

# ABSENTEEISM IN INDUSTRY

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Absenteeism in industry has been a persistent evil in India. It is not uncommon even in some industrially advanced countries like the U. S. A. and the U. K. The author, in this article, makes a comparative study of absenteeism in industry in India and abroad and makes suggestions for minimising this evil, which deserve the attention of all industrialists.

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The problem of absenteeism in industry faces almost every country in the world. In India, its magnitude is far greater than in the western countries.

Absenteeism is generally understood in different ways by different persons. It is commonly understood as an employee or a group of employees remaining absent from work either continuously for a long period or repeatedly for short periods. But in the industrial field, absenteeism conveys a different meaning, and is expressed in different ways in different countries or industries. In simple language, it is the total number of workers absent expressed as a percentage of the total number of workers employed.

In more technical words the same may be said to mean "a ratio of the number of production man-days or shifts lost to the total number of production man-days or shifts scheduled to work."

For purposes of calculation, an employee is considered scheduled to work, when there is work available and the employee is aware of it, and when the employer is fully aware that the employee will be available. In calculating absenteeism, public holidays, and other days when the factory is closed are excluded. When the employee takes time off on a scheduled working day, he is considered to be absent. Also, when the worker remains away from work, without informing the employer, he is treated as wilfully absent.

In calculating the rate of absenteeism, the procedure adopted differs from mill to mill in the same place and from place to place in the same industry. For example, in the cotton textile mills in Bombay, if a worker is absent and a substitute is taken in his place, as far as the permanent worker is concerned, he is treated as absent. But in the mills in Ahmedabad, if a substitute is taken for the permanent worker who is absent, he is not treated as absent for calculating the rate of absenteeism. Such divergencies in methods of calculation exist from place to place and factory to factory in the country. This makes a lot of difference and hence it is not possible to have a clear and comprehensive or comparative view of the rate of absenteeism in industry for want of a uniform basis.

Secondly, no scientific method is adopted in India, for investigating the rate of absenteeism in any particular industry, on a nationwide scale or even in a localized unit, as is done in the western industrial countries. In the West, research bodies like the National Industrial Research Board in England are making special enquiries into the causes and incidence of absenteeism in a selected area or industry within a specified time. Similar investigations have been made in other countries like Canada by the Canadian Munitions and Supply Department and in New Zealand by the Industrial Psychological Department, of the Scientific Industrial Research Department and the results of their investigations along

with their suggestions for improving the conditions are published. Such investigations into industrial labour conditions in India were hitherto carried on, though not on very scientific lines, on only two occasions, once by the Royal Commission on Labour in 1931, and then in 1946 by the Labour Investigation Committee. On both these occasions, the investigations were so comprehensive, and the field of enquiry was so wide that little time and space were devoted to the subject of labour absenteeism in Industry,

According to the Royal Commission, no industry was able to collect or furnish any data about the causes or rate of absenteeism. Even when such data were collected in some cases as absenteeism due to sickness they were inadequate again, as the details of sickness etc. were not available. The Royal Commission also noted that a large percentage of absenteeism was being classified under "other causes" or "without any acceptable reason." But during the period of the Second War, more care seems to have been taken to collect data on absenteeism in Industry.

*Absenteeism In Cotton Textile Industry.*—A high rate of absenteeism prevails in the cotton textile industry in India. This industry is mostly localized in the three centres of Bombay, Ahmedabad and Sholapur in the Bombay State, Madras, Madura and Coimbatore in the Madras State and to a minor extent in Nagpur in Madhya Pradesh and Kanpur in the Uttar Pradesh. The following tables gives a comparative idea of the rate of absenteeism in cotton textile mills in a few centres of the country in the three years 1939, 1944 and 1948:—

*Absenteeism in Cotton Textiles\**

Place	Absenteeism in Percentage		
	1939	1944	1948
1. Bombay	10.5	11.4	13.3
2. Ahmedabad	3.3	5.7	5.9
3. Sholapur	10.8	15.4	18.1
4. Madura	10.1	13.6	13.9
5. Madras	—	—	9.1
6. Calcutta	8.9	6.31	

Of the three places in the Bombay State, the rate of absenteeism is very high in Sholapur in all the three periods and it is lowest in Ahmedabad. This is due to the difference in method adopted in calculating the rate of absenteeism in the three centres.

