

REVIEWS

Strike of Supervisory Staff in the State Bank of India, by Ishwar Dayal and Baldev Sharma. Bombay, Progressive, 1971.

In this book Professors Ishwar Dayal and Baldev Sharma have presented a detailed diagnosis of the strike of supervisory employees to the State Bank of India. The strike, as the authors point out, was unique in more ways than one. First, it was a strike by those employees who are usually regarded as part of the management. Secondly, it was the first prolonged strike by white collar employees, and finally after the strike dissolved the parties agreed to amicable settlements of mutual problems without wasting time in needless recriminations. (p. 3,4)

The approach to the problem rests on quite logical grounds and according to the accepted models of Industrial Relations. To be specific, first of all the principal actors (in this case the management and the employees' federation) have been identified and their characteristics have been highlighted. Secondly, the background (cultural, demographic and attitudinal) of the employees (those who went on strike have been investigated in order to look for clues that may help to understand why (a) the strike took place and (b) it took place in the State Bank of India. This latter has been investigated by comparing the attitudinal and demographic data obtained from six other Banks. Third, the Industrial Relations situations, in the State Bank of India has been investigated in detail with special regard to the climate prevailing in the Bank just prior to and during the strike. Finally, the authors have presented their diagnosis of the causal roots, of which the strike was the visible effect. They have consolidated and analysed the data presented in the previous chapters as to their relevance to and impact on the strike. This consolidation and deduction (there from) have been done in a manner which the authors claim "helps to provide an understanding of (a) the universality of the kind of processes that cause conflict and strike in industry, and (b) the human response to work situations irrespective of the perceived levels of responsibility in the organisation. (p. 5)

The starting point of the analysis, as has been noted above, is a detailed investigation into the characteristics of the two systems, the management and the federation. In each case, the description centres around the allocation of tasks, organisational hierarchy, authority patterns, leadership styles, and managerial philosophy. Clear distinction between the two systems with regard to these variables are pointed out. Of interest are the differences in managerial philosophy. There seems to be no common meeting ground for the two Actors. As the authors later say, differences in perceived roles of other actors, are a basic cause of suspicion and apprehension of each other's objectives. The point is brought home quite forcefully by a look at the differences in philosophy and objectives of the management and the federation.

The presentation of the organisational hierarchies, especially of the top management is not very lucidly done. It appears from the details that there are overlaps and duplications in the system ; the problem is that since these are not shown related directly to the organisation chart, one is left wondering as to how to fit all that data into a framework. Further, these do not appear sufficiently conceptually related to the authors' model to show why conflict among senior employees can be envisaged. One has to make one's own deductions. Lastly, although it is said that 'there is considerable emphasis on impersonal relationships, as commonly observed in a bureaucracy' it is never stated specifically stated that the Bank is a bureaucracy, probably because of the degree of decentralisation and delegation. Even this implication, however, poses problems for the serious reader since data on the exact positions of the supervisors, their span of control etc., are lacking.

In contrast to the management system, the description of the Staff Federation is quite lucidly presented. This is probably because the union system, not being a bureaucracy, is slightly easier to comprehend. In any case, one gains a fair amount of insight into the union system.

However, the authors do not adequately explain one point. They state that the previous unions failed because they were of the 'club variety'. But if, as is stated, the management looked upon the Federation also as a club then it is not readily understandable why (a) from the management's point of view the new 'club' should receive a better treatment compared to the previous ones, and (b) they should receive amenities like office space etc. Since the possibility that registration of the Association as a Trade Union had any effect on the management is discounted, such avuncular behaviour on the part of top management appears inexplicable. A possible answer may be found in a statement by a previous Chairman of the Bank that he would be able to talk to the supervisory staff better if they had a representative body (p. 18). While the authors deny the this remark had any catalytic effect on the formation of the Association, consideration of the presented evidence may lead one to think otherwise.

