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A Study on Employability in the Iron Foundry Enterprises of Howrah

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ABSTRACT

'Employability' generally means quality of being employable. Since it stresses on learning and progressing in the work place, it indicates that the proprietorial establishment has an important role to play in facilitating the employability in the workplace. The cast iron foundry industry is one of the most labor-intensive industries, with around 6000 foundries in the country. They continue to be plagued by problems of lack of good infrastructure and low skilled labor, making it difficult for them to compete in the global economy that stresses for new production system. Further, the 11th five year plan, as well as approach paper to 12th five year plan points out that the majority of the workers in the MSMEs are the marginalized sections of Indian populations who already are impoverished. Therefore it becomes even more important to address the problems of this sector. This article sets out to study the practices of employability in the Howrah foundry industry, the first organized modern cast iron industrial cluster in India. For this study, a sample of thirty-six (36) foundry units has been purposively chosen in a way so that it represents a credible and acceptable cross section of the Howrah Foundry industry. The questionnaire focused on (a) understanding employer's or proprietor's perception of changing markets in last few decades and its effects on labor market, and (b) hiring and contracting practices of the firm. In light of some of the newer dimensions emerging out of this study, the article concludes that though the foundry units are beginning to feel the heat of competition, but the processes of employability strategy are not yet mature.

Key Words : Employability, MSME, Howrah, Organization, Foundry, Anthropology

INTRODUCTION

In anthropological terms, industry or enterprise[1], whether small or big, formal or informal, involves the social arrangements of persons and the cultural systems of meaningful symbols, values, and attitudes that integrate individuals as they participate in the industrial process of production.

Now-a-days, 'Micro small and medium size enterprises' (MSMEs) are regarded as the engine of economic growth (Woldie and Adersua, 2004), accounting for 85% new job creation (Hamilton and Dana, 2003) all over the world (Gerrard *et al.,* 2003). The MSME industrial sector contributes 40% of the gross manufacture to the Indian economy (Kelibach, 2008). The small-scale industry (SSI) historically has been one of the most important sectors in a developing economy like India. This sector alone in India creates the largest employment opportunities for the Indian populace, next only to agriculture (http://msme.gov.in). It has been estimated that an investment of one lakh rupees (in fixed assets) in the small-scale sector generates employment for four

1. An enterprise is considered to be any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form. This includes, in particular, self-employed persons and family businesses engaged in craft or other activities, and partnerships or associations regularly engaged in an economic activity. (Official Journal of the European Union, 2003)

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people[2] .

A substantial amount of work had been done on the Indian MSMEs too. While some provided an account and assessment of the social security and insurance arrangements in India with regard to factory workers (Dasgupta 1994), some others chose to discuss economics of freight equalization in West Bengal foundries (Datta, 2004). There had been studies on investment pattern in labour and technology in Indian SMEs (Rajeev, 2008), while Chakravarty and Bose (2009) studied the impact of different institutions on the manufacturing output of the industries of West Bengal. The state's industrialization experience has been analyzed relative to the performance of seven other leading industrialized states of India (Dasgupta, 1998). Substantive amount of work on industrial labor, many of them being migrants who came to the industrial area of Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) and adjoining areas, had been done too (De Haan, 1997).

In this regard, a study, which deals with the economy of West Bengal in general, shows its concern about the poor condition of the SSI sector in West Bengal in spite of having all the necessary ingredients for growth (Banerjee *et al.,* 2002).

Employability as a concept has been increasingly pursued in recent anthropological literature (Koyl, 1956; Arocena *et al.,* 2007). The word 'employability' generally means quality of being employable, usability. However, in scholarly works, it is a process and a strategy and has been increasingly understood as process of remaining employed in the changing work conditions (Van Buren III, 2003). A paper prepared by Caledonian University, underscores the different facets of employability as "set of achievements, skills, understanding and personal attributes that make individual more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation" (Caledonian University, 2005). Van Dam, while discussing employability orientation refers it as set of attitudes of employees towards interventions aimed at increasing organizations flexibility through developing and maintaining workers' employability for the organization (Van Dam, 2004). This indicates that employability is a process which helps the workers to participate productively in a flexible organization. This would require changes in job, work content or participate in training so that workers are capable of adapting to changes and requirements of a flexible organization (Van Dam, 2004).

