



TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA: THE UNIONS OF INTEGRITY AND WORKERS' WELL – BEING

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Abstract

India is a country of vast population and rich heritage. Different religions, traditions, customs and languages of the people make the country great. Even with respect to the current trade scenario, India has also been on the forefront due to the vast developments and amazing achievements which can be seen today. All this is due to the hard work and contribution of workers in trade. So from this point of view, workers recognition and their protection becomes a crucial issue. Keeping this in view, the existence of strong trade unions becomes mandatory. The concept of trade union leaves a strong mark from the phase 1918-1924 which is considered as the era of formation of modern trade unionism in the country to protect the workers interests and till now they have been very much successful. This research paper attempts to induce one of the most pivotal issue in today's scenario and that is the existence of strong trade unions in India. The research paper also highlights about the history of trade union movement in India. It will also shed light on the various roles and problems that come in the way of the unions when they go their way.

Key Words-India, Trade Unions, Trade Union Movement.

Introduction

Over the ages the teeming millions which constituted a sizeable chunk of industrial society have struggled hard to achieve a greater measure of protection against inhuman treatment meted out to them by the employers. They have learned to make themselves secure against ills over which they believed to have little control. In fact, individually, the labourers can do little to bring about the kind of reforms they believe desirable. They are only effective if they act in concert. The very idea of joint action laid down the foundation of their instrument of struggle for security and advancement- the trade union/labour union.

The trade union is an association either of employers or employees or of independent workers. Accordingly, in India such unions may consist of:

- Merchant's or employers' associations;
- The general labour unions;
- The friendly societies; and
- Combination of intellectual labour.

The Trade Union Movement in India

The trade union movement's origin in a sense can be traced back to a very early date to the time when villages had panchayats and guilds for settling disputes between the masters and their members. The panchayats prescribed the code of conduct which was rigidly observed by its members. Its non-observance resulted in expulsion from the community. Trade unions, as understood today, however originated in the first quarter of the present century, although the groundwork was laid during the last quarter of the 19th century. In Bombay, as early as in 1875, a movement was started by reformers under the leadership of Sorabji Shapurji. They protested against the appalling conditions of the factory workers and appealed for introduction of adequate legislation to prevent them. The credit for laying the foundation of the organized labour movement in India is at time accorded to Mr. N.M. Lokhande, a factory worker himself. An agitation was organized by him in 1884 in Bombay. This resulted in certain amenities being extended to the mill workers which led to the organization of the Bombay Millhands Association.

Actually a real organized labour movement in India started at the end of the First World War. Rising prices, without a corresponding increase in wages, despite the employers making huge profits, led to a new awakening. Many trade unions were formed throughout India. There were a number of strikes during 1919 to 1922. To this was added the influence of the Russian Revolution, the establishment of the ILO (International Labour Organization) and the All India Trade Union Congress. This speeded up the pace of the trade union movement. Following the Second World War, there was a spiralling of prices. The workers once again became restive. This further indirectly strengthened the movement in India.

Present Scenario of the Trade Union Movement

In 1926, the Trade Union Act was passed which was a landmark in the history of Trade Unions in the country. The Act gave legal status to the Registered Trade Unions and conferred on them and their members a measure of immunity from Civil Suit



and Criminal prosecution. Registration of Unions enhanced their status before general public. The Act gives protection to registered trade unions in certain cases against civil or criminal action.

The Indian trade unions have come to stay now not as *ad hoc* bodies or strike committees but as permanent features of the industrial society. The political, economic, historical and international factors have all helped the unions to get a legal status and represent the workers.

They have succeeded in organizing Central Union Federations which help in the determination of principles, philosophy, ideology and purposes of the unions and give some sense of direction to the otherwise scattered and isolated large number of unions. The unions have achieved a remarkable status where their voices are heard by the government and the employers, they are consulted on matters pertaining to improvement in conditions of work, health and safety, job security, wages, productivity, all matters concerning the interests of labour. The unions have created for them a platform to air their views, policies and ideologies both at the state level and national level in the Standing Labour Committee and the Indian Labour Conference.

Following table shows the various Trade Unions in India with their year of establishment.

