

Organizing Indian Labour: History, Politics And Beyond.

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Abstract: Labour Class of a given socio-political and economic dispensation is a key segment of the same and the greater Indian scenario is also not exceptional from this fact. Though, the history of Indian labour class can be traced from the time immemorial, but the labour class in true sense in India emerged only in colonial period. Importantly, it has been a complex task from the very beginning to till date to organize the Indian labour class owing different structural and social causes. However, it has widely been seen that numerous attempts have been made on the parts of various entities ranging from philanthropic personalities to the Trade Unions infused with diverge political lore for awakening labour class in India and to make them organized. Hence, this paper makes a humble attempt to throw some lights on the historical background and political orientation of organizing Indian labour in a brief manner.

Key Words: Indian Labour Class, Capitalism, Communism, Gandhism, Trade Union Movement

Objective: The paper is intended to elucidate the dynamics of organizing Indian labour Class pertaining to its historical background and ideological orientation.

Methodology: The present paper has been carried out using historic-analytical method and this paper is qualitative in nature. Further, it is based on secondary sources as different books, articles and journals have been consulted and relevant websites are visited while preparing this paper.

Discussion:

Era of emergence of labour consciousness:

The early and the middle part of the 19th century is the time when the real foundations of modern industries like tea plantations, railway, petroleum and other mega industries were established in India and the trade union movement in India too came into being during this era. The genesis of Indian trade union movement can be traced with some action emerged in the mid and last phase of 19th century. Interestingly, in this regards it is important to mention the fact that such actions weren't carried out by laboureres. On contrast such action were carried out by some social reformers having humanitarian and philanthropic spirit. For instance some philanthropists under the leadership of Mr.Sorabji Sahaporji Bengalee an well-known social worker initiated an agitation to draw the attention of erstwhile government to the miserable conditions of workers recruited in factories in 1875 and after this agitation the government enacted the factories act, 1881. Hence, Mr Sorabji Shahpurji Bengalee can be termed as the founding father of Indian Trade Union Movement.

¹ However, Mr. Narayan Meghjee Lokhande who started his carreer as a worker in factory was the leader from the working class section of the society and Mr Lokhande organized a conference of the

workers in 1884 at Bombay in order to represent their grievances to the factory commission.² Similarly, another organization namely The **Bombay Mills Hands Association** came in to existence in 1890 with Mr. Lokhande as its president and this association was also able to publish a journal of its own called '**Dinabandhu**'. While discussing the initiatives carried out by Mr. Lokhande it is worthwhile to mention the fact that his efforts played a vital role in the amendment of the Factories Act, 1891

³Most importantly, Mr. Lokhande deserves special mention in the discourse of trade union movement in India as his efforts achieved success in receiving weekly holiday in 1890. It was basically the efforts carried out by the personalities like Mr. Bengalee and Lokhande by dint of which the labourers of colonial India were mobilized and most importantly were able to draw attention of the colonial state mechanism. Hence the name of Mr. Bengalee and Mr. Lokhande has been scripted in golden letters in the history of Indian trade union movement. Here, we must highlight the fact that such agitations were carried out by social reformers and not by the workers or labourers themselves during this initial phase of the trade union movement in India. The root cause behind the fact is that during that phase, consciousness among the labourers was too fragile so that they weren't in a position to add voice to their respective demands. Hence, it was the efforts of some social reformers with philanthropic ideology that can be credited for paving the way for trade union movement in India in the days to come.

In a nutshell, above are the efforts carried out by some kind-hearted personalities during the last parts of 19th century which got maturity to a greater extent in 20th century and such developments have been discussed below

Early 20th century: The Systematic Initiation

With the arrival of 20th century the Indian Trade Union Movement received maturity to a great extent as during the initial phase of this century as the consciousness among labourers which was infused by the social reformer in the mid and last phase of previous century got accelerated in this phase with the emergence of various actions carried out by the labourers themselves. For instance, various agitations registered in different pockets of the country like strike by the labourers of the **Government Press, Madras** (1903), agitations carried out by **Postal Union, Bombay** (1907), Indian Telegraph Association (1908) had been marked in this phase. Though such agitations have been recorded in the different corners of the country and it is important to mention the fact here that though such unions and actions taken by such unions were local in nature and were pre-mature in character due to their longevity as such unions were unable to persist their agenda further because such unions emerged with some specific demands and disappeared with the fulfillment of such demands. But such efforts can be credited for building the foundation of modern trade union and properly organized trade union movements.

The period between two world wars and more specifically the post-Bolshevik revolution of Russia brought tremendous changes to Indian Trade Union movement⁴. It was the period of developing consciousness among the working class section of the society. The historic November revolution of Russia infused the notion of class consciousness and sensitization among the working class section of contemporary India and thereby labour unrest has been recorded in the industrial hubs of contemporary India like Bombay, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Madras, Calcutta and other such industrial cities. For instance the workers of the Ahmedabad mills agitated in December, 1917 to add

voice to their demand for having better welfare and to celebrate May day , a day dedicated for the working class section of the society⁵. However the efforts carried out by philanthropic personalities and labourers themselves are quite crucial for bringing labour consciousness among the working class section of the society. But such organizations can't be treated as trade unions in proper sense as such bodies were ad hoc in nature and the notion of continuity was absent in such organizations and The **Madrass Labour Union** formed under the leadership of Mr. B.P Wadia in 1918 and this entity has been credited as the First systematic trade union of the country⁶.