*Woollen Textiles.*—The rate of absenteeism is equally high in the woollen textile industry also in Bombay, when compared with the figures elsewhere. It was 15.2 percent in Bombay in 1948, while in the same year it was 11.68 percent in the U.P., 10.63 percent in Mysore and 14.8 percent in Kashmir.\*\*

But it is not known whether or not a uniform method is followed in computing the figures in all the centres.

*Iron and Steel Industry.*—The figures for Iron and Steel Industry reveal that the rate of absenteeism is high in Bengal and Bihar, where it was 13.9% in 1949, whereas, in Madras, it was 6.9% in the same year. This industry is mostly concentrated in Bihar and Bengal due to the proximity of the available raw materials. Attempts have been made to bring down the percentage of absenteeism in this industry but they seem to have produced practically no result so far.

\*Figures for 1939 and 1944 are taken from the Labour Investigation Committee Report and for 1948 from the Indian Labour Gazette 1948-49.

<sup>1</sup>This figure is for the year 1943.

\*\* Indian Labour Gazette, June 1949, p. 883.

The figures of absenteeism in some industries are classified on the basis of their causes. The following table shows absenteeism classified according to their causes:—

STATEMENT SHOWING PERCENTAGE OF ABSENTEEISM BY CAUSES IN THE YEAR 1949 IN THREE STATES.

State	Sickness	Leave Other than Holidays	Social Causes	Other Causes	Total
Bengal	3.4%	8.3%	0.3%	1.9%	13.9%
Bihar	4.5%	5.2%	1.4%	2.8%	13.9%
Madras	1.8%	3.4%	1.7%		6.9%
All States	3.2%	5.6%	1.1%	1.6%	11.6%

It is interesting to note from the above table that of all the causes "leave other than holidays" accounts for nearly 50% of absenteeism. Sickness comes next and works out to less than 33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub>%.

In Bengal and Bihar, labour is mostly recruited from the neighbouring villages and also other States like the U.P., M.P., and the Punjab. Absenteeism has been found to be greater during the harvesting seasons, when they go to their villages for sowing, transplantation and other agricultural operations. The workers that come from other States go to their native places twice or thrice a year and remain absent for about ten to fifteen days on each occasion.

*Coal Mines.*—The rate of absenteeism is high in coal mines especially among the miners and loaders. Generally agricultural and tribal people of the neighbouring villages are recruited for work in the mines. As they are more attached to their land, they absent themselves periodically from this work. These agricultural workers are found to have a natural dislike for work underground. The rate of absenteeism is

very high—in Bihar it was 34.4% in 1947. The most important reason as explained by Dr. R. K. Mukherjee in his book, "The Indian Working Class" is, that there is a general shortage of labour force in the mines and labour does not remain steady. Workers constantly move from mine to mine in search of better wages.

*Mica Mines.*—Absenteeism in mica mines is also very high. Even though no proper records are maintained in any of the mines, the Labour Investigation Committee has enquired and found out that about one-third of the total labour force remains absent on the day following the pay-day, and about 10 to 15% remain absent for two or three days. It was found that absenteeism in mica factories of M/S Chrestein & Co. was as high as 25 per cent in 1943. The rate of absenteeism is still higher in the mica mines in Madras State—34.4%; it is higher among the non-resident workers during the rainy season. In mica factories in Madras, the rate of absenteeism varies between 10 per cent and 20 per cent from one factory to another. But in Rajputana, the problem is not so great, except during the monsoon. Here labour is not mobile and there is not much of drink evil as in Bihar and Madras.

*Tea Plantations.*—The rate of absenteeism in plantations is equally high, especially in the tea gardens of Assam. When compared to other industries, the rate in tea plantations stands second in order, while that in the mines takes the first place. It is also seen from the following table\* that absenteeism increased during the war years.

*Absenteeism in Tea Plantations in Assam:*  
(Figures in %)

Pre-War	During War	Post-War
1938-39	1944-45	1946-47
25.2	27.7	24.2

\*Indian Labour Gazette 1938-39, 44-47.

In plantations, absenteeism, it has been found, is generally higher in summer than in other seasons.

