailing in our country, (2) Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps the first man who that definitely laid down the organisation of the masses to be the principal plank in the Congress platform, (3) Organising the masses on the line of Trade Unionism will not only solve the question of communal but also definitely lay down the foundation of economic and

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political liberty of the country. But the Congress leaders have so far set out of their consideration the organisation of the workers.” (p. 775).

The Communist Party too was active in India at this time. Indians, some of whom had been abroad, had been infected with the exciting new ideas of communism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the new experiments in the Soviet Union. At the same time the international communist movement targeted India. The working class would lead the revolution and so for them it was important to organise the workers. Philip Spratt and Bradley were sent by the British Communist Party to India

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to target the trade union movement and bring it into the communist fold.

Jhabvala, at the time looking for dedicated workers and political allies, found both in these new communists.

“In a great movement like Labour Organisation various kinds of people come in and various kinds of activities were possible for them to conduct. So long as those who associated me with trade unionist professions worked only for trade unionism and advanced the causes I had laid at my heart namely the organisation of the masses, I had nothing to speak against them. Mr. Spratt, a foreigner coming in our midst and working as he professed to do in the Trade Union field, was as much welcomed by me as Mr. Horniman or Mrs. Besant with whom I had the pleasure of working in those ancient days of Home Rule activity.” (p.723) ...when the young Bombay gentlemen under their able director and guide Mr. Bradley offered their assistance to me I cheerfully accepted it... Call it folly, call it innocence or call it anything you like, I looked upon all these young Bombay Partymen with the two European gentlemen as willing participators in the cause I had espoused and naturally so far as the trade union platform was concerned I freely associated with them for a short time and with my friend Mr. Bradley.”

Jhabvala was ideologically very far from communism. As he says:

“I have the fortunate honour of not belonging to the Communist Party” (p.723). “I have no connection whatsoever with any kind of ‘ism’ whatsoever. I reckon not your Chartism, and your Labourism and your Socialism and your Fabianism and your Communism... (p. 717) ...I have eschewed all Bolshevism... It

pains me to say that Bolshevism is but a necessary result of modern materialistic civilization in the West... it has its own sensate worship of matter as against spirit... Years ago I happily learnt that evil could be conquered by non-resistance to it and the great prophet that taught it stood for freedom with peace which is the only righteous and enjoyable freedom for humanity. The wrenching of power by a class of people... by violent means and measures of blood... would lead to unending war and fight... from one kind of tyranny the country passes to another kind of tyranny... the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, any dictatorship, is in its very essence a kind of Moghul tyranny. I stood against such tyranny and oppression in any form. I am and I have worked simply with a spiritual end of Dharma in view.” (p. 764).

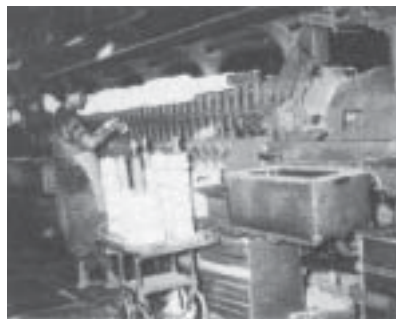
His own idea was of “Labour Raj” which he defines as follows:

“There should be a Labour Raj which would remove the ills of the working masses. By Labour Raj... I mean the Government of those persons that work and among these workers. I include the intellectuals and men of superior professions... In India the 98 per cent of agricultural and working classes must get their due representation in the superior councils of the State.... through the ballot box by gradual yet persistent and firm endeavours the workers themselves, be they farmers in their fields, spinners in the factories, forgers in the iron mongers shops, school masters teaching the young people of the country, lawyers... should have their rightful places in the administration so long as they worked and toiled in the interest of all the factors that formed the State.” (p. 729).

However, Jhabvala had always felt uncomfortable about politics and politicians. He had felt that unions should be kept away from politics.

“I am not a politician... I have an abhorrence of politics and politicians. (p. 716). Politics in the stages of trade unionism was kept a thing away from the circle. In fact in the constitution of almost all my Unions there was a specific clause introduced that the unions would be a non-political institution.”