S.No.	Trade Union	Year of Establishment
1	All India Trade Union Congress	1920
2	Indian National Trade Union Congress	1947
3	Hind Mazdoor Sabha	1948
4	United Trade Union Congress- Lenin Sarani	1948
5	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh	1955
6	Centre of Indian Trade Unions	1970

The high aspirations of workers in the attainment of political independence but followed by their non-fulfillment and subsequent deterioration of their economic conditions due to continuous rise in cost of living, and the recognition of unions for their participation in management and political involvement in the labour field all combined together, led to multiplicity of unions during the post-independence period. A large number of small-sized unions arose at local level, but they were subject to infant mortality. The trade unions in India have been allied with one or the other political parties, not in the nature of partnership based on equality and independence as in England, but as mere adjuncts of the political parties. The trade union rivalries have become sharper in free India. The splitting up of unions and formation of new unions having sympathies with political parties has permeated unions operating at different levels.

Through the status the unions have gained, the unions have been able to influence public policy, labour and industrial legislation. They have played an important role in evolving suitable machinery of joint consultation to negotiate various issues between labour and management. Changes are visible in the pattern of political unionism which has led to an increasing recognition of the need for consolidating the gains and a diminished interest in purely political matters. These changes have manifested in three ways:

“*First*, there has developed a distinction between political leaders with a secondary interest in labour union activity and labour leaders with a secondary political interest. More emphasis is being paid to labour leadership by giving pointed attention to the improvement of union cadres, finances and training in official administration.”

“*Second*, the national federations have shown greater interest in long-term activities designed to build-up personnel and organizational side of the trade unions, even while maintaining the patterns of rivalry. Now trade union federation arranges for the training of workers’ education”.

“*Third*, there has been a greater recognition in practice of the need for unions to function as autonomous units rather than supply as appendages of the political parties.”



Research Methodology

The study is based on secondary data which is collected from the newspapers, journals, books, websites, etc.

Literature Review

Today, trade unions are accepted as a part of industrial relations system. In liberalized economic environment the unions are looked upon as a facilitator of change. Here comes out a brief array of literature on trade unions. Hoxie in his analysis of trade union leadership points out, that unionism is the spontaneous outcome of workers' needs and problems, but in actual practice unionism is taught to workers by leaders because the workers have neither experience nor leisure. Unions should depend upon leaders who are specialists, which is "the natural and necessary outcome of the situation", though power is concentrated in the hands of leaders. He also admits that leaders are natural born politicians possessed of considerable administrative ability, men with the talent and instinct of boss and employer, men who love power for its own sake. He concludes that "here is a great weakness of unionism, it dies at the top". So he expresses that though the unions promote industrial democracy, in their actual administration they are hardly democratic. Lenin characterized the trade union as "an educational organization, a school administration, a school of economic management, a school of communism".

Marx and Engels consider trade union solely as the organ of class struggle and it cannot progress or establish socialism. They explained that union is the Instrument to oppose capitalists and to carry on the economic struggle of workers, the first step in bringing out a classless society. The unions should be rendered guidance and the workers should be taught the revolutionary role of working class. "The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy".

Perlman tries to distinguish between 'organic' labour as it actually exists in the industry and labour viewed by intellectuals, and explains that "mature" trade union movement "is not dominated by intellectuals" conceptions, instead "by the home grown philosophy" or "ideology" developed by the needs and aspirations of "organic labour", "Job consciousness" is the primary cause of unionism and the ultimate goals are limited to the control and ownership of the job within the same social framework.

According to Samuel Gompers, "Trade unions were born of the necessity of workers to protect and defend themselves from encroachment, injustice, and protect the workers in their inalienable right to higher and better life; to protect them, not only as equal before the law, but also in their rights to the product of labour, to protect their lives, their limbs, their health, their homes, their firesides, their liberties as men, as workers, as citizen, to overcome and conquer prejudice and antagonism, to secure them the right to life, and the opportunity to maintain that result of their brain and brawn, and the civilization of which they are the founders and the mainstay."

Sharma (1988) argued that like employers, unions too have catered only to the physical well-being of the worker and have paid little attention to improve the quality of his work life. He argued that the bond between the worker and the union is not at all strong as the relationship is based on negative motivation. He suggested that employers and unions can co-operate and collaborate with each other if they come to agree upon some common goal like improvement of quality of work life.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1920) define a trade union as "A continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the condition of their working lives".

The Trade Union Act 1926 defines a trade union as a combination, whether temporary or permanent, formed primarily for the purpose of regulating the relations between workmen and employers or between workmen and workmen, or between employers and employers, or for imposing restrictive condition on the conduct of any trade or business, and includes any federation of two or more trade unions.