*Cement.*—In cement factories figures of absenteeism vary from State to State as shown below for the year 1949 for 11 months\*: —

Madras—6.4%

Madhya Pradesh—11.5%

Bihar—13.2%

Bengal—10.1%

The percentage of absenteeism in these cases has been found to be very high in January '49 in M.P. and Bihar and falls to half by the year end. But it is reported **that** in all the four States there is a higher rate of absenteeism in the months of January and July.

*Ordnance Factories.*—The figures of absenteeism have been collected in different ordnance factories since the war, as the Government realised the necessity of finding out the rate of absenteeism and its causes and effects, in order to minimise the same, and increase production. The following figures will give an idea of absenteeism in this industry and the percentage under each cause during the year 1948 to 1949:—

*Percentage of Absenteeism in Ordnance Factories in 1948-49s*

State	Sickness	Leave other than Holidays	Social and Religious Causes	Other Causes	Total
Bengal	1.1	2.5	0.2	2.5	7.4
Madras	0.3	6.0	0.2	0.2	6.7
Uttar Pradesh	1.2	4.5	0.5	1.5	7.7
Madhya Pradesh	1.4	7.7	0.2	0.8	10.1

\*Ibid, 1949.

§Indian Labour Gazette 1948-49.

\*\*Indian Labour Gazette, April 1949.

From the above statement it can be seen that the rate of absenteeism is higher in the Madhya Pradesh than in other States.

*Dockyards.*—Among the dockyard workers in Bombay, Calcutta, Cochin and Vizagapatam, the rate of absenteeism is very considerable as shown by the table below:—

PERCENTAGE OF ABSENTEEISM IN DOCKYARDS  
IN 1946-47\*\*

State	Dockyard	1946 %	1947 %
Bombay	Mazgaon	31.7	31.8
"	H.M.I. Dockyard	19.47	16.09
"	Bombay Steam Navigation Co.	9.88	9.91
Calcutta	India General Naval & Railway Co.		13.1
Cochin	Dockyard	6.3	8.1
Vizagapatam	Scindia Steam Navigation Co.	18.9	10.19

The percentage is highest in Mazagaon Docks in Bombay. This may be due to the Pali system existing here—that is the workers are sent on forced leave by turns, whenever there is shortage of work. The range between maximum and minimum is far wider in Scindia Docks at Vizagapatam, which is 20.4% in January 1947, and 3.2% in October 1947.

It is not known whether a uniform method has been adopted in computing the figures of absenteeism in all the dockyards. It does not appear to have been followed; the low figure for October '47 was due to the labour strike in that month. If the strike situation is not taken into consideration, the figures as they are do not speak of the facts.

So far, the rate of absenteeism as it exists in different industries in different States of India has been shown. It is clear from the few tables given that absenteeism varies from 10% to 15% in factory industry and it is 25% in plantations and about 40% in mica mines. On a careful scrutiny of the various tables of absenteeism given above, it is seen that in general absenteeism is considerably higher in North India than in the South.

It may here be profitable to compare the figures of absenteeism in industries in India with those obtaining in industries in the highly developed Western countries. Unlike the investigations in India, enquiries into absenteeism and the causes thereof in the Western countries have been made on more scientific methods; and the remedies suggested are generally carried out by the industries, Government and private bodies.

*Absenteeism in U.K.*—The industrial Research Board under the auspices of the Medical Research Council carried out an investigation into the problems of absenteeism in the United Kingdom. The extent of this enquiry was in all 60 factories, big and small, employing about 75000 workers and found out the following results:—

	Absenteeism
Peace Time	— 5%
War Time	— 6 to 8% for men
“ ”	— 10 to 15% for women

It was also found that women absentees are twice as many as men and married women three times more than the unmarried ones. Another important fact revealed by the enquiry is that the rate of absenteeism is double in larger and new factories than in smaller and old establishments. Secondly the rate again is higher among women workers. Thirdly, the rate of absenteeism is higher in the case of workers, whose living places are far away from the factory.

The factors within the factory that are found responsible for the high rate of absenteeism are—(1) Long hours of work; (2) Bad working conditions; (3) Efficiency and general contentment of the labour force; (4) Boredom which affects the younger workers; (5) Lack of co-operation between management and labour and between groups of workers.

