

Trade Unionism in India- A Transient History

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Abstract

Trade Unionism in India-A Transient History deals the brief history of trade unionism in India. The history of Trade Unionism in India is interspersed with many economic and political events, which muddled its growth pattern and contributed to its present strengths and weakness. Trade Unions have gained recognition as legitimate social and political organisations all over the world. They have become an integral part of the contemporary business and industry. However, the beginning was not rosy when both employers and government viewed any combine of labourers with scorn. Organising itself was unlawful and punishable. Trade Unions have since emerged as formidable socio – economic force with political clout.

Key Words

Muddled, amelioration, philanthropists, revolutionary, fraternal

Introduction

Trade unionism is a by-product of industrialization in both developed and developing countries. Over a period, trade unions have grown to the stage of being considered as formal organisations wielding considerable influence on the socio-economic and political life of the nation. Trade unions were born at a time when the Industrial Revolution started in England.

At present, the trade unions play a vital role in developing countries. In India also trade unionism has reached a vital position. “Trade Unions in India are the products of modern industrialism based on capitalist relations of production”. The early pioneers of trade unions in India conceived it as an inevitable reaction against industrial system of free market competition and of capitalist control.

The history of Trade Unionism in India is interspersed with many economic and political events, which muddled its growth pattern and contributed to its present strengths and weakness. The development of trade unionism in India has had a chequered history. The advent of the trade unionism in India could be traced to the early days of industrialization, beginning in the 1850s with the establishment of the Cotton and Jute mills in Bombay and Calcutta. The first trade union, Bombay Mill Hands Association was established in 1890 with immediate aim of agitating for a revision of the first Indian Factories Act of 1881. The colonial oppressions and the gradual growth of capitalism, the long gap between the decline of the old system of production and the rise of new industrial system gave the Indian working class movement a slow origin. The birth of the Trade Union Movement in India as understood now may be traced back to the first quarter of the 20th century, although some form of trade union organizations came into existence after the establishment of factories in India in the 1880s. From the beginning, workers were recruited through a special class of men called “Jobbers”. The jobbers were empowered to keep discipline, in the factory and give elementary training required by the workers. They were usually skilled workers; they acted as protector and spokespersons of the workers. The workers were helpless victims in

the hands of jobbers. The workers were made to work for long and undefined hours and thus they were exploited as an instrument of capitalist production. The setting up of modern factories created many a stress for the labourers. Apart from insecurity of employment and inhuman treatment by European supervisors, excessively long working hours sans break mauled them. Absence of safety devices at the work place, employment of women and children, dearth of suitable accommodation and the remoteness of their homes from the factories strained them. Above all the wages below the subsistence level were commonly evident all over India. In 1875, a few social reformers under the leadership of SorabjeeShapurjeeBengalee started an agitation in Bombay to draw the attention of the Government to the appalling conditions of workers in factories, especially those of women and children and to appeal to the authorities, to introduce legislation for the amelioration of their working conditions. In 1908 when BalgangadharaTilak was sentenced for 6 years imprisonment, the workers struck work for a day for every year of sentence in which the entire city of Bombay participated. Tilak was arrested at Bombay on 24 Jan 1908 in connection with the Swadeshi Movement and boycott of foreign goods. Through the struggle against excessive exploitation, against both the British and native capitalists, the workers realised that the imperialist rule was the root cause of exploitation. This stimulated them to take part in the national liberation movement. The method used by the Bombay workers was the historically tested working class modes of general strike and confrontation with the armed police of the oppressors.

V.I. Lenin observed that, “In India too, the proletariat has already developed to conscious, political mass struggle and that being the case, the Russian style British regime in India is doomed

In India the movement was initially in the form of demands for reform in the field of labour industrial relationship. The leaders of public opinion sympathized with the cause of labourers on humanitarian grounds. The political parties in turn forcefully pleaded the cause of labour which resulted in enactment of legislation to regulate industrial relationship on a sound footing. Labour Movement in India can be said to have started in 1875. When a delegation of British Cotton Mill owners met the Secretary of State for India and on his advice the Government of Bombay appointed the Bombay Factories Commission for the investigation of the factory conditions on 25 March 1875. Lord Rippon was responsible for the first Factory Act of 1881. This was to regulate and improve the conditions of labour in Indian factories. Narayan Meghji Lokhanday, a factory worker is said to be the founder of the organised Labour Movement in India. He organised an agitation and called for a conference of workers in Bombay to make representations. As a result, in the year 1884 another Factory Commission was appointed. The year, according to V.B. Karnik, may be said to make the beginning of Trade Unionism in India. As no redress was given by the Government, Lokhanday convened a mass meeting of labour attended by 10,000 workers in Bombay on April 21, 1890 and drew up a memorandum containing demands. (i) complete day of rest on every Saturday; (ii) an hour's rest at noon; (iii) working hours not longer than 12 hours beginning at 6.30 am which should close at sunset; (iv) the payment of wages not later than

