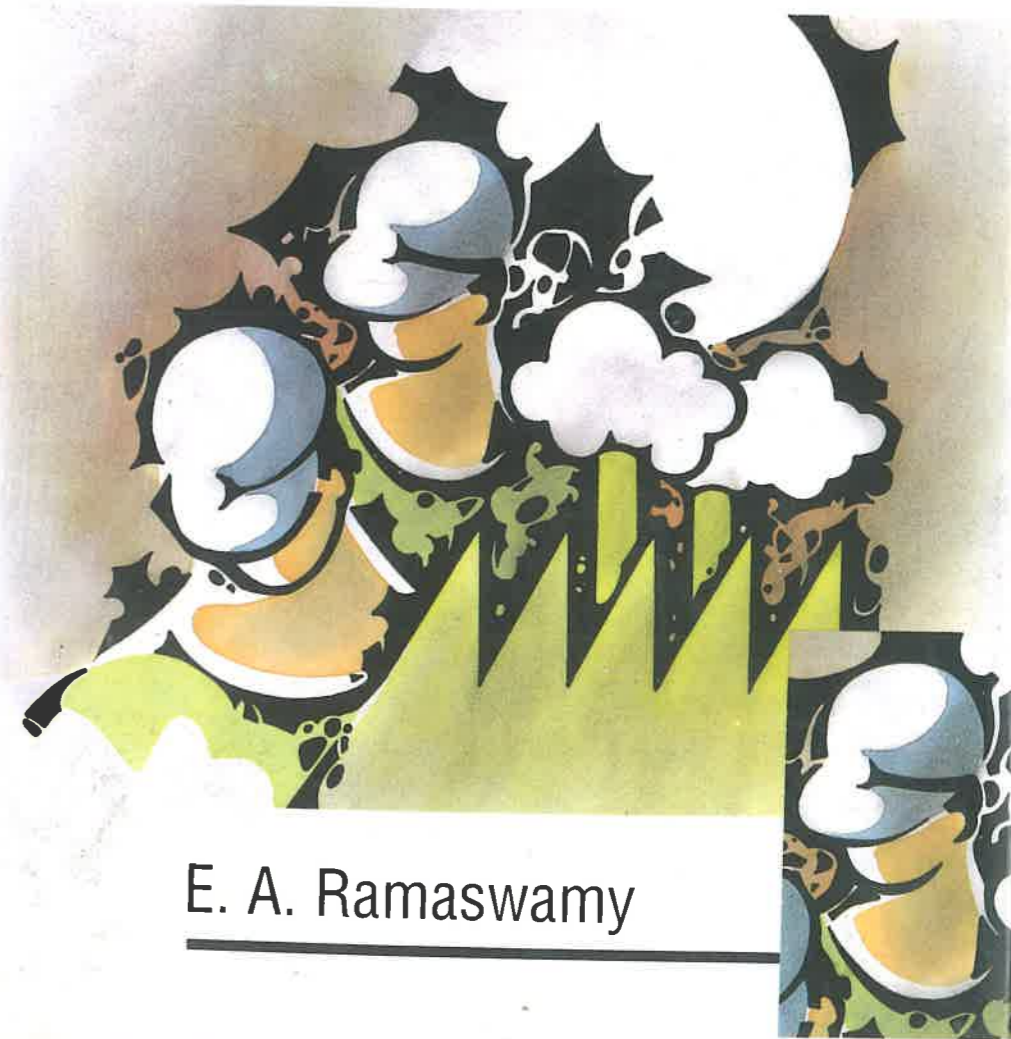


A question of balance

**Labour,  
Management  
and Society**

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E. A. Ramaswamy

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*A Question of Balance* is a lucid and readable rendering of a complex and vexed issue, namely industrial relations. Bringing together articles written over a period of eight years, it offers an objective and unbiased commentary, unencumbered by the ideological baggage that writings on this subject usually carry.

It is about industrial workers, their trade unions, union leaders, managers, people in government who make and administer labour policy, and their interactions. It is a colourful, and occasionally murky, world whose *dramatis personae* have strong and often conflicting interests. The methods they adopt to secure these interests affect us all as consumers of products and services, and as citizens, but few of us are privy to these goings-on. This collection offers an intimate insight into the complex universe of industrial relations. It comes from someone who has had the benefit of close association with labour and management for three decades as researcher, teacher and consultant. Stringing together anecdote, evidence and theory, and going beyond description to express opinions, this book makes compelling reading for a wide cross-section, ranging from MBA students, management aspirants, managers and trade unionists, to the general reader.



