



TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper attempts to Trade Union Movement in India. The traces of trade unions' existence could be traced from the eighteenth century; the rapid expansion of industrial society was to draw women, children, rural workers, and immigrants to the work force in larger numbers and in new roles. This pool of unskilled and semi-skilled labour spontaneously organised in fits and starts throughout its beginnings became an important arena for the development of trade unions.

INTRODUCTION

The trade unionism in India developed quite slowly as compared to the western nations. Indian trade union movement can be divided into three phases .

The first phase (1850 to1900)

During this phase the inception of trade unions took place. At this period, the working and living conditions of the labour were poor and their working hours were long. Capitalists were only interested in their productivity and profitability. In addition, the wages were also low and general economic conditions were poor in industries. In order to regulate the working hours and other service conditions of the Indian textile labourers, the Indian Factories Act was enacted in 1881. As a result, employment of child labour was prohibited.

The growth of trade union movement was slow in this phase and later on the Indian Factories Act of 1881 was amended in 1891. Many strikes took place in the two decades following 1880 in all industrial cities. These strikes taught workers to understand the power of united action even though there was no union in real terms. Small associations like Bombay Mill-Hands Association came up by this time.

The second phase (1900 to 1946)

This phase was characterised by the development of organised trade unions and political movements of the working class. Between 1918 and 1923, many unions came into existence in the country. At Ahmedabad, under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, occupational unions like spinners' unions and weavers' unions were formed. A strike was launched by these unions under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who turned it into a satyagraha. These unions federated into industrial union known as Textile Labour Association in 1920. In this year, the First National Trade union organisation (The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)) was established. Many of the leaders of this organisation were leaders of the national movement. In 1926, Trade union law came up with the efforts of Mr. N.M. Joshi that became operative from 1927. During 1928, All India Trade Union Federation (AITUF) was formed.

The third phase (Post independence)

The third phase began with the emergence of independent India in 1947. The partition of the country affected the trade union movement particularly in Bengal and Punjab. By 1949, four Central Trade Union Organisations (CTUO) started functioning in the country:

1. The All India Trade Union Congress,
2. The Indian National Trade Union Congress,
3. The Hindu Mazdoor Sabha, and
4. The United Trade Union Congress

The Indian workforce consists of 430 million workers, growing 2% annually. The Indian labour market consists of three sectors:

1. The rural workers, who constitute about 60 per cent of the workforce.
2. Organised sector, which employs 8 per cent of workforce and
3. The urban informal sector (which includes the growing software industry and other services, not included in the formal sector) which constitutes the rest 32 per cent of the workforce.

The First Strike

The origin of the movement can be traced to sporadic labour unrest dating back to 1877 when the workers at the Empress mills at Nagpur struck work following a wage cut. In 1884, 5000 Bombay Textile Workers submitted a petition demanding regular payment of wages, a weekly holiday, and a mid-day recess of thirty minutes. It is estimated that there were 25 strikes



between 1882 and 1890. These strikes were poorly organised and shortlived and inevitably ended in failure. The oppression by employers was so severe that workers preferred to quit their jobs rather than go on strike. Ironically, it was to promote the interests of British industry that the conditions of workers were improved. Concerned about low labour costs which gave an unfair advantage to Indian factory made goods, the Lancashire and Manchester of Commerce agitated for an inquiry into the conditions of Indian Workers.

First Indian Factories Act

The Govt. of Bombay set up a Factory Commission with F.F. Arbuthnot to investigate the condition of factories in Bombay covering all industries except jute. On the recommendation of the commission, first Indian Factories Act, 1881 was enacted. This act is significant in the sense that it led to the emergence of working class point of view in the country in subsequent years and ultimately to the birth of labour movement in our country.

Following recommendation of the third Factory Commission, Indian Factories Act, 1891 was passed. It was an improvement on the previous Act. A Royal Commission on Labour was appointed in 1892. Restrictions on hours of work and on the employment of women were the chief gains of these investigations and legislation.