Employability as it is envisaged appears to be a process of maintaining a job and progressing in the work place. It is a macro concept that can fit as a strategy across any sector or production system. The skill sets, learning and content, job content could vary across sectors but the foundation of the concept of learning, being flexible and progressing at the workplace are common to all sectors. The process of learning is inherent to the production system, whether the product is manufactured commodity or rendering of any service. This signifies that understanding the production mechanisms and the nature of the sector, the rationale for the sector's existence and growth and the challenges in the sector would help in contextualizing employability specifically to that sector. It would also help in assessing how employability can be used in the specific sector and the impediments it might face in using it as a strategy. Further, since employability stresses on learning and progressing in the work place (Bischoff, 1978); it indicates that the economic establishment has an important role to play in facilitating the employability in the workplace.

The area :

The city of Howrah has been selected for the empirical study for the reason that Howrah foundry cluster happened to be the first organized modern industrial cluster in India. It was set up during the British rule, when Kolkata, erstwhile Calcutta, was the political and commercial capital. The history of the foundry cluster, along with the jute industry, is synonymous with the rise of British mercantile colonialism in India. The cluster used to be considered the Sheffield of India.

Industrial development in West Bengal is of particular interest for important theoretical and policy-oriented implications. During the post-independence period, the medium sized firms owned by the British were sold to the new entrepreneurial community of Marwaris. The smaller firms continued to remain under the control of second generation of Bengali entrepreneurs. Continued availability of cheap pig iron, coal and a large pool of skilled labor ensured a competitive advantage to the cluster. In the seventies, the State witnessed some major labor unrest that resulted in the sale or closure of a large number of industrial units in West Bengal. Many non-

2. Here I take into consideration only the registered small units. The definition of a small-scale unit as of 21.12.99 is an industrial undertaking in which investment in fixed assets in plant and machinery, whether held on ownership terms or lease or hire, does not exceed Rs. 10 million.

Bengali industrialists moved out of the state and a large number of the Bengali owned small foundries were closed down. Migration of skilled labor to other upcoming foundry clusters in other states is also noticed. Eventually the Howrah cluster lost all of its traditionally built up competitive advantage. Technology remained stagnant with little or no re-investment. Markets declined to low value products of the simplest kind and owners lost interest in their business. Since liberalization, in the early nineties, the situation has shown signs of improvement. However, obsolete asset base / production facilities, pressure on land-use due to high levels of urbanization, poor infrastructure facilities, and stringent enforcement of environmental norms continue to haunt the foundry units located at Howrah.

The challenges the foundry industry of Howrah sector is facing are many and diverse. These industries also face bottlenecks of low skills levels, inadequate infrastructure both physical, financial and the general unorganized nature of production (Dasgupta, 1999). If we begin to contextualize employability in foundry units, it appears that foundries in India have a long history and continue to be an important source of job for millions. It also appears that it did not receive kind of support the big businesses received in India. They continue to be plagued by problems of lack of good infrastructure and low skilled labor making it difficult for them to compete in the globalizing economy that stresses for new production system. It is very necessary to have policies that will support the sector and achieve efficiency to survive in the competitive market. Further, as 11th five year plan, as well as approach paper to 12th five year plan points out that the majority of the workers in the MSMEs are the marginalized sections of Indian populations who already are impoverished, it becomes even more important to address the problems of this sector. In this context, the present study after exploration of the field find the following objectives emerging at the micro level of the organizational units.

The objectives:

The main focus of this study is on understanding main on-going changes in the foundry units, employer's perspective on employment, practices of employability, and the overall challenges these industries are facing. The questionnaire is divided into following categories that have bearing on employment processes. They are :

a) Employer's (in many cases it's the manager of the unit in study) or proprietor's perception of changing markets in last few decades and its effects on labor market, and

b) Hiring and contracting practices of the firm

The cast iron foundry industry, one of the most labor-intensive industries (with around 6000 foundries in the country, mostly in the SSI sector), produces nearly 3.3 million tons of castings annually[3] . The present work is an attempt to study this important industry in the SSI sector of the state, *viz.,* the cast iron foundry industry, in order to bring out the specific features and organizational features that are region-based.