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A Question of Balance  
*Labour, Management and Society*

E.A. Ramaswamy



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## Preface

When *Business India (BI)* invited me in 1985 to write a column, one of my fondest dreams came true. After two decades at Delhi University, I was getting tired of academic pretensions. Social Scientists seemed lost in themselves, the joke being that Marxists only read what they themselves wrote, whereas non-Marxists didn't even do that. Footnotes and endnotes dominated their existence. They seemed unable to move an inch without leaning on somebody's shoulders. Their style was so circumlocutory as to put off everyone except teachers who had to teach, students who had to read and researchers who had to pad their CVs with a publication. So many of them, as the saying goes, were engaged in the dialectical splitting of dogmatic hair. As a young teacher I was impressed by a book which compared sociologists' writings to the sorcerer's magic and went on to sum up an entire page of Talcott Parsons, the undisputed master of convoluted writing, in two simple sentences. I saw no reason why social scientists had to be so dreary. We were researching issues which had wide appeal and could be read with profit by a wider audience if only we could make ourselves intelligible. *BI* provided the perfect medium for me to break out of this academic straitjacket.

The *BI* page absorbed much of my energies over the next several years. The invitation was for a column every four weeks. A page a month might sound pretty simple, but not to those who know what it takes to come up with something that others might want to read. I could not identify a theme, muster the evidence, or string them together into a readable page cocooned in my office. The inspiration had to come from the people I met, the conferences I addressed, the training sessions I took and the consulting assignments I found myself in. None of this was in short supply, for I was part of the Administrative Staff College of India, located at the crossroads of the corporate world. Some of my best pieces were written when I was curious, elated, disturbed, or downright angry, the strength of the response often being a function of the quality of the stimulus. The most agreeable feature of my column, many readers have told me, was its familiarity — it was about people and events

they knew and identified with. Petulant trade unionists, weak-kneed managers, dilatory politicians, workers wanting to climb the social ladder and the rest of the trappings which lend so much colour and vivacity to our industrial relations were all around them, as they were around me, the only difference being that I strung them together into a page.

Because I was writing about such familiar events and people, and in a manner which abandoned the safety of the academic style with its ifs and buts, riders and qualifications, I was never far from controversy. I had begun my academic career as a labour researcher before being catapulted all of a sudden into the world of management. I had rubbed shoulders with union leaders, lived amidst industrial workers, marched the streets, collected donations for unions and their political parties, attended more gate meetings than even trade unionists, and done much else for twenty years as part of my apprenticeship in trade union research. From this, it was a long hop to rubbing shoulders with general managers and vice-presidents at the Administrative Staff College. In spite of this shift, or perhaps because of it, I did not see myself as being on one or the other side of the industrial divide, at least not consciously. Some of my readers were, however, trying to figure out where I stood. Looking back, I should think that my earlier pieces were a lot more friendly to trade unions than some subsequent ones. My perceptions were definitely undergoing a transformation because of more varied exposure, but trade unions were not standing still either. In any case, I was not going to fall into the trap of consistency, which is a mere synonym for stagnation. I remember one of my teachers in college who had taught political science for thirty years without taking a single holiday or missing a single class. We students wanted nothing more than that he should go on vacation.

Whatever the reason by hindsight for my fusillade, I was incurring the wrath of trade unionists, especially of the gerontocratic leadership of central organizations. A prominent trade unionist once asked me, in a barely concealed tone of mockery and indignation, why I spent my life writing about the labour movement. Trade unions, he said, were perfectly capable of researching themselves, of analysing the events which affected them and their environment. He thought that academics derived perverse pleasure by washing other people's dirty linen. I responded

by pointing to Sir Edmund Hillary's reply when asked why he spent his life climbing mountains. 'Because they are there', answered the man who made history by first conquering the Everest. I was often snubbed by unionists who disliked what I wrote and declared *persona non grata*, and on one occasion even described as the chief enemy of labour in the country. Perhaps they had a point, for I was definitely getting acerbic. When I wrote such pieces as 'What is Wrong with Trade Unionists' and 'In Defence of Monopolies', I was pulling no punches; but in my own mind I was being so pungent not because I was against the labour movement but because I was for it. I cannot imagine a world without countervailing power, and we have no better instrument than the trade union to discharge that function in the workplace, at least not as of now. I was shooting at priggish trade unionists because they seemed to me to be destroying a vital social institution with their obscurantism. Even as the warlords put me on the hit list, I had the consolation of striking a responsive chord in sections of the labour movement. Many trade unions have corresponded with me, sent materials they thought might interest me, circulated my writings among members and even translated them in their house journals.