The assumptions underlying the strategies of the supervisory association are clearly identified. The most important among these appear to be (a) the supervisory staff are sandwiched between the 'aggressive' clerical union and the 'weak' top management and (b) since the management does not like unions, the existence of the union is threatened and only by collective strength can they survive the displeasure of management. (p. 22)

The point that emerges from the above is that in view of the indulgent behavior of top management towards the association, assumption (b) would appear to be more realistic, then the strike is more of an image-builder for the union members rather than anything else. Quite naturally therefore, if the union followed strategies which were directly influenced by this assumption, these would be perceived as hostile action by the top management and would contribute further to the rift between the union and the management. This point, though implicit in the author's argument, may be underscored by the researcher. The data on background and job attitudes of the supervisors form part of a larger study by the same authors on the Banking industry. The

background data for the supervisors are divided under (1) rural-urban background, (2) education, (3) age and seniority, and (4) salary. The job attitudes, which were measured on the basis of responses to a job attitude questionnaire, relate to job tension, job satisfaction, superior-subordinate relations etc.

As the authors say, no direct connection concerning the causes of the strike can be drawn from the data. Instead, some generalisations have been concluded. These can be summarised as (a) formal relationships with superiors (b) low level of satisfaction, (c) routine but high pressure work, (d) comparable salary and other benefits with the banking industry in general, and (e) lower rate of increase of pay as compared to the clerical staff.

The presented data give a fairly clear picture of the supervisors in the Bank. As far as the conclusions are concerned only two points will be made here. First, that the conclusions drawn appear to be in no way peculiar to the Banking industry. The bureaucratic model, which the data fit, can be applied to all types of organisation all over the world. The peculiarity in the data which may have been a latent casual factor in the strike, or even as far as the banking industry is concerned has not been explicitly considered. Secondly, although connections of mean differences have been drawn, significance levels have not been given. The astute reader may therefore find the conclusions a little difficult to accept. The matter however, is one of a minor technical oversight and will no doubt be corrected in later editions.

Table 4 (p. 43) shows the response pattern to questions concerning assumptions / perceptions of the supervisors concerning work and human beings in general. Although the authors do not specifically say so, the type of questions given seem to test belief in Theory X or Theory Y of McGregor. If that be so (and comparison with theory X, and theory Y assumptions in 'The Human Side of Enterprise' seems to confirm the suspicion) then the response pattern seems to indicate that the majority of supervisors have faith in Theory Y. One of the causal attributes of the strike can therefore possibly be traced to the dichotomy between the attitudes of the supervisors (belief in Theory Y) and the prescribed organisational norms to which they have to adhere. This possibility could have been delved into a little more deeply.

Chapter III contains a detailed description of the Industrial relations situation in the Bank at the time of the strike. A day by day account of worsening of mutual relations is given which amply clarifies the whole situation. The immediate cause of the strike appears to be, as the authors say, a response to the perceived victimisation of four members suspended from work, rather than the long standing grudges against the management.

The authors' search for causal attributes leads them to explore specifically (a) the organisational climate and (b) the organisational process. In the former, the authors relate the total response to two psychological factors: alienation, and history of victimisation of the supervisors by the top management. In terms of the taxonomy of work groups given by Chappall and Sayles, the response of the supervisors would appear to be of a conservative character, as the history of the

interaction between the association and the management shows. Therefore the sudden eruption of the feeling which resulted in the strike is not adequately — explained by the above factors ; more so, since the basic Secondary education level is 100% and the opportunities of alternative employment low, as revealed by the background data in Chapter II.