the 15th of the month in which they were earned (v) payment to injured workers until they recovered, together with suitable compensation if they are permanently disabled. The year 1884 can legitimately be regarded as the beginning of the labour movement in India for all practical purposes. Initially workers organization in India had a very slow growth. The first union to be formed in India was the Bombay Mill Hand Association established in 1890. This was the first union in India which earned for its founder the title of being the “first trade unionist” of the country. He also succeeded in getting a weekly holiday for the workers. Its newspaper ‘Deenabandu’ also came into existence through his efforts. After 1890 several other organizations were started in the country, such as the Amalgamated Society of Railways Servants of India started in 1897, the Printers Union Calcutta in 1905, the Bombay Postal Union in 1907, the Kamagar Hit Varddak Sabah in 1909 and The Social Service League in 1910. However these were social welfare organizations and could not be termed as trade unions in the strict sense of the term as we understand it today. They were set up by philanthropists to ameliorate the miserable position of workers. Labour organizations of those times were of an ad-hoc nature. Their agitations were of sporadic, irregular, and isolated character.

Trade unions in India were organized on modern lines after World War I. After the war trade unionism became a part of life of an ordinary worker in India. The war gave India an opportunity to industrialize and the rise in cost of living and the political conditions gave a spurt to the growth of organized labour in India. This state continued till 1918, when the Madras Labour Union was formed under the leadership of B.P. Wadia. The Madras

Labour Union has been accepted as the first genuine, properly organized 'trade union in India'.

Trade Unions, after 1919, spread to other centres, especially to the Province of Bombay. Besides textile labour they covered labour in the railways and iron and steel industry. Between 1919 and 1923, scores of unions came into existence. At Ahmadabad, under the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi and Anusuyaben, occupational unions – Spinners Union and Weavers Union - came into existence, which later on federated into an industrial union known as the Ahmadabad Labour Association (Major Mahajan). Outside the textile group of industries, the most important union was the Jamshedpur Labour Association. More over trade unionism in the cotton textile industry had, by this time, become quite powerful in Bombay, Ahmadabad, Madras, Nagpur and Bangalore centres.

The confidence of workers further increased with the establishment of the International Labour Organisation, where they could be represented by their leaders on a par with the employer's representatives. It was established with a monthly membership of one 'Ana' and workers joined the union with enthusiasm and it was the first time that somebody was talking to them about their rights and showing them the way of securing attention to their grievance through an organization. The workers were severely exploited and in 1920 there arose an open conflict between the employers and the union led by V.P.Wadia.

The year 1920 was of crucial importance in the history of the Indian Trade Union Movement. The number of unions affiliated with the All India Trade Union Congress steadily increased from 1926 to 1929. It claimed 64 affiliated unions at the time of its

inception with a membership of 1, 40,854. Out of this membership, 91,427 represented railway employees and 19,800 were from the shipping industry under the leadership of LalaLajpat Roy. State wise, Punjab accounted for a membership of 70,000, while Bombay of 47,000 and U.P of 15,000. All the other provinces including Bengal and Madras could account for a membership of only 8,000.

The inaugural meeting of the AITUC was attended, among others, by such eminent national leaders as Motilal Nehru, Annie Besant and M.A.Jinnah. LalaLajpat Ray, who presided over the special session of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta in the previous month, also presided over the inaugural conference of the AITUC. Col.T.C. Wedgwood of the British Trade Union Congress was present as a fraternal delegate.

The AITUC was inclined towards the Indian National Congress due to the predilections of the leaders of AITUC. The basic objectives of the AITUC were to represent, 'safeguard, and promote the workers' economic, social and political interests, provide for a common platform for all existing labour organisations, to rationalize the activities and coordinate, and extend and consolidate the trade union movement in the country. There was feeling that the formation of the AITUC was rather premature and it was set up mainly for the purpose of representation in the International Labour Organisation. It met once in a year when the delegates made speeches, passed resolutions including representation in the Legislative Council and in the International Labour Organisation. The influence of Congress leaders over the AITUC was indeed so that it was felt to be Congress oriented for several years.