The First workers' Organisation in India

Quite a large amount of pioneering work was done with remarkable perseverance by some eminent individuals notably by Narayan Lokhande who can be treated as the Father of India's Modern Trade Union Movement. The Bombay Millhands' Association formed in 1890 under the leadership of Narayan Lokhande was the first workers' organisation in India, essentially a welfare organisation to advance workers' interests, the Association had no members, rules and regulations or funds. Soon a number of other organisations of a similar nature came up, the chief among them being the Kamgar Hitvardhak Sabha and Social Service League. Organisations which may more properly be called trade unions came into existence at the turn of the century, notable among them being the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of India and Burma, and Unions of Printers in Calcutta. The first systematic attempt to form a trade union on permanent basis was done in 1906 in the Postal Offices at Bombay and Calcutta. By the early years of the 20th century, strikes had become quite common in all major industries. Even at this time, there were visible links between nationalist politics and labour movement. In 1908, mill workers in Bombay went on strike for a week to protest against the conviction of the nationalist leader Bala Gangadhar Tilak on charges of sedition. There was also an outcry against the indenture system by which labour was recruited for the plantations, leading to the abolition of the system in 1922.

Madras Labour Union

The Madras Labour Union was founded in 1918. Although it was primarily, an association of textile workers in the European owned Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, it also included workers in many other trades. The Union was founded by Thiru. Vi. Ka. and B.P. Wadia, the nationalist leaders. The monthly membership fee of the union was one anna. The major grievances of workers at this time were the harsh treatment meted out to Indian labour by the British supervisors, and the unduly short mid-day recess.

There was a major confrontation between the union and the management over the demand for a wage increase, which eventually led to a strike and lock-out. The management filed a civil suit in the Madras High Court claiming that Wadia pay damages for inciting workers to breach their contract. As there was no legislation at this time to protect the trade union, the court ruled that the Madras Labour Union was an illegal conspiracy to hurt trading interests. An injunction was granted restraining the activities of the union. The suit was ultimately withdrawn as a result of a compromise whereby all victimised workers, with the exception of thirteen strike leaders, were reinstated and Wadia and other outside leaders severed their link with the union. Against this background N.M. Joshi introduced a bill for the rights of a Trade union. But the then member for Industries, Commerce and Labour himself promised to bring legislation in the matter and the Trade Union Act of 1926 was enacted.

By this time many active trade union leaders notably N.M. Joshi, Zabwalla, solicitor Jinwalla, S.C. Joshi, V.G. Dalvi and Dr. Baptista, came on the scene and strong unions were organised specially in Port Trust, Dock staff, Bank employees (especially Imperial Bank and currency office), Customs, Income-Tax ministerial staff etc.

Textile labour Association

About the same time as the Madras Labour Union was being organised, Anusuyaben Sarabhai had begun doing social work among mill workers in Ahmedabad, an activity which was eventually to lead to the founding of the famous Mazdoor Mahajan - Textile Labour Association in 1920. Gandhi declared that the Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad, was his

laboratory for experimenting with his ideas on industrial relations and a model labour union. He was duly satisfied with the success of the experiment and advised other trade unions to emulate it.

There were a number of reasons for the spurt in unions in the twenties. Prices had soared following World War I, and wages had not kept pace with inflation. The other major factor was the growth of the nationalist Home Rule Movement following the war which nurtured the labour movement as part of its nationalist effort. At this time the workers had no conception of a trade union and needed the guidance of outside leaders. The outsiders were of many kinds. Some were philanthropists and social workers who were politicians who saw in labour a potential base for their political organisation. The politicians were of many persuasions including socialists, Gandhians who emphasised social work and the voluntary settlement of disputes, and communists.