According to Webbs, trade unionism "is not merely an incident of the present phase of capitalist industry but has a permanent function to fulfil in the democratic state". They not only advocate peaceful parliamentary reform to achieve socialism but also express that society must accept industrial or economic democracy. "The trade union of the future will, therefore, be coexist with its craft, national in its scope, centralised in its administration and served by an expert officer staff of its own". They hope for the spread of democratic relations to industry, including economic and political decision- making. For them, the goal of trade unionism is to democratize industry within the framework of the present social order.



Roles of Trade Unions

In India, the roles of trade unions have been perceived differently by the different national unions. For instance, according to the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), “a trade union is an organization of the working class in its struggle against the all-pervading power of the capitalist class. It has to struggle with employers in order to secure better living and working conditions and to serve the interests of the working class in the given capitalist society, to mitigate the burden of exploitation. In its struggle, it uses economic, political, moral and ideological means to attain its demand and objectives. The ultimate aim of the trade union movement is to abolish capitalism and wage slavery and establish socialism in which not only the working class but all layers of society are freed from exploitation.

Besides that, trade unions in India generally undertake the following roles:

- secure for the worker fairer wages in the light of the cost of living and the prevailing standard of living in India;
- improve the workers' working conditions by securing shorter working hours, better leave facilities, adequate social security benefits, appropriate educational facilities and other welfare benefits;
- assure the workers a share in the increased profitability of an industrial unit by providing him payment of adequate bonus;
- protect the workers' interest and more specifically to avoid their exploitation;
- ensure the workers' security of employment by resisting retrenchment and victimization likely to harm them;
- protect the larger interest of society by aiding in the improvement of trade and industry; and
- promotion of national integration.

Problems of Trade Unions

India has the largest number of trade unions for a single country; but they have developed very slowly. In the beginning, Indian employers like the British capitalists in India, disliked unionism. Mahatma Gandhi's struggle at Ahmedabad and B.P. Wadia efforts at Madras produced some results. The proliferation of unions and their splitting up came after independence. The trade unions in India could not develop into effective voluntary organizations for certain reasons. Some of these are:

- a. The unrealistic policies of the government-idealistic and irrelevant notions of morality and democratic niceties have stood in the way of realistic policies;
- b. Moral idealism about goals, optimism about achieving them and malnutrition are endemic in India;
- c. The government set before it, goals which were too ambitious, viz., schemes like the Worker's Education, Worker's participation in Management etc. Without creating an atmosphere for its applicability; and the Code of Discipline which did not make much headway because these schemes did not take into account existing conditions. They only attempted to push labour schemes faster than they had the capacity to go; and
- d. The encouragement by the government to the growth of a large number of weak and dependent unions.

The World Labour Report has aptly remarked that “Indian unions are very much 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 somewhat violent. It is difficult even to say how many trade unions operate at the national level since many are not affiliated to any all-India federations. The early split in trade unionism tended to be ideological grounds- each linked to a particular party. Much of the recent fragmentation, however, has centered on personalities and occasionally on caste and regional considerations. In fact, a century-old trade union movement of the country is suffering from problems like small size, poor finances, outside leadership, domination by political parties, intense inter-union rivalry, multiplicity of unions etc. With the upsurging of new political and economic trends, these problems are further multiplying at a rapid pace. Some of the most important and pressing problems of Indian trade unions are:

- Uneven Growth (Industry-wise and Area-wise)
- Small Size of Unions
- Financial Weakness
- Multiplicity of Unions and Inter-Union Rivalry
- Leadership issue
- Politicalisation of Unions
- Problem of Recognition of Trade Unions
- Exploitation of Labour still prevails.



Conclusion

Trade unions are the unions of integrity and workers' well-being in India. But despite of this, the trade unionism in India suffers from a number of problems. The need is to overcome such problems. The factors that make a trade union strong and healthy are unflinching adherence to the union's constitution and rules, regular payment of dues, fully representative character of the union, co-operation with sister unions and a sound leadership. A methodological organization with an enlightened labour force is necessary for the trade unions.

Moreover, the trade unions should have a well-conceived policy with regard to their structure. A trade union should be regarded as a business organization which needs careful planning and sound organizational methods. Trade unions should also adopt policies which do not harm industrial production. It's thus the duty of trade unions of India to help management and all the employees to utilize to the maximum the scarce resources of production available to the organization. Trade unions when enriched and made strong would further ensure the Industrial peace and prosperity.

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