

Business Standard

The struggle is still on: Life after Maruti's Manesar factory clash

Workers jailed after the strife at Manesar factory are struggling to put their lives back together

Anjali Puri March 10, 2017 Last Updated at 13:24 IST



Business Standard is republishing this 2015 article as a court in Gurgaon in Haryana on 10 March, 2017 convicted 31 workers for the violence at the Maurti Suzuki factory in Manesar in 2012 in which a

Former Maruti Suzuki worker Narender was rejected for a driver's job because he failed police verification

manager died of asphyxiation.

During a week in late September, when almost every newspaper splashed on its front pages the news that Maruti Suzuki had raised the salaries of its permanent workers by Rs 16,800 a month, Narender, 31, a trained machinist who worked for five years at the car manufacturer's Manesar plant in Haryana, was refused a Rs 9,000 a month personal chauffeur's job.

[Read more: 2012 Maruti factory violence: Meet Sonu Gujjar, the man behind the strike](#)

"I applied for 15 jobs," he says, "after I came out of jail in May this year, with no luck. Finally, I steeled myself

to take up this driver's job — and then I failed the police verification.” This week, Narender, married with a child, still had no job. He works as a daily wage driver for taxi companies when he gets a call.

[Read more: 31 convicted, 117 acquitted in Maruti's 2012 violence case](#)

At their small Gurgaon home, a world away from the district's glass-and-steel office blocks, his father, Daya Ram, a Class X pass security guard in a shabby safari suit, produces, unasked, his son's Industrial Training Institute (ITI) diploma and testimonials.

“He got a joining letter from the company when it restarted after the trouble in July 2012,” he says, pulling out yet more papers from bulging files. “Look,” he says, tracing with his finger the printed sentences on a company letter, “he was asked to rejoin duty on August 27, 2012. And then, when they learnt he was in jail, they withdrew the call. Tell me, would they have wanted him back, in the first place, if he hadn't had a clean record?”

This faceless former worker for India's largest car-maker is part of a case etched in public memory, not least because it involved the death of a general manager, amid arson and violence. Narender was one of the 150 workers jailed after this episode of industrial strife on July 18, 2012, at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar plant.

Like all the others, he was charged under as many as 18 sections of the Indian Penal Code, including murder. Another 60-odd workers were named as absconders and nearly 2,500 were dismissed amid an avalanche of negative media publicity for the workers.

Those picked up by the police — from their parents' homes, from shared rented rooms in worker's tenements, from the streets — soon disappeared into Bhondsi Jail, leaving behind shell-shocked families. As 2012 turned into 2013, and then 2014, they remained in jail, their bail applications rejected.

Famously, a Punjab and Haryana High Court judge cited foreign investors while turning down a plea for bail in May 2013. “The incident is most unfortunate occurrence which has lowered the reputation of India in the estimation of the world. Foreign investors are not likely to invest the money in India out of fear of labour unrest,” the judge observed.

Rahul Roy's 2015 film, *The Factory*, is a graphic, moving, worker-centric telling of the Maruti-Manesar story. Roy juxtaposes different accounts of the July 18, 2012 violence to paint a far more complex, contested and grey picture of the episode than the one drawn by the police and prosecution.

However, the dramatic centre of *The Factory* is not those events, but an agonising wait for bail. As the trek from sessions court to high court to Supreme Court proves fruitless, the screen explodes with the tears and rage of families brought to their knees. “Shall we eat mud to fill our stomachs?” a woman screams at the camera. The young men themselves are shadowy figures behind wire-mesh.

But no longer. Of the 150, 114 managed to secure bail this year, after two-and-a-half to nearly three years in prison, and they are now out in the world, engaged in a desperate, unnoticed search for employment. Defence counsel Vrinda Grover says they are targets of indiscriminate arrest by a state machinery strikingly eager to help a significant business player.

“Not one of them was identified in court,” she stresses, “by a single witness.” Even workers, she says, who by prosecution's own version, only damaged property, stand charged with murder. “If more than 200 people had a common intent to murder, as claimed, would they,” she asks, “have stopped at one man?”

Among the sheaf of case papers on Grover's desk are the



Tin shack where provisional committee of Manesar plant's sacked workers meet

order.

One of these four witness, according to his statement, claims to spot rioting workers whose names run from A to G (“Amit Prasad, Anup Kumar, Anup Kumar Dubey, Ashok, Baljinder, Bunty Kumar, Bharat Singh...”); another names workers from G to P; a third from R to S and a fourth from S to Y. “I haven’t seen statements like these in 25 years of criminal practice,” says Grover. “These names have been taken from muster rolls. On the very face of it, the statements have to be false.”