Formation of AITUC

The year 1920 also marked the formation of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The main body of labour legislation and paradoxically enough even the formation of the AITUC owes virtually to the activities of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It was considered that the origin of the First World War was in the disparities between the developed and undeveloped countries. As a result the treaty of Versille established two bodies to cure this ill viz., the League of Nations and the ILO. India was recognised as a founder member of the latter. This is a tripartite body on which each member state nominates its representatives. For the foundational conference of ILO held in 1919 the Government of India nominated N.M.Joshi as the labour member in consultation with the Social Service League which was then making the greatest contribution for the cause of workers. The ILO has a very exercising machinery to see that some action is taken by various Governments on its conventions and recommendations. All labour legislations in India owe a debt to these conventions and recommendations of ILO. The formation of India's first Central Labour Organisation was also wholly with a view to satisfy the credentials committee of ILO. It required that the labour member nominated by Government was in consultation with the most representative organisation of country's labour. The AITUC came into existence in 1920 with the principal reason to decide the labour representative for ILO's first annual conference. Thus the real fillip to the Trade Union Movement in India both in matters of legislation and formation of Central Labour Organisation came from an international body, viz., ILO and the Government's commitment to that body. Dependence on international political institution has thus been a birth malady of Indian Trade Union Movement and unfortunately it is not yet free from these defects.

The AITUC claimed 64 affiliated unions with a membership of 1,40,854 in 1920. Lala Lajpat Rai, the president of the Indian National Conference became the first president of AITUC. In 1924 there were 167 Trade unions with a quarter million members in India. The Indian Factories Act of 1922 enforced a ten hour day.

Trade Unions Act

The Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926 made it legal for any seven workers to combine in a Trade Union. It also removed the pursuit of legitimate trade union activity from the purview of civil and criminal proceedings. This is still the basic law governing trade unions in the country.

Ideological Dissension

Ideological dissension in the labour movement began within few years of the AITUC coming into being. There were three distinct ideological groups in the trade union organisation: communists led by M.N. Roy and Dange, nationalists led by Gandhi and Nehru, and moderates led by N.M. Joshi and V.V. Giri. There were serious differences between these three groups on such major issues as affiliation to international bodies, the attitude to be adopted towards British rule and the nature of the relationship between trade unions and the broader political movement. The communists wanted to affiliate the AITUC to such leftist international organisations as the League against Imperialism and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat. The moderates wanted affiliation with the ILO and the International Federation of Trade Union based in Amsterdam. The nationalists argued that affiliation with the latter organisations would amount to the acceptance of perpetual dominion status for the country under British hegemony. Similarly, the three groups saw the purpose of the labour movement from entirely different points of view. The party ideology was supreme to the communists, who saw the unions only as instruments for furthering this ideology. For the nationalists, independence was the ultimate goal and they expected the trade unions to make this their priority as well. The moderates, unlike the first two, were trade unionists at heart. They wanted to pursue trade unionism in its own right and not subjugate it completely to broader political aims and interests.

Formation of NTUF

From the mid-twenties of the 20th century onwards the communists launched a major offensive to capture the AITUC. A part of their strategy was to start rival unions in opposition to those dominated by the nationalists. By 1928 they had become



powerful enough to sponsor their own candidate for the election to the office of the president of the AITUC in opposition to the nationalist candidate Nehru. Nehru managed to win the election by a narrow margin. In the 1929 session of the AITUC chaired by Nehru the communist's mustered enough support to carry a resolution affiliating the federation to international communist fora. This resolution sparked the first split in the labour movement. The moderates, who were deeply opposed to the affiliation of the AITUC with the League against Imperialism and the Pan-Pacific Secretariat walked out of the federation and eventually formed the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF). Within two years of the event the movement suffered a further split. On finding themselves a minority in the AITUC, the communists walked out of it in 1931 to form the Red Trade Union Congress. The dissociation of the communists from the AITUC was, however, short-lived. They returned to the AITUC the moment the British banned the Red Trade Union Congress. The British were the most favourably disposed toward the moderate NTUF. N.M.Joshi, the moderate leader, was appointed a member of the Royal Commission.