Presumably the authors' purpose is to show causal relations between the above factors and the strike. If that case the explanations brought up are short because of several reasons. First, the presentation of psychological factors as causal attributes needs necessarily relate to time ; otherwise there is a dilution which does serve to make the point of eruption vague. This is what has happened in the present case. Given that there was alienation and perceived victimisation, the eruption at a particular time and over a particular issue cannot be rationalised without adequate information as to the actual state of perceived alienation and victimisation in the supervisors *just prior* to the strike. Secondly, the authors seem to assume a kind of universality of perception among the supervisors. While this may have been so, it is also highly likely that it was not. If the latter holds then the problem should be attacked in another way. While this is not the place to suggest research avenues, one may (quite pertinently) point out that the obvious is not always the solution. What is important (and must be remembered) is that given two alternatives, and with no particular reason for choosing a particular one (the case as far as the reader is concerned), it is usually considered safe to explore both to the fullest possible extent.

The authors could have made their point better had they presented data on the number of supervisors on strike in the various circles and the number of respondents to their questionnaires in those circles. The kind of universality of feeling that the authors seem to point to would then have been brought home to the lay (or even the professional) reader.

Organisational climate of the Bank has been discussed under (a) Problem-solving, (b) Communication, and (c) Rule-making. Of these, communication seems the simplest to digest as a possible cause, however, the other two are not completely negligible in the context. The Problem-solving, as presented in the book, seems to point more to long-range dissatisfaction than spontaneous deviant behavior. The incidence of rule-making is more relevant in this respect, as the authors point out, 'mutuality in rule-making, or existence of a wide zone of indifference ensures compliance ; lack of these cause deviant behaviour.....the State Bank of India lacked institutional resource to measure and initiate such changes in rules as the situation required' (p. 74). Here the authors have brought out an important facet of the IR situation and are to be commended. In a bureaucracy, the explicitness of roles and tasks is necessary for compliance ; therefore, given that an organisation is bureaucratic, one can look to the explicitness of these factors in order to measure behavior. Total compliance can be measured only when there is no ambiguity. In case any ambiguity distortion of role perceptions takes place, and may give rise to not only role conflicts but substantive issues as well. The policy of 'appeasement' by the top management of the clerical staff as perceived by the supervisors is just an example of a substantive issue owing its origin to ambiguity in rule-making.

The authors conclude with some observations on such questions as (a) what constellation of factors explain the strike and what roles did the management and the federation play in the event? (b) why did the breakdown occur in June 1969 and not any other time? and (c) what did the strike achieve for both parties?

The answers to these questions (as given) are sufficiently particularistic to be considered as valid explanations.

The principal factors affecting the strike have been given under the heads concerns of the supervisory staff and concerns of the management. These are presumably based on interviews by the authors. What they show conforms quite nicely with the model of differing perceptions of the actors about each other. The possible methods of resolving such differences, as the authors note, was not followed in the State Bank of India. Perceptions of the reality being different, no path of honest feedback being allowed, and ability to correct self being not in evidence, it is quite understandable that the latent conflict was sparked off by the seemingly (to management) minor matter of chargesheeting four officers. This latter also helps to answer the second question. The authors show a clear awareness of the conservative attitude of the supervisors by saying that had this victimisation not been there, there would have been no strike.

The last question is quite lucidly answered in the second part of the book (Resolving Differences). The authors show how after the strike the two actors developed an increasing awareness of each other in terms of legitimacy of roles and problems. The authors appear quite satisfied with the progress that has been made in the union — top management relations since the strike, which is also the feeling of the reader who goes through the facts of the case.

However the important thing about this improvement in relationship is not that it is practically unique in the Indian context but that it has paved the way for institutionalisation of such open relationships in the future. The authors contend (and rightly) that only through such institutionalisation can one be hopeful of furtherance of amicable relationships by letting each problem be looked at objectively by both the parties.

Despite the minor inadequacies the book is to be especially recommended as one of a new generation of data based publications of the Industrial Relations situation in India. It is sad that today in India when there are so many developments in Industrial Relations we should have so little documentary evidence available for the general public as to specific cases. It is hoped that this book will set a trend which will in the long run be beneficial not only to students of this particular subject but also to professionals who are, so to speak, 'on the firing line'.

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