Guilt or innocence will, of course, be decided in court. Defence evidence is currently being presented, and final arguments are expected to begin in a month or two. But prospective employers seem to have made up their minds. Those out on bail, and even those merely dismissed by the company, are being turned away by carmakers, by automobile component makers and by employers in the informal sector.

These are workers with ITI diplomas and, in most cases, significant work experience. But even as “skilling” is nationally valourised, being skilled appears to provide no advantage if you carry the Maruti-Manesar taint. Maruti Suzuki did not respond to questions from Business Standard on the case and the situation of its former workers.

There are two or three days every month when a wide corridor at the Gurgaon district and sessions court looks like the site of a college reunion, teeming with young men in jeans and non-branded trainers, with cheap backpacks. At some point, these ex-Maruti workers out on bail will queue below a sign that reads, “This is a temple of justice, keep it clean.”

They will file into a small courtroom, mark attendance, and then they leave quickly for the homeward journey to rural districts in Haryana and other parts of the Hindi heartland. Being interviewed helps to pass the hours,

near-identical statements of four star prosecution witnesses, labour contractors who between them criminally implicated nearly 90 workers, not one of whom they were able to identify in court. Collectively, the statements seem to advance a unique proposition: that the mob organised itself in alphabetical

though they do ask, with rough humour, “Will this help get us jobs?”

“If you don’t mention your Maruti-Manesar experience, you are asked about the gaps in your resume, and you have no answer,” explains Brajesh Kumar, who has just arrived after a 200-km train journey from Rajasthan. “But if you tell the truth, which I did when I was interviewed at an auto part company in Rudrapur, nobody will touch you.”

“Road-building, weight-lifting, packing clothes in a garment factory,” says Raj Kishen, a young Haryanvi who was an apprentice on the chassis line, listing the jobs available to him. “I didn’t study for 15 years,” he retorts, “to do what an unlettered man can do.”

But those with families to feed took up modest jobs that they found hard to hold down because of the frequency of court hearings. Sharma, a trained plastic processing operator with six years of experience, became a salesman. Pradeep Kumar, after seven years at Maruti, became a security guard. Kanwarjit Singh, with a three-year diploma in die and tool making, now works for a courier company.

“I always wanted to teach at an ITI,” says Amarjit Singh, 29. “But Maruti selected me; I got 54 out of 60 in its test. I was the kind of worker who corrected defects in other people’s work, ask anybody. I would have only blamed the police for this case, had the company not dismissed me as well. When I was terminated, I realised, company kisi ki nahi hai (the company is nobody’s).” Amarjit has now joined an instructor’s course. “It is on borrowed money, I am zero,” he says. “But I have to erase Maruti from my record, start again...”

Several of those waiting on concrete benches dressed in the uniform of urban youth are the sons of modest rural workers: tailors, masons, security guards at agricultural warehouses. It is clear from the police chargesheet, which astonishingly lists castes next to names, that quite a few are from socially vulnerable communities. Most seem to belong to families with a few bighas of land, or none. They all tell near-identical stories of enrolling at ITIs to escape rural stagnation but many are now staring it in the face.

Mritunjay Dubey, an ITI trained electrician from Ghazipur in eastern Uttar Pradesh, does a 36-hour round-trip by train for every court hearing. Sometimes, he returns in less than a week for the next hearing, because he has nowhere to stay in Gurgaon, where he tried, but failed, to get his next job. “So I just help in the fields,” he says, “when I am not in court.”

Conversely, Rajesh (not his real name) lives in Gurgaon, but has no hearings to attend. When the police arrived at workers’ tenements shortly after the Manesar violence, and took them away for “enquires” that later turned into arrests, he took to his heels. Named as an absconder, he now leads a below-the-radar existence as an auto-rickshaw driver.

He wears a nondescript kurta-pyjama with a gamchha (cloth towel) slung around his neck. When he meets his family, he does so stealthily. “I managed to send a few thousand



An earlier picture of a worker soon after being granted bail

rupees home every month when the others were rotting in jail,” he says. “My brother is studying at an ITI, my sister has to be married.” His own engagement was called off, he mentions in passing, before the end of July 2012.

“We have an office near the district courts, given to us by our lawyer,” says Ram Niwas, a member of

the provisional committee of the Manesar plant’s sacked workers. The office turns out to be a tin shed in a rabbit-warren of notary publics’ offices and shops, its few occupants instantly recognisable from *The Factory*.

They are among a clutch of exceptionally articulate explainers of the larger story told in Roy’s film, of a worker’s movement at the plant from 2011, to register an independent union, to protest a punishing shop floor culture and end wage discrimination between permanent and contract workers.