Another important fact regarding this phase of the history of Indian trade union movement is the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as a leader in the greater arena of trade union movement. Gandhi after returning from South Africa played an important role for the upliftment of peasants labourers of Champaran area of present days Bihar and by virtue of the leadership of Gandhiji, the *Champaran satyagraha* has assumed as a mass movement and the then colonial state compelled to enact Champaran Agricultural Bill in 9th November, 1917.⁷ Meanwhile, Gandhiji also dedicated himself for the wellbeing of industrial labour too. In 1918, Gandhiji led the mass agitation carried out by the labourers of Ahmadabad Cloth Mill in order to have additional bonus given by the Mill authority during the time when epidemic of Plague spread over Ahmadabad and its surrounding areas. Interestingly, Anusuya Sarabhai, a gandhian leader whose brother Ambalal Sarabhai happened to be the owner of the said mill, actively participated with Gandhiji for the greater benefit of the workers of this cloth mill of Ahmadabad.⁸ Another important fact regarding this movement is that it played a momentous role in the reemergence of three leader namely Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel, Shankarlal Bank and Khandubhai Desai as trade unionist and most importantly, approximately three decades later these leader played a vital role in the formation of **Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)**, a major trade union of the country at central level following the Gandhian lore⁹.

From the above discourse it is clear that from the last part of 19th century to the first part of the succeeding century Indian Trade Union Movement has grown up to a great extent and various organizations came into existence in different pockets of the country. Although such unions came into being but still there was a lack of an trade union with national outlook. Further, formation of **International Labour Organization (ILO)** in 1919 which is considered as the milestone in the history of trade union movement of the globe has fueled the urgency of national level Trade Union entity in India . ILO was established under part XII of treaty of versaille in 1919 and India being a founder member state of ILO nominated Mr. M.M. Joshi as the representative of Indian working class to ILO in 1919. However, the nomination of Mr. Joshi to ILO by the erstwhile Government was crucial in the sense that Indian labourers were not consulted due to the lack central body of labourers while nominating Mr. Joshi as the representative of Indian labour . Hence, a central level trade union was the need of the hour in the post World War-I period specially after the formation of ILO. This fact led to the Formation of **All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)** in 192¹⁰ with Lala Lajpat Rai as its Founding President. Importantly in initial era, there were cordial relationship between AITUC and the national movement carried out by of Indian National Congress and the leaders from the same like C.R. Das, Pt. Motilal Nehru, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had occupied the chair of the President of AITUC.¹¹ In other words, the labour movement carried out by AITUC and the nationalist movement carried out by INC went hand to hand during the initial phase. Although AITUC came into being in 1920 but in its formative years AITUC acted as an organization keeping itself busy in mere discussing the issues every year and to pass resolutions and to send representatives to ILO. During the time between 1921-1925 some

development occurred within the framework of AITUC. Further, AITUC received communist ideology over the period of time. For instance, the Red International of Labour Unions, Moscow a trade union entity with communist lore of Soviet Union sent greetings to second session of AITUC held in Jharia. Even the leadership of AITUC was invited by the Red Labour International to “*join the new great world movement of international solidarity on absolutely equal terms*”.¹² Moreover, there were some young intellectuals who had participated in non-cooperation movement had developed some dubious attitudes towards the effectiveness of Gandhian model for socio-economic problems faced by the working class section of Indian society and gradually notion of communism emerged to their minds and works. Meanwhile The 5th congress of the communist International held in 1924 opined that “*The Indian Communist party must bring the trade union movement under its influence*”¹³.Afterwards the 4th session of AITUC held Calcutta in the same year experienced ideological conflict among the delegates of the same. Even slogans related to communism have been raised in this session and eventually AITUC witnessed its ideological spilt in to two folds-one from the old guards of Indian National Congress and the moderates and other was the Communists. Thus from this historic session of AITUC held in Calcutta on 1924 AITUC, the first national level trade union of India ‘baptized’ itself with the growing trend of Communism. Further, AITUC witnessed its spilt in the 10th session of the same held at Nagpur in 1929 following the emergence of **National Trade Union’s Federation (NTUF)** as the trade union of the moderates. Moreover, another trade union entity namely Red Trade Union Congress came in to being under the leadership of the personalities like B.T. Ranadive and S.V. Deshpandey who possessed communist ideology with extreme level. Later on, All India Red Trade Union Congress and NTUF merged with AITUC in 1935 and 1940 respectively.