The investigating Board suggested that the worker's health, physical and mental, should be safeguarded, as they found that absenteeism in most cases was caused by illness. Secondly they also suggested improvement of transport facilities, besides creating satisfactory working conditions in the factory.

*New Zealand.*—Similar enquiries into absenteeism were conducted by the Industrial Psychology Department of the Scientific Industrial Research Department in New Zealand and found that the rate of absenteeism in factories was 6.5% for men and 11.5% for women due to all causes.

*Australia.*—An enquiry was conducted into the matter in 1942, when 16 private factories and 10 Government factories, employing about 20,000 workers were studied. In this method of enquiry, leave and authorised holidays were excluded and absence of all other categories was taken into account. The rate of absenteeism according to this enquiry was 7% for men and 13% for women. The absenteeism was higher among women workers.

*Canada.*—An enquiry was conducted in Canada in 1942 to find out the rate of absenteeism, by the Canadian Munitions and Supply Department.

The field of enquiry covered 35 factories engaged in war work and they were representative of the whole of Canada, both big

and small factories employing 12,000 to 100 workers, the average being 2,500. The average rate of absenteeism was 6.4% in October 1942, and 6.9% in November 1942. Here also the results indicated that the rate was higher among women workers; in one factory it was 24%.

The rate of absenteeism is found to be comparatively lower in the western industrial countries, as seen from the statistics given above for a few countries. This may be perhaps due to the industrial consciousness of the workers there.

*Effects of Absenteeism.*—Absenteeism causes a twofold loss. Firstly it affects the worker in his earnings; and secondly, it affects production. The worker, by absenting himself from work, earns less than what he should and thereby his standard of living is lowered. When he is unable to maintain a proper standard of life, his efficiency is lowered, consequently the quality of the article produced also is affected.

Secondly, production in the industry is retarded, due to the frequent and repeated absence of a number of workers in each department. It may not be the same worker or group of workers. It is not possible for the industrialists or the works manager to handle the situation with the help of untrained substitute labour, whose standard of production and efficiency are not on a par with those of the experienced and trained permanent workers. Therefore, the employer has to maintain a permanent auxiliary labour force in the factory, to replace the absentees. But this will increase the cost of production. Even if the latter course were to be adopted it gives an advantage to the employer to 'play off' workers and force some of them to go on compulsory leave, as is usually done in many of the textile factories.

Both these factors indirectly affect the morale of other workers in the job. The foreman or production manager may ask the worker who is present to do the job of the absentee, instead of taking a substitute in order to avoid the increase in the cost of production. In such a case, the workers will resent it and this creates bad feelings among them. Therefore, industrialists consider that absenteeism is a persistent hindrance to production.

An examination can now be made of the various causes of absenteeism, which is so high in India.

*Sickness.*—The most important and common reason that is given by an employee for his absence from work is sickness. The general health of the industrial workers is very low due to malnutrition, low wages and hard manual work for long hours. His general vitality is sapped in the factory and when he returns home he has to live in a crowded, ill ventilated house in an insanitary locality.

Secondly, the occupational diseases like silicosis caused by inhaling of quartz dust by the miner, in a mica or coal mine and fluff by the sider and the waste cooly in a cotton textile factory, affect the respiratory system of the worker and shortens his span of life. In order to save himself from the fatal end, or to cure himself of the disease, he worker frequently absents himself from work.

*Accident* is another important cause which accounts for absenteeism. Generally in every factory where statistics of absenteeism are maintained, accidents and sickness are treated under one head. Lack of proper knowledge about the use of the machine, and improper or lack of protection to the machine are responsible for the high incidence of accidents.

Accidents also occur due to bad working conditions. Managements have to rectify these unsafe conditions. During 1943, in the shipyards in the United States, it was estimated that the total man-days lost were 20 per each disabling injury, which were estimated as 1,02,500.

The rate of absenteeism caused by sickness and accident is about 25% of the total absenteeism.