The splintering away of the NTUF had cost the AITUC thirty affiliated unions with close on a hundred thousand members. However, the departure of the communists had not made much difference. In any case, the Red Trade Union Congress quickly fell apart, and the communists returned to the AITUC. During the next few years, there was a reconciliation between the AITUC and NTUF as well. The realisation dawned that the split had occurred on issue such as affiliation with international organisations, which were of no concern to the ordinary worker. By 1940 the NTUF had dissolved itself completely and merged with the AITUC. It was agreed that the AITUC would not affiliate itself with any international organisation, and further, that political questions would be decided only on the basis of a two-third majority.

On the whole the thirties were a depressing period for Indian labour. There were widespread attempts to introduce rationalisation schemes and effect wage cuts. The war time inflation also took its toll. While the militant elements on the labour movement fought for the redressal of worker's grievances, the movement itself was steeped in political dissent. The popular governments voted to power in the 1937 elections did not measure up to the workers' expectations although prominent labour leaders such as Nanda and Giri had taken over as labour ministers. They did pass some useful legislations, however a major piece of legislation was the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act of 1938 which attempted to eliminate inter union rivalries by introducing a system recognising the dominant union.

Formation of Indian Federation of Labour

In 1939, when India was unilaterally involved in World War II by the British, there was another wave of schisms in the labour movement. Congress governments voted to power in the 1937 elections resigned in protest against the country's involvement in an alien war, and the nationalists in the AITUC were naturally opposed to the war effort. But Roy and his supporters stood by the British. They founded a rival labour movement in 1941 called the Indian Federation of Labour (IFL). Initially the communists opposed the war effort and most of their leaders had in fact been jailed by British, But there was a dramatic volte-face in their position 1942 when Soviet Russia joined the Allies.

In the same year the nationalists launched the Quit India movement under Gandhi's leadership. The British reacted to these developments by emptying the jails of communists and filling them up with nationalists. With the nationalists in jail, the AITUC was ripe for capture by the communists, and they made the most of the opportunity. By the end of the war there were four distinct groups of trade unionists, two in jail and two out of it. Among the nationalists who were in jail there had existed for some time a pressure group called the Congress socialists. The two groups outside jail were the Royists and communists who had in common their support for the British war effort, but had maintained their separate identities. The stage was set for a formal division of the labour movement which would reflect the ideological differences.

At this juncture, the government of India became quite active on the labour front and Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, the Labour Member of the Executive Council to Viceroy with the assistance of S.C. Joshi was engaged and exercised to take action on all the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Labour. At their instance a fact-finding committee was appointed to study the then existing situation. During the period 1945-47 most of the present labour legislations were drafted and the conciliation and other machinery were also well conceived. In 1947 when the National government was formed S.C.Joshi, the then Chief Labour Commissioner, was entrusted with the work of implementing the various provisions of Labour Law. The whole of the present set up owes a debt to the work that was done by him and V.V.Giri, the former President of India.

Formation of INTUC, HMS and UTUC

With the formation of National government Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel advocated very strongly the cause of forming a new central organisation of labour. It was his view that the National Government must have the support of organized labour and for this purpose the AITUC cannot be relied upon since it was thriving on foreign support and used to change its colours according to the will of its foreign masters.

So, on 3rd May 1947, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was formed. The number of unions represented in the inaugural meet was around 200 with a total membership of over 5,75,000. There was now no doubt that the AITUC was the labour organisation of the communists, and the INTUC the labour organisation of the Congress. This was further confirmed when the Congress socialists, who had stayed behind in the AITUC, decided to walk out in 1948 and form the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat (HMP). The socialists hoped to draw into their fold all non-congress and non-communist trade unionists. This hope was partly realised when the Royist IFL merged with the HMP to form the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). However, the inaugural session of the HMS witnessed yet another split in the labour movement. Revolutionary socialists and other non-communist Marxist groups from West Bengal under the leadership of Mrinal Kanti Bose, alleged that the HMS was dominated by socialists and decided to form the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC). The UTUC is formally committed to the pursuit of a classless society and non-political unionism. In practice, however, many of its members are supporters of the Revolutionary Socialist Party.

