

# The role of trade union history essay



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Trade unions are unique organisations whose role is variously interpreted and understood by different interest groups in the society. Traditionally trade unions role has been to protect jobs and real earnings, secure better conditions of work and life and fight against exploitation and arbitrariness to ensure fairness and equity in employment contexts. In the wake of a long history of union movement and accumulated benefits under collective agreements, a plethora of legislations and industrial jurisprudence, growing literacy and awareness among the employees and the spread of a variety of social institutions including consumer and public interest groups the protective role must have undergone, a qualitative change. It can be said that the protective role of trade unions remains in form, but varies in substance.

There is a considerable debate on the purposes and role of trade unions. The predominant view, however, is that the concerns of trade unions extend beyond 'bread and butter' issues. Trade unions through industrial action (such as protests and strikes) and political action (influencing Government policy) establish minimum economic and legal conditions and restrain abuse of labour wherever the labour is organised. Trade unions are also seen as moral institutions, which will uplift the weak and downtrodden and render them the place, the dignity and justice they deserve.

### **The State of Trade Unions in the World.**

Public opinion is hostile to trade unions in most countries. The public is not against unionism in principle. It is against the way unions and union leaders function. The public image of union leaders is that they are autocratic,

corrupt and indifferent to the public interest ' Too much power, too little morality' sums up the public's assessment of unions

There have been many opinion surveys especially in the United States, which bring out the poor public image of trade unions. In surveys which rank the confidence of the American public in fourteen institutions (as for example the army, church, supreme court, stock market, legal profession, industrialists, newspapers etc.) trade unions have been consistently placed at the bottom of the list.

There is a serious decline in union membership in most industrialized nations. There are two possible ways of looking at union membership figures. The first method is to simply add up all union members in a factory, office or country. This gives overall membership position. In the second method, the density of membership is calculated. Density is the percentage of union members in relation to total employment, for example, if unions have 50 members in a factory employing 100, the density is 50 percent. When the reference is to entire country, density is measured by comparing union members against total employment in all sectors. Density is generally accepted as a better indicator because it shows not only how many are members but also how many are not.

Membership has dropped sharply in many European countries. In France, which is the worst hit, the density of union membership is now estimated to be a miserable 10 percent. In Holland, which is also badly affected, density is estimated at around 25 percent. In England the density of union membership is 44 percent. The picture is not very different outside Europe. In the United

States, density has dropped to 16 percent. In Japan, it has dropped to 25 percent. In India, union density has been of a very low order i. e., 10 percent. There are, however, some exceptions to this depressing trend. Trade union density in Sweden, the highest in the world, stands at an extremely impressive 91 percent the working population. Trade unions in Sweden are most respected. They seek social, political and economic democracy. They participate at all levels of decision-making, national and local, and share in the administration of laws. The density in Denmark is 82 percent, and in Norway 63 percent, both very high by world standards.

## **Trade Unions in India**

The trade union movement in India is over a century old. It is useful to take stock to see whether the trade unions in India are at the centre stage or in periphery. In order to do that, one may peruse the following relevant, though selective, statistics.

The Indian workforce 31. 479 Crore (314. 79 million) constitutes 37. 3 percent of the total population. Of the total workforce, 91. 5 percent is accounted for by the informal sector, while the formal sector accounts for 8. 5 percent. Further, only about 3 Crore (30 million) (i. e. 9. 5 percent of the workforce) are employed on permanent basis, implying 90. 5 percent being employed on casual basis. It has also been reported that by December 1991, the claimed membership of the Indian trade union movement was 3. 05 Crore (30. 5 million) (i. e. 9. 68 percent of the workforce) with 82. 24 percent of the trade union membership being accounted for by the organised sector. Thus the unorganised sector is meagrely represented.

The World Labour Report summarises the trade union situation in India “ Indian unions are too very fragmented. In many work places several trade unions compete for the loyalty of the same body of workers and their rivalry is usually bitter and sometimes violent. It is difficult to say how many trade unions operate at the national level since many are not affiliated to any all-India federation. The early splits in Indian trade unionism tended to be on ideological grounds each linked to a particular political party. Much of the recent fragmentation, however, has centered on personalities and occasionally on caste or regional considerations.”