However, there came a certain stage when trade unionists believed that there should be a Labour Party of some type which would stand for the interests of the working class.



“When the Trade Unions Act of 1926 was passed in agreement with Mr. N.M. Joshi we did not think it desirable that the clause (against politics) should continue, but we were fumbling for light, because it was suggested by Mr. Joshi that Labour had its own politics.” (p. 745).

Jhabvala remained unclear about what he should do with regard to joining a party. He felt that he should look to the guidance of the Indian National Congress. At that time the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee formed the Congress Labour Party. It then changed its name to the Labour Swaraj party and later on to the Workers and Peasants Party.

The demands of the Party were acceptable to Jhabvala as they included universal adult suffrage, abolition of communalism, freedom of speech and of association, nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, establishment of State-aided co-operative banks, minimum living wage, sickness and unemployment insurance, old age pensions, maternity benefits, introduction of an eight hour work day, improvement of laws regarding workers’ compensation, installation of safety appliances in factories and mines and removal of illiteracy. The party proposed to work as part of the Indian National Congress. Jhabvala was elected a member of the executive committee of this party.

Jhabvala saw the Party as a solution to his problems of running the many Unions he had formed. He began to distribute the running of his Unions among the different members of the Party who showed an interest in unions, assigning the Municipal Workers Union to Mr. Nimbkar, the Tramway Men’s Union to Mr. Dange, and the Dockworkers Union to Mr. Mirajkar. (p. 752) However, he still saw himself as a member of the Congress, and when the time came to stand for the elections for the Bombay Municipal Corporation, he resigned from the Workers and Peasants Party and contested and won on the ticket of the Indian National Congress.

### Losing Control

By 1928, all the unions that had been formed by Jhabvala from 1915 onwards now involved members of the Communist Party who were helping him, as he thought, in one way or another to run the unions and federations. In the Trade Union Congress, “Mr. Chaman Lal was a fresh man emerged from the International contexture of labour





ideas of the West.”

I n the Railwaymen’s Union, and the Textile Unions, Mr. Bradley and his disciples were active. And then began a period when Mr. Jhabvala began to be displaced from the unions he had formed and a struggle started in all the unions. This struggle was a power struggle for control of the unions, but more importantly, an ideological struggle.

The first wresting of control began with Mr. Chaman Lal. As described by Jhabvala:

“If I suffered first from anybody that began the art of capturing my creations it was this gentleman who introduced himself into diverse labour organisations and begin to spin about the balloonish balls of various airy colours before the eyes of the gaping masses.” (p. 783).

It then spread to other unions where Jhabvala was made the victim of tactics to discredit him in various ways.

“It was through Mr. Bradley’s proffered guidance that a great deal of work of different unions was assorted to different members of the Bombay Party. So far as each of the Unions was conducted satisfactorily and so far as each member looked to the proper management of the office I had rested myself satisfied... Later on I began to find out that the different members of the Managing Committees of different unions began to ally themselves closely with the white skin of Mr. Bradley and ultimately I found that there was a gradual feeling of antipathy sown against me in different

unions... Just then the ‘Kranti’ [Communist newsletter] in it’s sundry issues which I happened to read had begun to make out that I belonged to the older school of thought, the reformist section, the reactionary group, the Khaddar Association. It also spread all kinds of malignant rubbish... and I began to find myself on uncertain sands and everywhere the cry was that I was to be ousted... In October [1928] Mr. Bradley’s wrath against me was open and defiant. I was too unstrategic even then to do him an ungenerous service of getting him out. But when my conscience at a later stage still realized him to be a positive poison spreader I offered to the Managing Committee to let me go if they chose to work with him... he was welcome to hold a constitutional opposition to me but he should have certainly shown me the courteous gentlemanliness of consulting me before he wrote to his friends... He should have certainly known that he was but six months old in the labour field while I had been 15 years old and was a father of thirty children [meaning trade unions] and more.” (pp. 737-738).

Jhabvala describes the happenings in the Railwaymen’s Union.

