

Introduction.—Absenteeism and indebtedness are regarded as two chronic problems of our industries. Among many employers there is an awareness of the importance of these problems, but there appears to be a pessimistic—'nothing can be done about them'—attitude about tackling these problems. Hence there are no whole-hearted attempts to minimize the extent of these problems. In this paper an attempt will be made to understand the nature and causes of absenteeism and towards that end it may be possible for us to suggest some remedial measures. But before understanding the nature and causes of absenteeism let us be clear about the meaning of the term absenteeism.

There have been many definitions of absenteeism but the most appropriate one appears to be as follows:—'Failure of a worker to report for work when he is scheduled to work'. An employee is to be regarded as absent when he fails to report to duty and it presupposes that there is work waiting for him. This definition excludes 'leave' which the workers enjoy with the consent of the management. And late attendance for work will be regarded as absence (for that period).

Absenteeism poses a serious problem for many industries. It often results in loss of production, increase in the cost of production and other inconveniences. For a cost-conscious management it is an important problem. Sometimes the management may make some arrangements for replacements.

But it becomes uneconomical as the management may be required to pay these workers on other days when they cannot be given any work; In the textile mills of Bombay their managements have introduced a Badli system in which a permanent cadre of workers is maintained by the individual textile mills. These workers substitute for the absentee workers and are paid for whatever work they do (i.e. they do not get paid for the days on which they do not work). These 'Badli' workers are usually unskilled workers and they cannot replace the semi-skilled or the skilled workers. So even in these textile mills absenteeism among the skilled and semi-skilled workers is a problem. The remedial measures would consist of attempting to find out the causes of this phenomenon and then something could be done to remove them.

During the last few years with the introduction of Employees' State Insurance Scheme, the absence of the workers appears to have increased. It is claimed that the panel doctors knowingly or unknowingly are increasing absenteeism. A worker can always approach his panel doctor and ask for a sickness certificate. And the doctors many a time appear to oblige the workers. Anyway, the employers are making an issue out of it. Rather than facing the problem they are content with making a scapegoat out of E.S.I. and the panel doctors.

Patterns of Absenteeism.—While attempting to study the problem of absenteeism it is essential to know its pattern in a

*Mr. Desai is Lecturer in Psychology, Bombay.

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Chembur,

particular industry. This pattern may differ from industry to industry, from city to city and from country to country. We may find that in an industry absenteeism is more in one or a few departments only. It may be observed that absenteeism is more during the 2nd shift (it is more). It may be possible that absenteeism is more on certain dates in a month (notably after pay-days), or on certain days in a week (it is observed that absenteeism increases on the day following the weekly off). It is quite possible that absenteeism increases during certain seasons (the monsoon, the Ganpati festival, the pooja festival, the Holi festival and so on). On the other hand, we may observe that absenteeism may not have any fixed pattern but is confined to a few individuals only. Our course of action will then have to be very different for different patterns. The measures that we propose to take, will have to take into account the pattern of absenteeism.

Causes of Absenteeism.—For any social phenomenon like absenteeism we should never expect to find a single cause or a single factor. As is true of all social phenomena a single effect is preceded by a multiplicity of causes. These various causes or factors together contribute towards the final effect. Some causes may make more contribution whereas some may make insignificant contribution.

These factors can be grouped under three headings: (i) Socio-Cultural factors affecting the individual worker, (ii) Job-related factors and (iii) Other difficulties of the individual workers.

We are attempting to list the various causes. This list may not be exhaustive. And it is not claimed that all these causes will be operative in a particular industry. We are only stating that some of these causes would be operative in some industries. By research

and research only we have to ascertain the causes that are operative in a specific industry.

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING THE INDIVIDUAL WORKER

The Socio-cultural background of workers is an important determinant of behaviour. To understand the behaviour of a worker it is necessary to understand his Socio-cultural background. Ours is an under-developed country though now we are developing at a rapid rate. The workers that we require for our industries are often drawn from villages. They migrate to cities out of compulsion—for survival. These workers are not accustomed to the rigours of city life. To them the life in the city is drab, dull and un-inspiring. These workers have a longing to go back to their villages. And on slightest pretext they do go back to their villages. This can be one of the causes of absenteeism.