Apart from the low membership coverage and fragmentation of the trade unions, several studies point to a decline in membership, growing alienation between trade unions and membership particularly due to changing characteristics of the new workforce and waning influence of national federations over the enterprise unions. New pattern of unionisation points to a shift from organising workers in a region or industry to the emergence of independent unions at the enterprise level whose obsession is with enterprise level concerns with no forum to link them with national federations that could secure for them a voice at national policy making levels. Several studies also point to a shift in employment from the organised to the unorganised sector through subcontracting and emergence of a typical employment practice where those work for the organisation do not have employment relationship, but a contractual relationship.

Unfortunately trade unionism in India suffers from a variety of problems such as politicisation of the unions, multiplicity of unions, inter-union rivalry, uneconomic size, financial debility and dependence on outside leadership.

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## **Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh**

The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) is the largest Central Trade Union Organisation. The learned economist and visionary, Mananiya Dattopantji Thengdi who has dedicated his life to the service of the society, along with some like minded nationalists, founded it on auspicious Lokmanya Tilak Jayanti 23 July 1955.

Starting from zero in 1955, BMS is now a well-knit organisation in all the states and in private and public sector undertakings. Several organisations of the State and Central government employees are also affiliated to the BMS. The Sangh also enjoys the premier position in several industries.

At present it has over 5, 680 affiliated unions with a membership of more than 76. 39 lakhs (7. 639 million). Although not affiliated to any International Trade Union Confederation, BMS has relations with Central Labour Organisations of other countries. BMS representatives are taking part in the ILO sessions at Geneva for the past 25 years.

## **Objectives**

Bharatiya Culture forms the ideological basis of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh. Approach of culture is essentially subjective. The character of its contribution to the peace, progress and prosperity of humanity is, therefore, basic and fundamental. It fulfils its mission through various individuals and institutions arising in different times and climes. BMS is one of the instruments of Culture fighting against the mutually hostile but equally anti-human Capitalism and Marxism, with the ultimate goal of establishing Bharatiya Social Order based upon the tenets of Ekatma Manavavad (Integral Humanism).

It would be wrong to presume that labour problems are related to one section of population only. Such an exclusive view would be very unrealistic. Deterioration of working and living conditions of labour cannot be a sectional problem of labour alone; it is a malady adversely affecting the health of the entire social organism. Labour has always been regarded as the very foundation of the Bharatiya social structure. It is an integral and vital part of society. The character of its problems, therefore, is not sectional but national. To protect and promote its interests-which are by the very nature of things, not only compatible but invariably identical with those of the nation as a whole-is, therefore, the natural responsibility of the entire nation. BMS is pledged to fulfil this fundamental national duty towards labour.

With a view to achieving national prosperity and eradicating poverty, BMS is pledged to ' Maximum Production and Equitable Distribution'. This spirit is reflected in the ancient Bharatiya idea: Shata Hasta Samahar, Sahsra Hasta Sankir' (with a hundred hands produce; with a thousand hands, distribute.) Prosperity is not possible without increased Production. But we must also ensure equitable distribution so that all people have the urge to produce and share the fruits of prosperity.

BMS declared its belief in the concept of God as the sole moral proprietor of all wealth.

## GROWTH OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN INDIA

### **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

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 short lived 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 Chambers of Commerce agitated for an inquiry into the conditions of Indian Workers.

### **The First Factories Act**

In 1875, the first committee appointed to inquire into the conditions of factory work favoured legal restriction in the form of factory laws. The first Factories Act was adopted in 1881. The Factory Commission was appointed in 1885. The researcher takes only one instance, the statement of a witness to the same commission on the ginning and processing factories of Khandesh: " The same set of hands, men and women, worked continuously day and night for eight consecutive days. Those who went away for the night returned at three in the morning to make sure of being in time when the doors opened at 4 a. m., and for 18 hours' work, from 4 a. m. to 10 p. m., three or four annas was the wage. When the hands are absolutely tired out new hands are entertained. Those working these excessive hours frequently died." There was another Factories Act in 1891, and 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.

4 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, 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. 5 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 Bal 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. Thiru Vi. Ka. and B. P. Wadia the nationalist leaders founded the Union. 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. The union managed to obtain an extension of the recess from thirty p forty minutes. It also opened a cheap grain shop and library for its members and started some welfare activities.