In 1922, All Indian Railways Men's Federation was formed, under the president ship of C.F. Andrews. In 1928 the Bombay GirniKangen Union emerged. These events and the capture of important leadership positions in the AITUC by the communists, ultimately led to a split in the AITUC giving rise to two major trade unions. A section of communists led by S.V. Dashpande and B.T. Ranadive formed All India Red Trade Union Congress in July 1931.

The notable phenomenon in the 1930s was the world wide "great depression" and its consequences for industrial workers. In their attempt to combat the economic crisis the employers resorted to large scale retrenchment and wages cuts. Workers resisted this move by going on strike. Bombay witnessed the maximum industrial unrest. By the middle of the decade a significant change had taken place in the political sphere which had a favourable impact on trade unionism. In 1937, popular ministries were formed in seven provinces by the Indian National Congress following the election held under the Government of India Act, 1935. The Congress manifesto, promised to secure for workers a decent standard of living, hours to work and conditions of labour in conformity with the international standards, a suitable dispute settlement machinery, and the right to strike and form unions.

In order to fulfil their election promises and prevent the future outbreak of strikes, the Provincial Governments in Madras, Bihar and Bombay appointed Labour Enquiry Committees to investigate the actual conditions of labour. Several enactments were also made in favour of workers, viz. the Bombay Disputes Act, 1938, the Bombay Shop Assistants Act, 1939, the Bengal Maternity Act, 1939, and the CP Maternity Act, 1939.

The National Trade Union federation also emerged with AITUC in 1938. The annual session of the unified AITUC was convened at Nagpur in 1938 of which Suresh Baneyee and N.M Joshi were president and General Secretary respectively. But the unity didn't last long as was envisaged.

The World War II brought in its wake several problems. While one section in the AITUC was in favour of all out support to the war effort, the other was opposed to it. In November 1941, the former group established their own central organization called the Indian Federation of Labour (IFL). Jammadas Mehta and M.N. Roy became its President and General Secretary respectively. A further split took place in June 1947.

The economic hardship of workers led to widespread strikes in different parts of India. They demanded dearness allowance and bonus to compensate for the unprecedented rise in prices. But the Government invoked Rule 81-A of the Defence of India Rules and banned all strikes and lockouts. N.M. Joshi the president of the AITUC emphasised that the government was doing great harm by prohibiting the right to strike. Guruswamy and Maniben Kara, the other Labour representatives in the Assembly, expressed similar views. War brought no relief to the workers. The independence struggle was getting intensified. Inflation was rampant. Discontent among workers persisted and the number of strikes was on the increase. Disunity in the trade union rank was still very high.

In such a calamitous situation Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), an affiliate of Congress Party, was formed in 1947. After the setting up of INTUC, the communist dominated AITUC suffered considerably both in prestige and

membership. Meanwhile, there came another split when the socialists separated and formed the Hindu Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) in 1948. The Indian Federation of Labour formed in 1941 merged with this body. Some of the radicals, under the leadership of K.T. Shah and Mrinal Kanti Bose formed another organization in 1949, known as the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC). Thus by 1949, the trade union movement was split again with the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), and the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) representing the four rival groups and a few federations and unions remaining unaffiliated with any of them. The close relationship of the INTUC with Congress Party, of the HMS with the Socialist Party, the AITUC with the Communist Party and the UTUC with the Revolutionary Socialist Party and other splinter parties of the left ever since is indicative of the continuing political involvement of the trade union movement.

The other central trade union organization which emerged over the course of time were Bharatia Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) an affiliate of Bharatia Janata Party, Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU) an affiliate of CPI(M), National Labour Organisation (NLO) an affiliate of Congress (INTUC), National Federation of Independent Trade Unions and United Trade Union Congress an affiliate of Forward Block. Even several regional parties such as DMK had also got their labour wings.

There are some other federations also functioning. All India Federations, e.g., All India Bar Employees Association, National Federation of Post and Telegraph Workers, National Federation of Indian Railway Men, etc. A number of trade unions as well as their

federations prefer to operate as separate units, though at times they may collaborate with on organizations or the other.

Conclusion

The post war period has been marked by the most rapid strides so far made by the trade union movement in India. Acceptance of democratic structure and growth of industrialization in India contributed to the trade unions progress. Government's industrial relations policy also emphasized to encourage trade unions. The first five year plan kick started the worker's right of association, organization and collective bargaining. These were accepted without reservation as the fundamental basis of mutual relationship. The attitude towards trade unions also changed which synchronized to the view that they should be welcomed and helped to function as part and parcel of the industrial system. During this period both political and economic conditions had jointly and severally influenced the growth of trade unionism.

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