Secondly, many of the workers belong to the joint families and many of their family members are staying at their native places. These workers send a portion of their earnings regularly at their native places. They also like to go back to their 'folks' occasionally. This may be one of the reasons as to why the workers frequently go back to their native places.

Thirdly, ours is a culture of festivals. Especially in our villages many festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm. The workers who have cherished the childhood memories of these festivals like to go back to their villages during these festivals. For example, the Ganpati festival and the Holi festival are important for the workers from the coastal districts of Maharashtra (Ratnagiri, Kolaba & Thana) who comprise a large proportion of Textile Workers in Bombay City. And during these festivals many textile workers go to their native

places and absenteeism increases. This may be still another reason why the workers like to go back to their native places.

Fourthly, many families of workers have their lands at the native place. In the monsoon season they raise the crops. For this "purpose they require help—financial and manual. And many workers go back to their native places during monsoon seasons—at the beginning and towards the end.

Speaking of Socio-cultural factors I would like to record a curious observation made in the mining industry. There it was observed that when the pay scales were increased absenteeism also increased. It appeared that the workers did not need so much extra money and this they spent on booze. So rather than going to work and obtaining more money they preferred to retain the same standard of living and spend all the extra earnings on drinks.

This fact was also noted among labourers working in the Bombay Port Trust Docks. There when the Piece Rate system was introduced many workers started getting double the salary. Some of these workers, then, would work only for 15/20 days to earn the previously earned salary and then they would stay away from work. They had no desire for more money. So sometimes financial incentives might create other problems such as these.

Some of our illiterate rural workers have low level of economic aspirations and they would prefer to relax and take it easy, after being sure of having earned a salary sufficient to make both ends meet. This is another Socio-cultural factor operating in industries where the labourers are from tribal groups.

So we observe that for various reasons the workers are going back to their native places or staying away from work. And since they cannot get authorised leave for these various

reasons, they choose to remain absent—or pretend that they are sick and produce a medical certificate.

These are some of the Socio-cultural factors operating on the individual workers. We can find out whether these factors are operative in a particular industry or not. If we find that absenteeism increases during certain seasons only then we can say that the Socio-cultural factors are at work.

The Job-Related Factors.—A worker spends about 8/9 hours on his job every day (weekly offs & holidays excepted). The remaining 15/16 hours are spent outside the factory—in his home, neighbourhood etc. For the sake of convenience we have divided the life of the worker into two compartments—the life inside the place of work and life outside the place of work. But we have to realise that these two compartments are not watertight. In fact the two do influence each other. The worker's life outside his job may influence his performance on job and vice versa. In other words, the satisfactions that the worker derives from his job and his frustrations to some extent influence the satisfactions and frustrations outside the job—in his home life and Social life.

We will now consider the conditions on the job that might contribute to his absenteeism. As a general rule we can say that if the worker does not like the job he is doing, then he will try to stay away from the job as often as he can. But since the job is also fetching him money which he requires for his survival and well being he is compelled to be present at the job. These two forces act upon him and pull him in the opposite direction. Both these forces are operative on him at the same time.

Now let us consider the aspects of the job which the worker may not like:

Firstly, we have to point out that many of our workers with their rural background are accustomed to work in the open air and clear sunshine in the villages. They do not like to work in a confined, noisy, ill-lit and ill-ventilated work place in the industries (this is true of many Textile Mills in Bombay). The contrast between the two is too glaring. For this reason the workers may not like to work in such industries.

Secondly, the work which they were doing in their native places was meaningful and interesting. The work which now they are compelled to do in the factories is dull, monotonous and uninteresting. The nature of work is often not meaningful enough for the worker.

Thirdly, the supervisor under whom he is working is an important contributor to his job satisfaction. A supervisor can make the worker's life miserable in the job. What sort of adjustment a worker is able to make with his supervisor to some extent contributes to his job satisfaction. In some studies it was observed that there was much dissatisfaction with supervision among the high absentees.

Fourthly, the relationship with the co-workers also plays an important role in his job satisfaction. The companionship on the job may act as a balm to the miserable life in the workshop. A worker derives much satisfaction from his job when he is working in a congenial group of workers.

