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* Mica Industry to be placed on a Sound and Stable Footing

"The Government of India is prepared to do its best to put this industry on a sound and stable footing," observed the Hon'ble Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Labour Member, addressing a Mica Conference between representatives of the Government of India, the Bihar Government, trade associations and spokesmen of mica labour, held at Kodarma (Bihar) on April 29.

The Bihar Government was represented, among others, by Mr. E. C. Ansorge, Adviser ; Mr. J. S. Wilcock, Secretary, Revenue Department; and Mr. M. Z. Khan, Deputy Commissioner, Hazaribagh district. Mr. D. L. Mazumdar, Joint Secretary, Labour Department, Dr. E. L. G. Clegg. Director, Geological Survey of India, and Mr. J. T. K. Crosfield, Supervisory Field Officer of the Geological Survey, represented the Central Government.

"The Government of India," said Dr. Ambedkar, "realised that after the war, India might not retain its monopoly in mica to the same degree as today." He indicated that, with a view to placing the industry on a stable and permanent footing, the Government proposed to set up an Inquiry Committee which would deal both with the immediate and ultimate problems of the mica industry.

The Committee's terms of reference would be ; Working of the Mica Control Order, both in regard to war production and the effect of the Order on long-term policy, and the review of any orders that may have been passed by the Government in connection with that order; the present system of marketing—both inland and abroad ; standardisation of quality ; the extent to which alternative sources of supply may have jeopardised or are likely to jeopardise the position of this country as

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a principal supplier of muscovite mica and the extent to which other materials that may be used as substitutes for mica may have displaced or are likely to displace mica or its uses in industry; increased utilisation of mica in this country for the manufacture of finished goods; research and development; the desirability of setting up suitable machinery, whether by appointment of a Central Mica Committee or otherwise, to watch the interest of the mica trade and industry.

Dr. Ambedkar said the inquiry Committee would consist of a whole-time Chairman, two part-time members—one experienced in inland trade and the other in the export trade—and a wholetime Secretary. There would be seven assessors with the Committee, two representing the Government of Bihar, two representing Bihar dealers, one each representing the Madras and Rajputana mica trade, and one representing mica labour. In addition, the Committee would be assisted by two technical advisers, one of whom would be the Director of the Geological Survey of India and the other a representative of the Board of Scientific and Industrial Research.

Labour Welfare

Referring to the question of labour and industry, the Labour Member emphasised that if Government was to help the industry it would not allow the industry to exploit labour. It had been said that India's monopoly was based on cheap labour. If this was true it was not a matter of compliment cither to the industry or to labour. If Government was to intervene or to take measures in order to stabilise the industry, Government would expect the industry to safeguard the interests of labour.

The Labour Member observed that Government would require that labour must be assured a living wage, fair conditions of employment and general welfare, in the interest of maintaining Labour Welfare. He referred to the general policy that had been evolved to maintain labour by collecting money from industry and pointed out the welfare cess on coal as an example. The industry, he continued, must bear the cost of welfare by a special cess.

Earlier in his speech, the Labour Member, emphasising the importance of Indian's mica industry, referred to the fact that

electro-technical industries depended on mica for their existence and that mica was strategic material without which defence of the country would be impossible. World production of sheet mica in metric tons in 1913 was 17,018 of which India's production was 14,598— practically 81.7 per cent. And yet the mica industry had played next to no part in the industrial affairs of India.

He said : "We hear a great deal about the cotton, textile and jute industries but it is seldom that one comes across any reference to India's mica industry". Giving reasons for this, Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that there were two sets of causes—first, that mica produced was not consumed in India. Mica was entirely exported and the Indian people, therefore, were unconcerned. Profits were derived from the outside world and the consuming public were not interested in the mica industry. The second set of causes included the ineffective and unorganised state of the industry. He quoted figures to show that the production of sheet mica in India in metric tons had increased from 1,714 in 1905 to 14598 in 1937. Another indication of the industry's colossal growth was the fact that in the dry season the industry employed 60,000 workers in mines and factories and about 1,00,000 as home splitters. In spite of its enormous growth, he said, there was no big organisation in the mica industry comparable with the Millowners' Association or the Northern India Employers' Federation.