“I was very surprised when I met the ex-workers at Manesar,” the film-maker confessed in an interview. “They were a new kind of young Indian worker, intelligent and confident. The situation at the plant was centrally a problem about dignity. This is a case-study in how not to deal with a young, educated workforce. In fact, it is today being studied as one.”

Roy emphasises that when he began filming in July 2013 (until July 2014), the ex-workers had their backs to the wall. Their union leaders were in jail, their movement had peaked and there were “no grand victories on the horizon”.

“Yet, they were able to keep going, with a new set of leaders that arose from the ranks of dismissed workers.” The young men on the ex-workers’ committee liaised with lawyers, organised protests, got backing from national trade unions, raised funds for legal cases and jailed workers’ families, and were able to influence union elections at the plant, once it reopened. “When I showed the film in Mumbai,” says Roy, “people asked, ‘What is it about these Haryana boys?’”

That sparkiness comes through when they tell you that the new salary scales for Maruti workers (but only permanent workers, they point out) are a culmination of a process that they put in motion. “We changed the environment, we brought in a culture of negotiated settlements,” says Ram Niwas adamantly. “This was our

sacrifice.”

The word “sacrifice” is telling, however. The draining effect of a drawn out battle, in the criminal courts, and a parallel one, in the labour courts over the mass dismissals, is hard to miss. Most members of the committee have dropped off because of “family pressures”.

Those that remain are cash-strapped, even if they have been able to raise contributions for legal expenses through the workers’ union at Manesar. Ram Niwas, for example, largely manages on Rs 7,000 a month, paid to him by a worker’s cooperative.

His wife and children have left Gurgaon for their village in Kaithal district in Haryana. While they live in the ancestral joint family home, they eat separately, because other family members object to his continued involvement with the Maruti-Manesar case.

Sunil Kaushik, an arresting presence in Roy’s film, with his sharp explanations, accompanied by charts and drawings, of the layout, assembly line and working conditions at the plant, has quit the committee. “I gave my time to this struggle to clear our names, but I could not do it indefinitely,” he explains on the phone from Rohtak.

After failing to get more reputable jobs, the dismissed worker is retraining as a garage mechanic. “You can’t wash off this stain, however much you argue that everyone is not to blame for what happened,” he says, frustration in his voice. “Public perceptions are set.”

The mood is lighter in a one-room home in Gurgaon, where Sushma, another striking face from Roy’s film, finally has her husband, Sohanlal, by her side. In the film, the vulnerable yet poised young woman takes up work as a data entry clerk after her husband is jailed, rather than go home to her parents.

She lives in a one-room home on the rough edge of Gurgaon, amid symbols of a rural couple’s emerging middle class dream — a fridge in a corner, a bedspread with cartoon characters, wedding pictures with hand-drawn hearts in the margins — and never misses visitors’ days at Bhondsi jail. Recalling her first meeting with her husband, she says, “Boys usually exaggerate what they own, he told me he had nothing. I thought to myself, this man tells the truth.”

Looking back, now, she says: “I couldn’t have managed for nearly three years without the support system created by the committee. For three days after he was taken away, I had no idea where he was locked up, I had no money to fight the legal case, I had never visited a jail.” Sohanlal, 30, sitting on the bedspread with the cartoon characters, shows you his unused Casio watch, awarded for good work at Manesar, and his trophies for inter-departmental cricket.

He expects his name will be cleared, but wonders whether his career can ever recover from the lost years at Bhondsi. Yet, he is one of the lucky ones. He has a workplace to go to, a wedding banquet hall, where he handles petty administration for Rs10,000 per month.

A SORRY SAGA
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maruti Suzuki’s second factory opens in Manesar in 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A car is rolled off the assembly line every 50 seconds

- According to figures cited in the film, The Factory, the CEO earned Rs 47.3 lakh annually in 2007 and Rs 2.45 crore by 2010. A senior permanent worker got Rs 2.80 lakh a year in 2007 and Rs 3 lakh by 2013

- Workers at the Manesar plant strike work thrice in 2011. Key demands: they be allowed to register an independent union and contract workers be given same salary and perks as permanent workers

- Leaders of the struggle to form a union exit the same year after accepting generous severance package from Maruti Suzuki

- Workers finally register an independent union with new leaders in late February 2012 and the union subsequently submits a charter of demands, including a substantial salary hike

- Violence erupts in the factory on July 18, 2012, amid many unresolved issues. A general manager dies, several others injured; 147 workers, including union leaders, arrested and jailed (three more arrested later); 2,500 workers dismissed