METHODOLOGY

Selection of sample:

Regardless of data-gathering modes chosen, sampling in qualitative research follows a distinct logic. Generally speaking, qualitative inquiry focuses in depth on relatively small samples that are selected purposefully. The logic and power of purposeful sampling is founded on deliberately searching out and selecting settings, people, and events that will provide rich and detailed information regarding the research question. For this study, purposive, and in some cases, snowball sampling method is used.

Thirty six (36) foundry units from areas recognized as industrial belts (namely Belgachhia, Salkia, Bamungachhi, etc.) of Howrah district are selected for the study. Of these, twelve (12) foundry units are from Belgachhia, seven (7) from Salkia, eight (8) from Bamungachhi, and nine (9) from Benaras Road. These units have been chosen because of the following factors:

Locational Accessibility and Informed Consent:

All the above mentioned units permitted access for the research work. The owners along with the management consented and authorized a go – ahead to the researcher and cooperated fully to the research work as promised.

Cross – Sectional Representation:

The units have been purposively chosen in a way so that therein lies variation in terms of size, total turn over a year, number of employees, number of owners and their ethnicity, number of years they are in business,

3. The Hindu, Jan 25, 1999.

locational advantage, etc. The rationale behind the choice being so that it represents a credible and acceptable cross section of the Howrah Foundry culture.

A total of one hundred and forty three (143) individuals associated with the above mentioned foundry units, comprising of proprietors, permanent and temporary employees, contractors, and small scale order suppliers responded to the survey.

Method:

Fieldwork is a matter of techniques, rather than a rigid step-by-step 'how to' prescription (Sperschneider and Bagger 2001) that is to be done impromptu, on ad-hoc basis. It is also a matter of 'adaptation' on the part of a fieldworker, making the most (Baszanger and Dodier 1997) out of a situation. Gathering data through participant observation, the researchers tried to enter and become a part of the actual context in which people pursue their work, learning firsthand how they accomplish their work on a daily basis; how they understand and experience their work, spending sufficient time there to understand and learn how to conduct themselves according to the norms of the setting. Observations are logged and converted into field notes on a daily basis. Interviews provided another avenue for gaining observations, and these vary in the extent to which they are structured and formalized (Holstein and Gabrium 1997). For this research purpose, interviews have been organized through highly structured and standard interview protocols or semiformal conversation guides; along with free flowing, informal exchanges. In many cases subjects have been interviewed multiple times to gain their stable and changing perspectives on events as they unfold. Through interviews, the researcher's intention is to collect people's accounts of their work lives, actions, experiences, perceptions, opinions, and feelings (Miller and Fox 1997). As a matter of practice, interviews are usually digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study of select small scale enterprises:

Since employability is a process of ongoing learning and requires organization to adopt wider processes to foster it, we have adopted a qualitative methodology of in-depth interviewing for the case studies, along with the use of questionnaire format. Discussions were held with the owners, managers, and employees of these foundry units. Charts are made out of information extracted from these detailed case studies and questionnaires.

Employer's and/or Proprietor's Perception of Changing Markets:

The data are collected in the context of the perception for the last two decades as emphasized by most of the employers. Foundries are also forced to adopt ways of production that cater to the emerging market. It is stressed that this is possible through innovations both in production processes and fulfilling the increasing demand of the market.

Major changes in the business environment in last two decades:

The proprietors, and in some cases, the managers are asked about their views on some of the major changes that they have noticed in the business environment in the last few decades. Fig. 1 summarizes their opinions as answers to the question. For many of them (almost 25%) it is the government apathy towards foundry industry, especially to those from the eastern India that bothered the most. According to them, for Howrah to compete with industrial belts from states like Gujarat and Bihar, some amount of government support is needed. The stringent environmental laws require sophisticated furnace equipment and advanced divided blast cupola. For Howrah foundry units this requires additional funding to the already comatose industry. Such funding is almost impossible except governmental intervention in terms of subsidy and easy loans to purchase and implement the technology.