Piracy

Giving reasons for this state of affairs, he observed that persons concerned with the industry were torn by the spirit of mutual jealousy and trade rivalries. Each one was trying to build his place at the cost of others. It was a case of all competition and no co-operation. Referring to the future of the industry, the Labour Member said that the Government of India were prepared to do their best to put this industry on a sound and stable footing. The Government realised that there were two problems before the industry, one an immediate problem and the other the ultimate problem involving long-term policy. The immediate problem was the problem of mica piracy. In ordinary circumstances the Government of India would have thought that ordinary law dealing with theft and the receiving of stolen property was sufficient, but having regard to the importance of mica they were anxious to assist the industry

to the best of their ability. The Mica Control Order was in existence and, whatever its defects, it certainly provided machinery whereby the extent of piracy had been reduced. He pleaded for co-operation by those engaged in industry and assured them that the Government were ready to take steps to stop piracy.

Proposal Welcomed

Representatives of the industry at the conference unanimously welcomed the proposal to set up an Inquiry Committee. It was suggested that the Committee might also go into the question of postwar reconstruction as regards the mica industry.

Earlier, the Conference discussed measures intended to meet the immediate needs of the industry. These included proposals regarding prohibition of the purchase, sale or transfer of certain types of mica, the vesting of District Magistrates and Provincial Governments with a certain amount of discretionary authority in granting certificates, prevention of multiplicity of licensed agents, control of the location of godowns for the storage of mica and improvements in the administrative machinery.

It was indicated that the Central Government intended to amend the Mica Control Order, 1940, to provide for these, at an early date.

In regard to the welfare of mica labour, existing arrangements for grain concessions and dearness allowance, housing conditions, water supply, medical facilities and wages were reviewed. The Labour Member inquired if there was a certain basic wage for mica labour and emphasissed the need to provide medical attention, housing facilities and water supply. It was stated that most of the workers lived in their villages. There appeared to be general agreement on the proposal to impose a welfare and development cess in the interest of mica labour. It was agreed that the Geological Survey of India should be responsible for the distribution of coal to mica mines.

Labour Member Visits Mica Mines

On April 28, Dr. Ambedkar, accompanied by Mr. Mazumdar, Dr. Clegg, and Mr. Crossfield, visited a mica mine and a mica factory. The party went down about 400 feet by means of a ladder installed in the mines. Among various other aspects of mining, the Labour Member

saw drilling and boring operations conducted through pneumatic drills worked by lend-lease compressors which had been placed at the disposal of the industry by Government to stimulate mica production. Returning to the surface, the Labour Member visited the Labourers' hutted colony. In the middle were two saffron-coloured triangular stones placed against a tree. The Labour Member was informed that the labourers worshipped these stones as "Goddess of Mica"

In the factory at Kodarma, thousands of workers—men and women—squatted in huge dormitories, working on blocks of mica. Here the party saw various processes of mica manufacture, e.g. slating of mica, kinfe-drcssing, sick-dressing and splitting-performed with unerring judgment and skill, by hand. In one section of the factory, workers were splitting mica into thin sheets of uniform sizes, to be used ultimately as condenser films in spark plugs for aeroplanes. In another section, the Labour Member saw blocks of mica being cut into small sheets for being manufactured into micanite.

Science Has Increased The Importance Of Mica

India is the world's leading producer of sheet mica, which is mined mainly in the Hazaribagh and Gaya districts in Bihar, and Nellore in Madras, and to a minor extent in other districts in Madras and in Tonk State and Ajmer-Merwara in Rajputana, about 80 per cent coming from Bihar and most of the remainder from Nellore. This pre-eminence in the world's markets, is due largely to the excellent quality of the so-called " Bengal ruby " mica of Bihar, but also to the great manual dexterity of the aboriginals, mainly women, who trim and split the mica with crude soft-iron sickles (or shears in Nellore). So much is this the case that in pre-war years there was an appreciable import of block mica into India, to be re exported in the form of splittings. Mica has been used in India for centuries for decorative and medicinal purposes.

The mica occurs as "books", giant crystals which have been found, exceptionally, as large as 10 feet in diameter, in great veins of pegmatite traversing mica schists. The mica, which is muscovite, occurs with felspar and quartz and other minerals such as beryl, which from Ajmer is exported as an ore of beryllium.

Most of the mica exported from India goes to the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Advance of science, instead of rendering this natural product obsolete, has increased its importance. With the employment of higher temperatures of voltages in generators, as radio and television are developed, as the number of motor-cars and aeroplanes increases, and even as the electron is brought under control, mica becomes increasingly important.

It is considered indispensable for the following appliances :

(1) commutator segments, for motors and generators ;

(2) commutator V-rings, for motors and generators ;

(3) armatures (high temperature and high voltage);

(4) aeroplane motor spark plugs ;

(5) radio tubes;

(6) transformers ; and

(7) radio condensers.

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