Formation of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh

Before the rise of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh the Indian labour field was dominated by political unionism. The recognised CTUOs were the wings of different political parties or groups. This trend was more bound to encourage multiplicity than workers' interests in the actual conduct of trade union affairs. This often made workers as the pawns in the power game of different parties. The conscientious workers resented this political exploitation and relegation of their own interest to the background. They were awaiting the advent of a national centre based upon genuine trade unionism i.e., an organisation of the workers, for the workers, and by the workers. They were equally opposed to political unionism as well as 'sheer economism' i.e., bread-butter unionism. They were votaries of Nationalism. They sought protection and promotion of workers' interests within the framework of national interests, since they were convinced that there was no incompatibility between the two. In fact, all parties to industrial relations were part and sectional interests were identical with those of the nation. They considered society as the third and the more important party to all industrial relations, and the consumers' interest as the nearest economic equivalent to national interest.

Formation of CITU and UTUC (LS)

By 1965 a splinter group of socialists headed by George Fernandes formed a second Hind Mazdoor Panchayat. The split in the communist movement inevitably divided the AITUC, leading to the emergence of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in 1970. The UTUC was also split into two along ideological lines, the splinter group calling itself UTUC (Lenin Sarani) i.e. UTUC (LS). Regional Trade Union Organisations affiliated to regional political parties such as the DMK, AIADMK and MDMK in Tamilnadu and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra have also emerged.

Central Trade Union Organisations in India

At present there are thirteen Central Trade Union Organisations in India. They are as follows:

1. Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)
2. Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)
3. Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)
4. All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)
5. Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS)
6. United Trade Union Congress - Lenin Sarani (UTUC - LS)
7. Labour Progressive Federation (LPF)
8. United Trade Union Congress (UTUC)
9. All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU)
10. Trade Unions Coordination Committee (TUCC)
11. National Front of Indian Trade Unions - Kolkata (NFITU - KOL)
12. National Front of Indian Trade Unions - Dhanbad (NFITU - DHN)
13. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

Verified membership of CTUOs

The Chief Labour Commissioner (Central) is the verifying authority of membership of CTUOs. The latest verification is on the basis of membership records for the year ending 31st December, 2002 and the Chief Labour Commissioner's report on CTUs' membership verification was announced on July 4, 2007.

The verified membership of both the industrial and agricultural workers of the CTUOs is given in Table 1.1 and Figure 1.1. Thirteen CTUOs have qualified to be recognised as CTUO i.e. having a minimum membership of five lakh spread over four states and in four industries. The BMS has emerged as the number one organisation with the largest of members i.e. 62,15,797 on its rolls is followed by INTUC, AITUC, HMS and CITU.

Table 1.1 verified Membership of Central Trade Union Organisations as on 31.12.2002 (Provisional)

S.No.	Name of the Organisations	Industrial Workers	Agricultural Workers	Total
1	BMS	4879480	1336317	6215797
2	INTUC	2947205	944806	3892011
3	CITU	2567010	110969	2677979
4	AITUC	1971907	1370306	3342213
5	HMS	2641988	580544	3222532
6	UTUC (LS)	622861	745674	1368535
7	LPF	314419	297087	611506
8	UTUC	274846	332089	606935
9	AICCTU	135023	504939	639962
10	TUCC	183553	549207	732760
11	SEWA	383946	304194	688140
12	OTHERS	209291	393928	603219
Total		17131529	7470060	24601589

Source: Chief Labour Commissioner (Central), "Report on CTUOs' Membership Verification as announced on July 4, 2007".