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 lockout. 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. 6 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. 7

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). They saw in labour a potential base for their political organisation. The politicians were of many persuasions including socialists, Gandhians who emphasized 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 Organization (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 Versailles established two bodies to cure this ill viz., the League of Nations and the ILO. India was recognized 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 various Governments take some actions 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 be 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 Congress 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 Shri M. N. Roy and Shri Shripad Amrut Dange, nationalists led by Shri Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru, and moderates led by Shri N. M. Joshi and Shri 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 BLO and the International Federation of Trade Unions 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 present 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 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 communists mustered enough support to carry a resolution affiliating the federation to international communist forum. 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 this 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 reconciliation between the AITUC and NTUF as well. The realisation dawned that the split had occurred on issues 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-thirds majority.

On the whole the thirties were a depressing period for Indian labour. There were widespread attempts to introduce rationalisation schemes and to effect wage cuts. The wartime inflation also took its toll. While the militant elements on the labour movement fought for the redressal of workers 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 Shri Nanda and Shri 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 the British unilaterally involved India in World War II, 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 British had in fact jailed most of their leaders. But there was a dramatic volte face in their position in 1942 when Soviet Russia joined the Allies.

In the same year the nationalists launched the Quit India movement under Gandhis 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



Roy faction 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 then 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 Shri 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 Shri V. V. Giri, the former president of India.

### **Formation of INTUC, HMS and UTUC**

With the formation of National Government Sardar Vallbhbhai 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 organised 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. n 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 Roy faction 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 Shri 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.

By the fifties the fragmentation of the labour movement on political lines had become a permanent fact. Disunity was costing the labour movement dearly. There were periodic attempts at unity, but nothing much came of them. The INTUC was firmly opposed to any alliance with the communists. The HMS was willing to consider a broad-based unity that would include all groups, but not for any arrangement with the AITUC alone. The major stumbling block to unity was the bitter experience to other groups had with the communists in the thirties. Even in specific industries such as railways where a merger

between rival groups did take place, unity was short-lived All that could be achieved between rival trade unions were purely local ad-hoc arrangements.

## **Formation of BMS**

Before the rise of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh the labour field was dominated by political unionism. The recognised Central Labour Organisations were the wings of different political parties or groups. This often made workers the pawns in the power-game of different parties. The conscientious workers were awaiting the advent of a national cadre, 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 Rashtraneetee or Lokaneetee. 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. They considered society as the third-and more important-party to all industrial relations, and the consumers' interest as the nearest economic equivalent to national interest. Some of them met at Bhopal on 23 July 1955 (the Tilak Jayanti Day) and announced the formation of a new NATIONAL TRADE UNION CENTER, BHARATIYA MAZDOOR SANGH.

During the All India Conference at Dhanbad in 1994, BMS has given the clarion call to all its Karyakartas to be prepared to face the THIRD WORLD WAR AND SECOND WAR OF ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE unleashed by the developed countries against the developing countries. The emissaries of the developed countries are the multinational companies who look up to India as a ideal market to sell their outdated consumer products & technologies with

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a view to siphon out the profits to their respective countries. In fact there is concerted effort to even change the tastes and outlook of the average Indian through satellite and junk food channels to suit them. One might recall that the Indians were addicted to tea and coffee by the then British rulers by distributing them free of cost during 1940s. Today not surprisingly India is the largest consumers of both the beverages. Now in this decade the soft drinks and potato chips rule the roost. BMS has made it adequately clear that every country that has to develop has to adopt and adapt methods, which suits it, both culturally and economically. Today India needs MODERNISATION AND NOT BLIND WESTERNISATION. BMS publications HINDU ECONOMICS by Shri M. G. Bokare and THIRD WAY by Mananeeya Dattopant Thengdi are eye-openers to the planners of the nation in this direction. Practising SWADESHI is the only remedy to counter this onslaught.

In 1996, in its 41st year, BMS has rededicated itself in organising the unorganised labour in the country (around 93% of the total workforce) with a view to raise their standard of living and protect them against exploitation. Every member of the BMS has donated minimum Rs. 100 in the 40th year towards the cause.

BMS therefore encourages its workers to undertake social and constructive work along with day-to-day union work. During the Pakistan war, BMS unions suspended their demands and engaged themselves in repairing runways and donating blood for army men.

## **Aims and Objects of BMS**

Those who attended the convention of 23 July 1955, the formation day, had full confiden