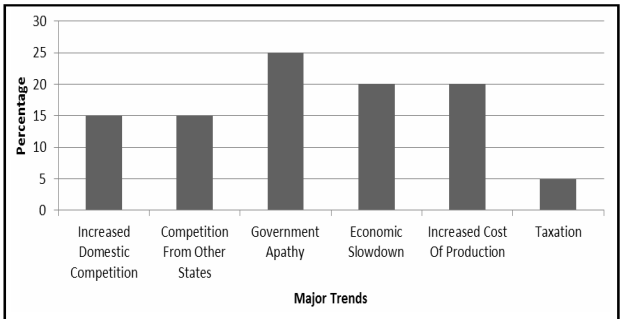

Fig. 1 : Major changes in the business environment in the last two decades

Changes in the production systems/technology over these years:

While sharing their understandings on some major changes in the production system and/or technology over

the years, most of the foundry owners believed that the future lies in increased automation in the industry. The foundry industry in Howrah came up to supply intermediate inputs to industries of shipbuilding, jute, textiles, railways, trams, etc. Cast iron soil pipes and manhole covers were also produced as suggested by the Government of India to meet domestic and foreign demands (Government of India 1958). Nowadays there is a growing demand for castings with thin wall sections, high precision in pattern, fine finish and little machine tolerance. For catering to this market, foundry units of Howrah need up gradation that requires huge first time investments. A large number of foundry units (12 out of 36; around 33%) confirm that they backed out from their planning of up gradation because of huge first time investment. Only 6 out of 36 foundry units (around 17%) are found to have upgraded their machinery in the last decade. While discussing automation, 10 foundry units allege that they faced labor union problems as automation would result in the threat of large number of laborer sacking (Fig. 2).

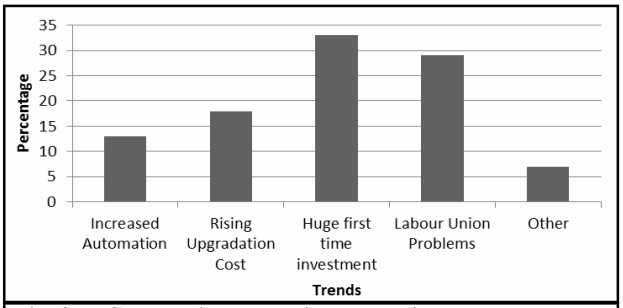

Fig. 2 : Changes in production system/technology over the years

Changes affecting the labor relation:

On the question of how these changes in the production process have affected the labor relations in the firm, there are mixed responses. Some mention (6%) that they now need lesser number of skilled labors since the automation takes care of the production. On the other hand some mention (27%) that there is a need for more skilled workers now as they need to operate automated machinery. Some firms (29%) also mention that there exists an increasing problem of labor availability. Almost 10% of the respondents are of the view that labor loyalty on the whole has decreased over time. Many a times it so happened that the firm suffered because the workers suddenly went on strike right in the middle of some important production schedule. By the time normalcy restored, the order deadline might be over by few weeks if not more. Around 16% of the respondents also note that there has been a lull on the labor migration to Howrah market as a whole. As other Indian states went ahead in the race, the labor force also goes west and south bound, leaving Howarh in a lurch (Fig. 3).

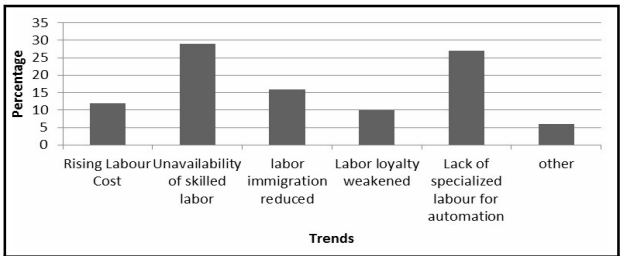

Fig. 3 : Changes affecting labour relationship

Main changes that need to take place in the labor market:

With regard to the main changes that need to happen in labor market, the owners have different suggestions. A very high percentage (35%) of owners stressed on improved work culture to revive the industry. Close on the heels (25%) is their concern on rising labor cost that needs to be checked in order to lower production cost and offer competitive price in the market. Around 15% of the respondents want simplified labor laws, which according to them will attract more entrepreneurs to invest in this industry. They feel that halting production process midway by going to strike over some demands may actually result in lock out, losses for the company concerned, and ultimately in closure of the unit altogether. This would mean job loss for not only to those people directly associated with the foundry unit, but also to those associated micro industries that feed from these foundry units by supplying necessary things and services. Around 18% wished for constant supply of raw materials at a

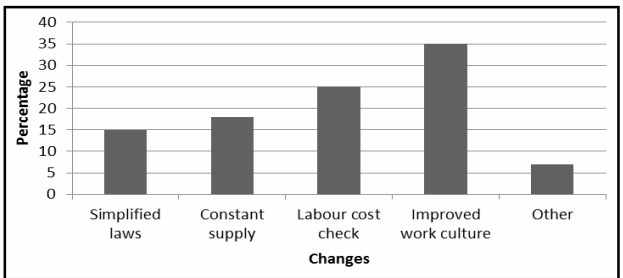

Fig. 4 : Main changes that need to take place in the labour market

reasonable and stable price. The fluctuating price of raw materials makes the situation more difficult for the firms. Only a few (7%) reason that more orders from governmental agencies like Railways and relaxation on strict environmental rules are needed to bring around the industry (Fig. 4).

Managing labor force for own advantage:

With regard to managing the labor force to one's advantage, an overwhelming number of the foundry owners (90%) responded that they do it by providing overtime, bonus, and other perks that includes organizing feasts and drinks during pujas. Only 3% owners indicated that they do this by giving trainings in multiple tasks. Interestingly, providing food to workers also is noted as incentive to manage workers by some firms (7%) (Fig. 5).

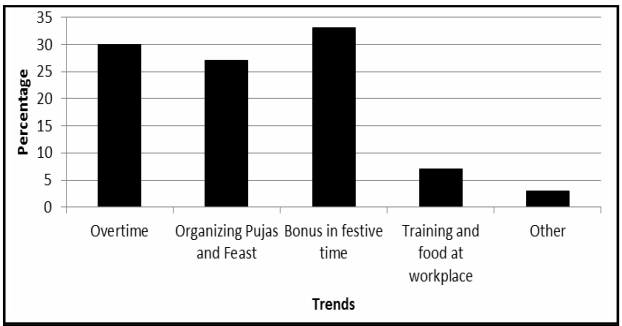

Fig. 5 : Managing labour force

Hiring (and/or contracting) and retaining practices of the firm:

The practices of appointing/contracting new employees and fostering employees within the foundry units are assessed though questions regarding processes of internal communication and learning, training workers for multiple tasks, formation of linkages with other such organizations, perceptions about lifelong learning in the organization and processes of selection of workers.

Communication between worker and between hierarchies:

With respect to internal communication and learning, the foundry units (33%) seem to have practices of holding weekly / monthly meetings to discuss issues related to production and other sorts of labor grievances. It appears that these interactions are mostly restricted to stock taking rather than specific trainings. The majority (42%) mention unions act as the mediator between the firm and the labor force. Many of the smaller foundry units (20%) affirm that the proprietor and the laborers have direct access to each other with no mediator. However, upon further investigation it is revealed that these units depend mainly on contractual workers managed through the contractors. The number of permanent workers in these units is usually in singular digits. None mentions any unique strategy to foster communication through which new knowledge may be shared. A meager 2% of the firms confess managing laborers through third party contractors. The other 3% reveal that currently their operation is run by loaning laborer from other units with their consent when needed (Fig. 6).