Although I had much to say about trade unions, my audience consisted essentially of managers. I was addressing them quite consciously throughout my stint with *BI* and found them, on balance, a lot more receptive. Unlike trade unionists, they were not sitting on moral high ground or breaking into goose pimples at the first hint of criticism. For someone who made such a late entry into management teaching and consulting, I had struck excellent rapport with managers and built up quite a readership. I was being read and not ignored, which was a lot more important than either agreement or disagreement. My absence was noticed when I missed an issue or went on a furlough; years after my column has ceased, I am still being asked by managers why I have stopped. When I commenced writing for *BI*, I scarcely expected to go beyond a few pieces. If the column lasted as long as it did, it was because there were readers for whom I was writing.

While they hit off very well with me, managers were not without bees in their bonnets. Quite a number thought I was pro-labour, which was an irony considering the union view that I was anti-labour. Many also thought I must be a communist,

although no self-respecting communist will accept me as one, or at least that I must have started life as a trade unionist, which is not the case either. The view that I was not just pro-labour but anti-management was reinforced by the piece on labour aristocracy. It questions one of the fondest beliefs of our managers, which is that industrial workers earn more than they need or deserve, and that this is the underlying cause of the miseries of their brethren in the unorganized sector.

Perceptions apart, I found managers unhelpful when it came to research. They wanted the products of research, but not the process. They read with interest so long as I was writing about another organization, but became prickly the moment it touched on them. The very organizations which asked me to train their managers in methods of dealing with labour or advise them on industrial relations (IR) strategies put impossible conditions when it came to research. On one occasion I was told that permission would be granted on condition that no one was contacted at the workplace or during working hours, no access sought to official papers, the research report cleared with them before publication, and in addition to wait until conditions became more propitious. As a labour researcher in Delhi University I had learnt to work my way into organizations without formal permission. Even such subterranean entry now became difficult because I was more widely known.

Recognizing the sensitivity of managers, I avoided naming organizations, but sometimes even this did not help. I had eventually to face the biggest crisis of my career as a columnist not with any trade union but with one of our large public enterprises. 'The Price of Appeasement' which stirred a hornet's nest narrated the lengths to which captains of industry would go to purchase industrial peace. The management of this public enterprise not only suffered a trade unionist who struck terror in the hearts of managers and had the company at his mercy, but used every possible adjective to recommend him for an industrial relations award. When the recommendation letter found its way into my possession, I could scarcely resist the temptation. Within days, photocopies of my piece, embellished with a cartoon depicting the leader as a monkey sitting on a tree top being beseeched by management to climb down, an Urdu couplet, a newsclipping identifying the organization and the leader, and a photo of the award ceremony,

had found their way to the many locations of the firm. An embarrassed management decided to remonstrate with my Principal. They wanted us to make amends on pain of losing a sumptuous endowment to fund a chair.

My Principal was in a quandary, and not a little embarrassed himself, for he was the one to confer the honour on the trade unionist. I stood my ground, arguing that I had not named the firm nor given any clue which might lead to its identification. I was willing to make amends for any misrepresentation of facts, but no one could point to an error. I had finally to ask my Principal what he thought of my activity as a columnist; I had to decide on my next move if he disapproved of it, but fortunately he agreed that I was well within my right as an academic. It was now for him to fight the battle, but I offered to help by writing yet another piece titled 'The Fascist Organization'. Being smarter, my Principal decided on a less cumbersome route; he used his clout in Delhi to get the endowment. The final act in the drama was a visit by the union leader to my office, a thousand miles away. I expected him to use trade union methods, but he chose a different tack. He alleged that I had made a monkey out of a simple worker, wearing company uniform, eating company food and doing his best for the company as a unionist. I tried to explain to him that my sympathies were indeed with trade unions, but what he practised was not trade unionism by a long shot. He saw a copy of one my books on my table, asked me to inscribe it for him and left my office with it. The unfortunate episode came to a close, but I was troubled to find many colleagues view it in commercial rather than intellectual terms; they thought I had affected the college's prospects by writing about a firm which sent its executives to us for training, gave us consulting assignments and even endowed a chair.

I stopped writing the labour column when I began spending several months a year in the Netherlands, teaching at the Institute of Social Studies. It became more than clear when I went to The Hague that without all the travel, meetings, conferences, consulting, training and, if I may say so, the controversy, my adrenalin just did not flow. That is just as well, for eight years is a long enough stint.

Bangalore  
19 June 1996

E.A. RAMASWAMY

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