*Hours of Work.*—Even though the Factory Act stipulates the hours of work as 48 per week and 8 to 8½ hours per day with rest breaks, many industries do not observe this rule. Even under the present stipulated time, the worker is exhausted and unless he takes sufficient rest, he is not fit for work the next day. Many employers often engage the same workers for working overtime also. The worker too, not knowing the consequences, takes up overtime work for immediate economic advantage. It has been investigated and found in the West that workers working for longer hours per day are more frequently absent than those that work shorter hours with intervals for rest.

*Fatigue.*—This is caused by arduous work and compels a man to take rest. When he neglects to take rest, during night, he is forced to absent himself from work the next day.

*Boredom.*—The monotonous and repetitive job causes absenteeism. The worker should be allowed to change over from one job to another to get relief from the monotony as is often done by the drawer and readier in the drawing Department of the textile industry.

Unsuitable working conditions, like bad lighting and ventilation, extremes of tem-

perature and other factors often lead to exhaustion and illness and consequently to absence from work.

Lack of understanding between the worker and the management or between worker and the foreman, and worker and worker causes mental and psychological tension. When the worker is having an internal conflict, he loses all interest in his job and absents himself from work. So the Labour Officer or management should see that there is complete harmony and understanding between one section and another of workers, and try to maintain harmonious relations in the factory premises.

Job placement is very important from the point of view of absenteeism. If the worker is placed on a job for which he is not trained properly, or is psychologically or physically not suitable, then he will not take interest in his work. This leads to discouragement, fatigue, accident and finally to absence.

Lack of proper *medical aid and first aid* is also responsible for absenteeism. If the worker, for every minute ailment or injury has to go elsewhere for first aid or medical help, he will be absent from his job. Similarly when any member of his family, wife or child, falls sick, and if there is no proper arrangement to provide them adequate medical help, he remains absent from work.

Lack of such welfare facilities as canteens, nutritive food, snacks and tea, rest rooms, sanitary conditions etc., will surely increase absenteeism.

*Low Wages.*—If wages are below the subsistence level, the worker will be forced to seek subsidiary job in order to supplement his earnings. In such a case, he frequently absents himself from his main job.

Besides these various factors, there are also others which lead to absenteeism in industry. Some of these are discussed below.

Bad housing condition is one of the most important factors. A contented labour force that lives near the work place will be an asset to any industry. If the worker has to walk a long distance early in the morning and late in the evening, he feels exhausted and often desires to take rest at home. In such a case, during the rainy season, the worker fails to go to the factory, for want of facilities. And lack of proper transport facilities also affects a worker's attendance at the place of his work. Further lack of marketing facilities near the living place also is reported to partially cause the workers, especially women workers, to absent themselves from work. Besides these, festivals, religious occasions, marriages in the family, etc., keep a worker away from his work frequently.

Another important factor is the desire for rest and enjoyment. The Indian worker feels that he needs rest and without it he thinks that he will fall ill and so he forces himself to rest by feigning sickness.

*Drink evil* is another important cause for absenteeism. In Bihar and Madras, workers in the mining areas are generally addicted to drink, and the day after pay absenteeism is the highest as many visit the toddy shop, get drunk and fail to report to duty the next day. The weaving community in Sholapur is also reported to be addicted to drink and therefore frequently absent themselves from work.

Absenteeism among married women is frequent, because they have to play the dual role, one as the bread winner, and secondly as the housewife. She has to attend to children, husband and other rela-

tives at home and also work on her job in the mill.

In India as well as in other countries little has been done to meet the situation and bring down the rate of absenteeism. So far the employer is providing few welfare amenities like medical aid, housing, transport and marketing facilities.

Precautions no doubt are being taken to prevent and reduce the incidence of accidents. Measures such as fencing the machinery by railings are being adopted by employers in many cases for the safety of the workers. Though these precautions are taken by the employers, yet very few are giving necessary instructions to the workers, when they are first employed, about the handling of the machinery and precautionary steps they have to take in the course of the performance of their duties.

Every employer has provided medical facilities as required by the Factory Act. In some mills, first aid dispensaries are established and in others regular medical officers and Safety Engineers are appointed to co-ordinate the work of treatment and prevention of accidents and injuries.