“By the time the hot loaf (i.e. the new Federation) came out of the oven I felt myself mystically scuttled and unwarily stranded on the lonely coast for the managing committee suddenly began to adopt other measures of thinking. I folded my hands to them and repeatedly, asked them to kindly relieve me of the post of General Secretaryship... but in the midst of the tentacles the

voice ultimately emerged that if I resigned the union would collapse and I soliloquised within, that if the Union collapsed my weeping soul would certainly retire into the nook to cry my life away. I was between the devil and the deep sea. Under such circumstances my actions as the men would not let me go, appeared to be in conflict with those of Mr. Bradley... in that laughable situation he thought me to be a mischief mongerer. It is in the creed of Communism, Party above all, country and its considerations secondary, nation to the dogs...”(pp. 740-

**“I never invited the men to give up their work as I knew that would be throwing them on the streets in helplessness.”**

741).

### The Textile Strike

While trouble was building up within the unions that he had nurtured for so long, even worse trouble awaited him from the State. In the last few years he had become, in the eyes of the Government, closely identified with the communists and their creed. Perhaps the last straw was the textile strike.

For Jhabvala, a strike was the way that the workers expressed their needs, made themselves heard.

“The masters never understood that the beasts of the working class had their own rights. They could very well remember that their dog was hungry when he barked, they could very well recollect that their horse was thirsty when he neighed, but they had totally forgotten that

when their own workers met together to protest against certain violation of principles of industrial life or for certain legitimate necessity of theirs they had as well to pay attention... Strikes are the results which come by themselves during the progress of industrial activity.” (p. 809).

However, he did not encourage the workers to strike.

“I never invited the men to give up their work as I knew that would be throwing them on the streets in helplessness. Whenever a strike was declared it was declared by the men themselves not in an organised manner but by themselves downing tools in their rude, blunt, obstreperous impetuosity often accompanied with lightning speed. No power on earth, as my experience revealed could ever persuade the working men to give up their work, and therefore it was after the men had given up their work themselves as guided by their own conscience that they used to come often-times to me explaining their grievances and seeing if it was possible that I could help them in the solution of their difficulty.” (p. 792).

In 1928 there was a general strike in the textile industry which went on for months. As described by Jhabvala, this strike was in the making since the formation of the Union. The miserable plight of the textile workers had been often documented by different commissions and committees. Many of the mills had experienced smaller strikes that lasted for a short time over particular issues. However, conditions

continued bad in most of the mills.

“These little eruptions in the Etna of the Textile Industry happened in 1923 over the bonus question, in 1925 over the wage cut question, in 1926 over the three loom question... Mr. Joshi, myself and others working in the Bombay Textile Labour Union were shaking our heads among ourselves that for once a big general strike



properly conducted might clean the Augean Stables... Therefore when in the Sassoon group disaffection that had long since been reigning burst into a wilder conflagration... and thus we were in the middle of a general strike... do not think, Sir, for a moment that such a proposal emerged from me, but it arose practically from the workers themselves.” (pp. 793-794).

### **The Lonely Humanist**

In 1929, along with other trade unionists, Jhabvala was arrested and was taken to Meerut to be tried in what has come to be known as the Meerut Conspiracy Case. The defendants were heard by the Magistrate of the lower court in Meerut and committed to trial by the Additional Sessions Judge. In both courts Jhabvala defended

himself, and in 1934 he was acquitted of all charges. He entered politics and became an MLA from the Congress party in the Bombay Legislature. He also continued to found new unions and work with older ones. However, he could not work within a party and after Independence refused the position of Labour Minister. Shortly thereafter he gave up politics and founded his own newspaper, *Dawn*.

He continued to write until his death, and to go to the colonies and chawls of the poor, to help people.

“Temperamentally I have led a life aloof from all humanity and have my own sphere of existence even in matters of public life wherein like a humble planet I go on revolving, offering to work in my own humble way in the direction that I chose, namely alleviation of the misery of the masses.” (p.794). □

**Renana Jhabvala was the General Secretary of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad. At present she is the National Coordinator of SEWA.**

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