Number of Trade Unions and their Membership

The growth of trade unions and their membership is shown in Table 2.2. This table brings home a disturbing aspect of trade unions, which, one may say, is the most fundamental characteristic of the Indian Labour Movement. While the number of registered unions increased by nearly 20 times between 1949 and 2002, their average membership more or less remained the same without much difference i.e., from 949 to 893.

Thus, while the total number of unions and union members has risen impressively, the unions have been getting smaller. The figures in parentheses denote the percentage of unions submitting returns. There has been an alarming decrease in the number of unions filing returns with the Registrar of Trade Unions. In 1949, 54.5 percent of the registered unions filed returns, whereas by 2002 this figure had fallen to 11.4 percent. It would be reasonable to assume that a large number of trade unions do not file returns because they have very little to file. They exist merely on paper. Even the returns submitted by unions to the Registrar of Trade Unions usually contain exaggerated claims.

Table 1.2, Growth of Trade Unions and Their Membership

Year	Number of Unions		Membership	
	On Register	Submitting Returns	Total (000)	Average per Union
1949	3522	1919(54.5)	1821	949
1950	3766	2002(53.2)	1756	878
1951	4623	2556(55.3)	1996	781
1952	4934	2718(55.1)	2099	772
1953	6029	3295(54.7)	2112	641
1954	6658	3545(53.2)	2170	612
1955	8095	4006(49.5)	2275	568
1956	8554	4399(51.4)	2377	540
1957	10045	5520(55.0)	3015	546
1958	10228	6040(59.1)	3647	603
1959	10811	6588(61.0)	3923	595
1960	11312	6813(60.2)	4013	589
1961	11476	7044(61.4)	3728	529
1962	11827	7521(63.6)	3682	489
1963	11984	7250(60.5)	3977	548
1964	13023	7543(58.0)	4466	592
1965	13248	6932(52.3)	3788	546
1966	14686	7244(49.3)	4392	606
1967	15314	7523(49.1)	4525	601
1968	16716	8851(53.0)	5121	579
1969	18837	8423(44.7)	4900	582

1970	20879	8337(40.0)	5120	600
1971	22484	9029(40.2)	5470	606
1972	23628	9074(38.4)	5340	589
1973	26788	9853(36.8)	6580	668
1974	28648	9800(34.2)	1941	632
1975	29438	10324(35.1)	201	634
1976	29350	9778(33.3)	202	666
1977	30810	9003(29.2)	2137	670
1978	32361	8727(27.0)	2262	711
1979	34430	10021(29.1)	2425	746
1980	36507	4432(12.1)	2591	841
1981	37539	6682(17.8)	2685	808
1982	38313	5044(13.2)	276	595
1983	38935	6844(17.6)	2826	792
1984	42609	6451(15.1)	5150	798
1985	45067	7815(17.3)	6433	823
1986	48030	11365(23.7)	8187	720
1987	49329	11063(22.4)	7959	719
1988	50048	8730(17.4)	7073	810
1989	52210	9758(18.7)	9295	953
1990	52016	8828(17.0)	7019	795
1991	53535	8418(15.7)	6101	725
1992	55680	9165(16.5)	5746	627
1993	55784	6806(12.2)	3134	460
1994	56872	6277(11.0)	4094	652
1995	57952	8162(14.1)	6538	801
1996	58988	7242(12.3)	5601	773
1997	60660	8872(14.6)	7409	835
1998	61992	7403(12.0)	7249	979
1999	64817	8152(12.6)	6407	786
2000	66056	7253(11.0)	5421	747
2001	66624	6531(10.0)	5874	900
2002	68544	7812(11.4)	6973	893

Source: Gupta, V. (2004), *Trade Union Movement in India: A Brief History*(Mumbai, Mill Mazdoor Education Trust, (1949-1983),p.116 ; Institute of Applied Manpower Research, *Manpower Profile India Year Book 2008*,New Delhi, IAMR, (1984 –2002), p.320.

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