The Factories Act laid down the provision for the weekly holidays, rest pauses and leave with pay in order that the workers may have adequate rest and enjoy their social life. But it is found that in practice, the worker is permitted to take leave, not according to his need, but to suit the convenience of the employer. So the workers in many instances are forced to go home without applying for leave. This causes more of unaccountable absenteeism. In some cases, the worker does not inform the employer, even when he is leaving the job in preference to another. So for some time at least he is treated as absent in one factory

though he may have started work in another.

In mica mines and coal mines, there are no facilities whatsoever, to prevent accidents occurring daily due to the falling off of the sides and the roof. Due to inadequate lighting, especially in mica mines, workers have to grope in the dark with small candles in hand; when once these candles are blown out, they cannot proceed further with their work. Many accidents occur due to bad working conditions. Workers should be provided with electric torch lights in the mines.

Little is being done to improve the social condition of the worker and his family. In cities, they live in crowded slums where welfare activities are carried by the municipal authorities just in name.

In case the State or the employer or the community provides a decent standard of living conditions, with all the amenities of recreation, health, sanitation and education for children, within easy reach of the worker and his family, he will not have any occasion to worry when he is on his job. He will concentrate on his work, which will increase his efficiency and thereby production and his earnings as well.

In some industries, the employer is giving profit sharing bonus. In some, cases, this bonus is paid on attendance basis, as in the Tata Iron and Steel Company at Jamshedpur. Surely this may be an incentive to the worker. But experience of such bonus systems as attendance bonus, production bonus, efficiency bonus, etc., has shown that it only corrupts the worker and has not improved him, nor has it in any way reduced or solved the problem of absenteeism.

So far no attempt has been made in India to consider and solve this problem of

absenteeism in the right perspective. Whatever measures are adopted by employers in this direction are done, not with a view to mitigating this problem but only to satisfying demands of the workers and only to meeting the provisions of the Factories Act. The problem is not the complete elimination of absenteeism for that is impossible of achievement, but is prevention and control of it.

The following few suggestions may be considered to reduce and control absenteeism in industry.

The employer as well as the worker should have a complete understanding of the difficulties both have to face in industry and should co-operate with each other. The relation between the worker and the foreman must be friendly. The foreman must have a humanitarian and sympathetic attitude towards the workers under his charge, and should not irritate them. The employer should select such trained supervisory staff who are capable of handling the situation in the right way.

Whenever a worker is absent, the Personnel Officer or his staff should visit the worker at his place of residence in a friendly approach and find out the cause of his absence and give all necessary advice and help. He should not hurt the worker's feelings and give him scope to think that he is doing all this in the interests of the management. For this, every factory should employ trained personnel staff with modern outlook. The worker should be made to feel that he is one of the entire organization and has equal responsibilities in the production and working of the industry. He must be made to feel that he is contributing a valuable part in the promotion of the interests and welfare of his nation. A study of a worker's attitude towards his

work, fellow workers, supervisors and the effect of external factors on his attitudes is very important if the rate of absenteeism has to be reduced.

Selection of a right type of person for the right job is most important in an industry. The Personnel Officer must know the job requirements and how to select the right man. There are many misfits in every factory. Due to improper and wrong selection, a person who will be more suitable to work in a particular job, may be employed on some other job in which he finds no interest and thereby frequently absents himself from work. After employment, the personnel department should study and investigate with the help of the Engineer or foreman whether the worker is suitable for the job; if not he should be immediately changed to another suitable job.

The wage level should be raised, so that the worker has no financial worries when he is on the job. If he has to think of how to pay his medical bills and for the education of children, and such other problems, he will not attend to his work pro-

perly. The employer or the community should give him facilities to borrow in cases of emergencies at low rate or no rate of interest by starting co-operative credit societies and also by giving loans from his provident fund.

Adequate marketing facilities within the reach of the worker and his family will also help to bring down the rate of absenteeism. Co-operative Consumer Stores should be started nearer the working class localities.

The worker should be diverted from the drink evil, which accounts for a large percentage of absenteeism. As there is no other way of amusement and diversion provided by either the employer or the community or the State, he straight away goes to the toddy shop. The introduction of prohibition alone will not solve the problem; he must be given some other amusement or activity to recreate his mind and body and relieve him from fatigue and emotional tensions. Though it is the responsibility of the State, the employer and the community should help him in this by providing recreational facilities during his leisure hours.