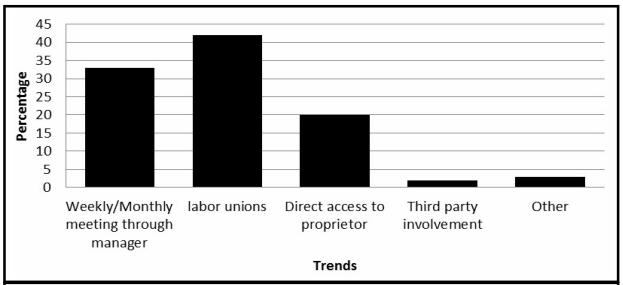

Fig. 6 : Communication between workers and hierachies

Retaining better skilled and knowledgeable workers:

With regard to keeping better skilled workers within the organization, providing extra incentives and perks (23%) is mentioned as the strategy. Besides, in some foundry units (27%) there is facility to access loans from workers cooperative and perks being given for workers' medical treatment and their children's education (20%). About 28% claimed providing better working condition in terms of safety is the way to retain the better portion of the workforce (Fig. 7).

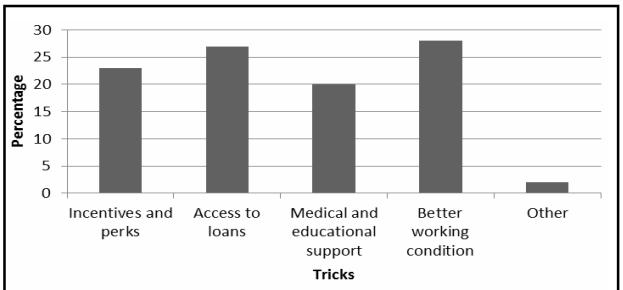

Fig. 7 : Tricks to retain better workers

Networking with other organizations:

The firms are asked about their networking with other organizations like educational institutes, governmental bodies etc. in promoting for the development of the labor force and for better adaptation to new production systems. A sufficient number (37%) of the foundry units interviewed has established tie ups with the local training institutes (ITI and Polytechnics) for accessing trainings. Most of the industries (43%) also have in house peer training programs. Here workers also learn from their senior peers while on the job indicating learning by doing as the strategy. This proves to be the most favored one in all such case studies. The focus of training in all the foundry units is on technical aspects. Around 17% of the foundry units indicate that sometimes they access technical trainings from outside agencies (Fig. 8).

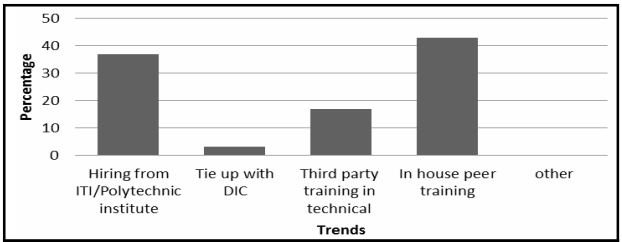

Fig. 8 : Networking with other organizations

Hiring practices:

Questions related to selection process reveal that the foundry units look in the worker the willingness to work (most important criterion, according to some), age, experience, and technical qualifications as the parameters for recruitment. The assessment of workers performance is linked to the quality of the output being produced. It also includes the time taken to produce the output. Observation by the supervisor/ team leader is the tool used to assess the performance. The majority (30%) indicates that the workers who have exposure to all aspects of production are preferred and valued most. Around 24% say that if a worker has good recommendation from another firm or a known contractor, he is hired most of the time. Though only 4% say that novices are hired from time to time, they are trained through peer learning and hand on training. Around 16% indicate that hiring specialized hand becomes necessary in case of precision works (Fig. 9).

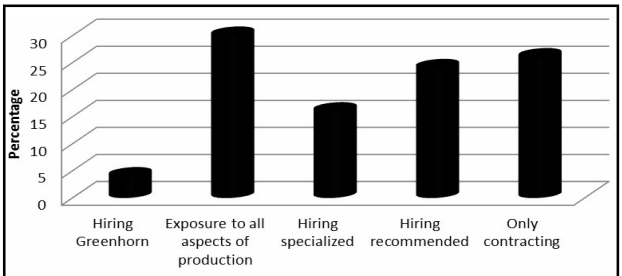

Fig. 9 : Hiring practices

Contextualizing labour market:

Since the 1970s, the foundries of Howrah had to undergo profound changes in the labor processes. Drastic decline in orders for castings, especially from the railway industry, and lockouts preceded by labor stoppages have brought about changes in the nature of employment in the foundry industry. Thereafter, labor is employed on contract. Only a few foundry owners employ permanent workers in furnace related activities. In every foundry there is a panel of contractors who maintain the payroll of employed workers. A contractor, in a foundry, is not merely a labor contractor in the usual sense of the term, but something more than that. The owner(s) contract out the whole process of starting from moulding to loading, finished castings. The contractor gets commission on the basis of weight of delivered product. Although the contractor appears as a separate employer in official statement, they are not outsiders in a foundry rather very much internalized in the production organization. The labor contractors secure orders of castings, buy molten metal from the foundry owner and then organize moulding and casting operations. The kind of subcontracting is a mixture of both industrial subcontracting and labor subcontracting. Beyond that it is also sharing of management responsibilities in securing orders as well as that of transportation and delivery.

There are different grades of skilled and unskilled workers according to their assignment in the production process. Normally the worker works 10 to 12 hours per day, but this varies according to the nature of work. In a 'charging day', *i.e.* the day in which melting operation is carried out, the cupola runs for four to eight hours according to the size of the units. In most of the small foundries there are one or two fixed 'charging days' in a week. With decreasing orders, the number of charging days in a month is reduced and as a response the skilled permanent workers related to furnace activities are gradually turned into contract laborers. On an average, the labor cost paid by the owner is about Rs. 2000/- to

3000/- per ton of castings, which is disposed of by the contractor to his group of workers according to their occupational grades. Minimum monthly wages of unskilled workers in an iron foundry as declared under the Minimum Wage Act (31.12.97) is Rs. 1673 per month (Government of West Bengal, 1998). Only the skilled workers in Howrah actually have a monthly income above this minimum level and the unskilled workers often receive much lower than the scheduled minimum wages.

In most of the units studied so far, periodic wage increment of the workers has been either stopped or reduced to a mere formality. The trade unions say that in recent times they could not push workers' demands even in bigger units as they apprehend threats of lockouts or closure, which could even destroy their existing opportunity of earnings. Hence the labor market in Howrah can be characterized as fairly flexible with contractual labor, weak trade unions and none to execute minimum wage legislations. And, the stagnation of the cluster can be explained neither by low profitability of firms nor by low productivity of labor. This fact evokes a deeper analysis to the host of constraints in the forward and backward linkages that these small foundries presently face.

Conclusion:

Employability is understood to be a process of on-going learning of new skills and being adaptable for multi functions. It also appears to be a process that has gained currency in recent times to tackle the market pressures of high competition and also opening of new markets. The vast technological changes in the modes of production have also resulted in demands for newer skills in labor.

Employability processes are very much rooted in the history and the position of the specific sector in the economy. This article focuses on the issue of employability within the foundry units which continue to be one of the important economic establishments in India. With regard to the practice of employability in the foundry units, nothing very innovative seems to be in place to foster employability in these firms. There appears to be emphasis on trainings and building linkages with training institutes, however, concerted efforts to infuse employability through peer learning, change in routine of jobs and an emphasis on lifelong learning appeared to be insignificant.

From the study conducted with 36 sample foundry units in Howrah district, some interesting patterns emerge. In some foundry units, owners suggest that automation has reduced the need of skilled labor as automated machines have replaced the manual work whereas some entrepreneurs have indicated that more skilled labor is now needed to operate the automated machines. This first point suggests that requirement of skilled workers is diminishing with increased automation as now fewer skills in labor are needed as automated machines have replaced the human skills. The second point, however, suggests that increased level of automation needs more skilled labor. Most of the industries mention that the level of automation in their industry is not yet fully accomplished and few of the production processes are automated. Assuming that increased automation would lead to more efficient production systems, some fear that it might also result in lesser requirement of skilled labor. On the other hand, the rest of them think that efficient production systems might have boosted the growth in the industry and the need of the skilled labor might have gone up.

Some foundry owners indicate that presently there is a lack of such workforce since the educational system in general does not equip a student with necessary skills. The analyses from the study point out that the foundry units are beginning to feel the heat of competition but the processes of employability strategy are not yet mature.

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