Importantly the post World-War is crucial in the realm of trade union movement in India not only for the emergence of Trade unions in proper sense. But also, such developments rejuvenated the State apparatus to look in to the issues raised by the Indian working class under the banner of their respective trade unions. Moreover, the contribution made by the laboureres in supplying goods across the country during the catastrophe of war also compelled the erstwhile state mechanism to keep eyes on the issues of labour welfare and several pro labour legislation like **Workmen’s Compensation Act,1923, Trade Union Act,1926 and Industrial Disputes Act, 1929** came in to existence accordingly. Such legal measures on the part of the state denotes a clear shift of policy possessed by state regarding working class section of the society. Prior to World War-I , State mechanism’s attitude towards laboureres or working class section of the country was somehow non –interference in nature which gradually assumed the tenants of the policy of interference to a large extent after the breakdown of World War-I and its subsequent developments in the greater arena of Indian Trade Union Movement.

Indian Trade Union Movement since World War II: Era of Maturity

The World War II and its subsequent socio-political developments have impacted a lot in Indian Trade Union Movement. Moreover, the economic scenario of the country which became too fragile during and post World War II period which had made the workers of the country sensitized to have organized efforts in order to ensure their wellbeing and due rights. During the war there had been differences of opinion regarding the leadership of AITUC and a new trade unions namely **Indian Federation of Labours** came in to existence in 1941 which was highly influenced by the ideas put

forwarded by M.N. Roy, a veteran personality in the lexicon of Marxist political thought of India¹⁴. Interestingly, there had been a tussle between AITUC and IFL regarding the representative characteristic of them. Both of them claimed to be of having most representatives among the working class section of the country which led to give chance to both enteritis to represent Indian working class in international platforms on rotation basis¹⁵. However, later on IFL merged to AITUC and over the period of time, the impact of communist ideology became more prominent in AITUC following which the communist forces within AITUC began to act as the agents of colonial rule and suggested the workers to behave moderately regarding their rights and to work harder to enable successful prosecution of war¹⁶.

In such a peculiar situation, Indian National Congress decided to oppose the war and not to co-operate with war efforts. Meanwhile, Mahatma Gandhi wanted to ensure the participation of working class in during the Quit India Movement in 1942 and workers too joined in this movement initiated by Gandhiji on 1942¹⁷. Moreover the leadership of Indian National Congress perceived the necessity to have a new central trade union and **INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress)** came in to being on 3rd May, 1947 at New Delhi with Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel as its President accordingly. However, while discussing about INTUC it is important to mention the fact that the polarization of Indian trade union movement on political and ideological lore became more concrete from the very inception of INTUC¹⁸. Moreover soon after its emergence, INTUC began to receive strength as AITUC was invited to send representatives to International Labour Conference in 1946 and 1947. But, INTUC in December 1947 claimed to have more representatives organizations compare to AITUC. In such a situation the Government had to conduct a survey in 1948 which revealed the possession of membership of AITUC and INTUC as were 8,15,011 and 9,73179 respectively .

Indian Trade Union Movement in Post Independence Era : Towards New Horizon and Beyond

With the dawn of Independence the trade union movement in India received new horizons and dimensions as emergence of new central trade unions have been widely seen in post-independence era. For instances unions like **Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) and United Trade Union Congress (UTUC)** came into being in the year 1948 and 1949 respectively. Here, it is worthwhile to mention that both HMS and UTUC possessed two distinct political ideologies i.e. Socialist ideology and Maoist communism respectively .Similarly **Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)**, another trade union of national level in 1955 which wholeheartedly believes in conservative nationalism.

It is a well-known fact that India after its independence put emphasized on industrialization with modern norms and modern industrial set-up and trade union movement are considered as the both sides of a same coin. Hence, expansion of modern industries the numbers of registered trade unions has been increased day by day in post independence era. For instance, the strength of registered trade unions in India in 1966 increased to 14,686 which were mere 4,623 in 1951.¹⁹ Similarly, legislations like Industrial Disputes Act,1947, The Plantation Labour Act,1951 and other such pro labour and trade union acts also played a key role in strengthening trade union movement in India in post Independence era. Thus the trade union movement in India has undergone various changes in post-independent India with the emergence of new trade unions. However, some factors like industrial stagnation (1967-1979), hike in oil price in 1973 and in 1978 resulted in inflation. In

such a complex scenario agitations came on the part of the common masses including the trade unions too. In this connection the agitations carried out by **All India Railwaymen Federation** in 1974 played an active role in compelling the Central Government to declare national Emergency in 1975²⁰.

The labour movement in India has received drastic change after the closing decade of the previous century specially after the initiation of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) by the state apparatus. Such move impacted the very socio-political structure of our country including trade union movement too. Emergence of innovative technologies has hampered the bargaining power of labour and in most cases labourers were bound to adopt the policy of VRS (Voluntary Retirement Scheme) and with the arrival of new millennium the scenario became more vicious as the opportunity of employment getting complicated due to the initiation of recruitment of labourers and employees solely on contractual basis which ultimately hampers the strength of trade unions in terms of its numerical strength which are diminishing day by day and these developments ultimately impacted the sense of greater labour solidarity of the country to a significant extent.

Conclusion: In conclusion, it can be remarked that the labour class in India is a highly fragmented entity which started to be united during the colonial regime and it witnessed different developments over the period of time and enriched not only the class itself but also and most importantly the greater lexicon of Indian Politics to a great extent.

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