And lastly, the type of job which the worker holds is also an important contributor to his job satisfactions. If the work is adequately suited the worker being neither underqualified nor over qualified—the chances are that the worker would be more satisfied with his job. The worker who takes more pride in his work has more job satisfaction. It has been observed that skilled workers are more satisfied with their jobs

than the unskilled workers, presumably because they take more pride in their work.

These are some of the job-related factors contributing to absenteeism. But to what extent these can be operative in a country like ours? Ours is an over-populated country. There is unemployment among illiterate workers and also among the literates. In such a situation there is bound to be insecurity about the job. For survival and for his own well-being the worker has to earn his salary and stick to his job. So he cannot afford to be absent from the job. He may not work with enthusiasm or may work with less efficiency but he will come to work regularly if he feels insecure in the job. So among our unskilled workers these job-related factors may not be important. But among the skilled workers these factors may be more important. They are not so insecure about their jobs and they are more sensitive to job conditions and to supervision. So when we are thinking of the importance of job-related factors in absenteeism we must know the type of workers that are involved in absenteeism.

Now let us consider the other difficulties of the individual workers.

Difficulties of the workers.—Here we will consider the health problems of the workers and their families, other domestic difficulties of the workers, indebtedness among the workers and other such factors.

Firstly, let us consider the health of the worker as one of the contributors to absenteeism. In order to perform the work efficiently the worker must be in good health. And in order to be present on the job and work with at least marginal efficiency he must be free from ill-health. A sick worker is compelled to stay away from his job. So in order to attend his job regularly the worker must enjoy reasonably good health. There are many factors which

contribute to the ill-health of the worker. Inadequate and un nourishing food, congested home, lack of adequate ventilation and lighting, etc. are some of these factors which contribute to the ill-health of the worker. And looking at our workers' residences we find that they are staying in over-crowded, ill-ventilated and over-congested homes. Looking at their homes one may start wondering as to how they survive at all. Anyway, poor health of our workers is an important contributor to absenteeism. But it is observed that many a time ill-health is the apparent reason for absence. A worker may want to stay away for some other reasons. But he dare not give the real reason because it may not be accepted by the management so he is compelled to produce a sick certificate to justify his absence. Now-a-days he may take help of his panel doctor (of E.S.I. Scheme) to do so. But ill-health of the worker is often the stated reason for his absence. And whenever it is given as a reason for absence it is essential to probe deeper into the matter.

Another contributor to absenteeism is the poor health of his family members. When the wife of the worker or one of his children is sick, the worker may be compelled to stay away from work. Because he may be required to attend to the sick person, to bring his medicine and assist in other domestic chores. This is another stated reason for his absence and this also requires careful scrutiny.

Still another contributor to absenteeism is the transport difficulty faced by workers. In the rapidly growing cities the workers may be required to stay far away from the place of work. It is not the physical distance from the factory *per se* that contributes to absenteeism but the time involved in travelling from home to place of work and back. Our trains are always overcrowded

and it may not be possible for the worker to board the train or to get down at the destination. One is compelled to wait for a long time in queues if one decides to travel by bus. Shift duties may pose additional transport problems. A worker finishing his duties at mid-night may not be able to reach his home by morning due to lack of trains or buses. A worker who is expected to start his work at mid-night may be compelled to reach the place of work much earlier for the same reasons. Some studies have indicated that absenteeism is more among workers who are staying far away from the factory.

Besides there are also other domestic chores which our worker has to attend. In our culture, specially in the lower classes from which we get a majority of factory workers, the women folk are still expected to be in their home. They may not go to market place to make purchases. They may not go to Rationing Offices to secure ration-cards. They will not go to ration-shops to purchase grains. The worker himself may be compelled to do all these tasks. And for these reasons he may be compelled to stay away from his job. The point is that we must be aware of the difficulties of the workers and if management is able to solve these difficulties it may be possible to reduce absenteeism.

Another important contributor to absenteeism is indebtedness. It has been observed that many a time the two go together, A worker may be indebted for some obvious reasons (marriages of self and family members, sickness in the family, death in the family and so on and so forth) and may take loans from unscrupulous creditors at exorbitant rates of interest. And then the creditors may start threatening him. And he may be compelled to stay away from work for a few days (after pay day) to avoid these creditors. And because of his

absence he may get less salary and may not be able to repay the loan. Thus he enters a vicious circle from which he cannot get out on his own.

These are some of the difficulties faced by the workers and an attempt must be made to understand the nature of the difficulties faced by the workers.

So far we have discussed the various causes of absenteeism. In the case of a particular industry all the causes may not be operative. Some causes may be common in some industries. In addition there may be different difficulties faced by the individuals in different industries.

These causes will have to be ascertained by research. Now we will discuss the research methods employed to understand the nature and extent of this problem.

There have been numerous studies on absenteeism. Researches in Western countries indicate the importance of Job-related factors. Some studies have also attempted to establish the relationship of absenteeism with such personal factors as Age, Marital status, Years of service, Place of residence (distance from factory) and so on and so forth. Researches done in our country have followed this lead. But I feel that the factors regarded as important in the Western countries may not be found to be important in our country. There are vast cultural differences in the Western countries and India. Firstly, our workers are illiterate and are not urbanised to that extent. Secondly, the economic condition of our workers is rather deplorable. Studies in motivation of workers carried out in some parts of India have indicated that our workers regard salary and security as the two most important parts of the job. Whereas in the Western countries opportunity for advancement, good working conditions, good company are sometimes regarded as

more important. So it is quite possible that the factors which are operative in the Western countries may not be operative here.

I believe that here Socio-cultural factors and the individual difficulties of the workers are more important contributors towards absenteeism. Further researches should be directed at these factors.

The pattern of absenteeism in a particular industry can indicate the importance of socio-cultural factors. We would then find that absenteeism increases during certain periods only. If, on the other hand, absenteeism has no such fixed pattern then we should go in for 'case study' type of research. We should investigate in greater details a few chronic absentees. We may then come across some common difficulties. I firmly believe that our workers remain absent only because they are compelled to stay away from work. So we should investigate the chronic absentees with a view to find out their difficulties. For such a study the traditional Questionnaire method or the Interview schedule method is not of much use. We should go in for 'case study' method.

And after the difficulties of the workers are ascertained the management can then think of appropriate remedial measures.

The Remedial Measures.—If any industry has a problem of absenteeism it should start with finding out the pattern of absenteeism. The absenteeism can be seasonal. In such a case the causes are to be discovered from among the socio-cultural factors. If we know the cause we can bring down absenteeism by introducing special incentive schemes during these seasons. In the Bata Shoe Co., the management has been able to reduce absenteeism by about 70% after the introduction of such a scheme.

If the absenteeism increases after pay-day it may be possible that there is greater

indebtedness among the workers. In such a case the long range measure would be introduction of credit co-operative societies.

If on the other hand, we find that the absenteeism may be restricted to a few employees only then we have to study these employees with a view to understanding their difficulties. It may be possible that the employees may be facing such common difficulties as obtaining rations, difficulty of transport, sickness in the family and so on. By proper employee counselling, personal problems of the employees can be tackled. Starting a fair price shop, home delivery of

food-grains can solve common problems of many employees.

What I am trying to suggest is that it is up to the management to take cognizance of the difficulties of the employees. Sympathetic management can always find out ways and means of solving the problems of employees. Such an approach will change the attitudes of employees towards management. And in the long run the problem would be solved. But it is within the power of management to take a lead in the matter.

Thus the problem of absenteeism can be tackled in our industries.

REFERENCES

- ¹Survey of absenteeism pattern by K. C. Seal in 'Labour Survey Techniques', published by Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, 1964.
- ²Psychological Researches on Labour Problem in India' by H. C. Ganguli in 'Industrial Labour in India', Ed: V. B. Singh, Asia Publishing House, 1963.
- ³Getting Across to Employees by John S. Morgan, McGraw Hill Book Co., 1964.
- ⁴ Personnel & Industrial Psychology by Ghiselli & Brown, McGraw Hill Book Co., 1955.
- ⁵A Survey of Absenteeism in Laxmi & Vishnu Mills, Sholapur, by Dr. S. D. Puneekar & Others, Dept. of Social Research, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 1962.