
UNIT 14 WORKING CLASS MOVEMENTS

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

The modern working class arose in India in the nineteenth century. This development was due to the establishment of modern factories, railways, dockyards and construction activities relating to roads and buildings. It was a modern working class in the sense of relatively modern organisation of labour and a relatively free market for labour. There were certain important exceptions to this rule. The plantation workers, who also worked for the capitalist employers and produced goods which were sold in the international markets, were recruited and worked under unfree conditions. In fact, for the majority of the workers in colonial India, the recruitment and working conditions were not as free as were present in some other countries which were capitalistically more developed. This situation had its impact on the working class movement as it developed over the years. Apart from less developed economy, the colonial condition also had its bearing on the labour movement. This Unit will discuss the labour movement in India as a social movement.

14.2 WHAT IS WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT?

It must be clarified right in the beginning that working class movement and trade union movement are not exactly the same thing. They are different in the sense that the working class movement is a much broader phenomenon and covers all kinds of movements involving workers. It includes within its ambit silent protests, passive resistance, individual protests and strikes as well as more organised forms of welfare activities and bigger protests and strikes reaching to the level of general strikes. It involves various kinds of reactions and responses of the workers to the industrial system. These reactions may be to ameliorate the working and living conditions within the industrial system, but they may also be radically opposed to the industrial system itself. Thus labour movement may range from everyday struggles of the workers to general strikes encompassing the whole industry or many industries. It covers the activities and movements of the workers within the capitalist system as well as those opposed to it.

Trade union movement, on the other hand, accepts the industrial system as given but attempts to make it more humane, more amenable to the needs of the workers. It tries to reform the working and living conditions of the workers within the industrial system. The short-term and long-term working of the trade unions is geared towards making the workers more committed to the industrial work while agitating for higher wages, suitable working conditions, stable housing and reasonable credit system. The classic definition of the trade unions which still holds good was formulated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb:

“A trade union, as we understand the term, is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.”

While labour movement may include various types of structures, pre-industrial or modern in nature, which coordinate the protest activities of the workers, the trade unions are generally hierarchical and bureaucratic, relying upon a variety of functionaries with defined roles. The trade unions run on the basis of continuous membership of and regular contributions from workers. Although the trade unions are hierarchical, these hierarchies are not fixed but are based on the acceptance of democratic principles of equality and elections. In principle, anybody can occupy any post in the trade union hierarchy, irrespective of caste, creed, region or economic status.

Thus, it needs to be made clear that the working class movement is a much larger phenomenon which includes the trade unions. However, it can be said that the trade unions are the most organised and modern expression of the labour movement.

14.3 DEVELOPMENT OF CAPITALIST ENTERPRISES

The working class is an integral part of the capitalist economy. Traces of capitalism were introduced in India in the 19th century under colonial dispensation. It was an ironic situation where the organisation of production was capitalistic whereas the labour market was unfree. Plantations and railways were the initial enterprises to herald the era of colonial capitalism in Indian subcontinent. A British company, the Assam Tea Company, was established in 1839 to set up tea gardens in Assam; coffee plantations were started in South India by 1840. Companies which were organised along capitalist lines and produced for international markets established these plantations. However, force and manipulation were used to recruit the labourers who were then kept in bonded condition. The expansion railways, especially after the revolt of 1857 provided suitable conditions for the development of capitalist enterprise in India. The migration of the indentured labour, transport of raw material and manufactured good within and outside the country became much easier. Port cities Bombay, Calcutta and Madras became the centres of the capitalist economy. Cotton mills in Bombay, jute mills in Calcutta, and several factories in Madras were set up in the late 19th century. Similar developments took place in some other cities as well, i.e., Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Sholapur and Nagpur. It was mostly owned by the Indians. A Scottish entrepreneur started the first jute mill in Calcutta in 1854. It also expanded rapidly over the next fifty years. The ownership of the cotton mills was with the Indian entrepreneurs, while that of jute was of the with the foreigners for a long time. By 1914, there were 264 cotton mills in India employing 260,000 workers, 60 jute mills with 200,000 workers, the railways provided work to 600,000 people, the plantations to 700,000 workers and mines to 150,000 workers.

14.4 WORKERS' MOVEMENTS BEFORE THE EMERGENCE OF TRADE UNIONS

Even before the emergence of trade unions after the First World War there have been various forms of labour movements and protest against low wages, long working hours, inhuman conditions of work and several other issues. In fact, the trade unions can be seen as the result of these earlier labour struggles to secure their demands. The trade unions, however, were the most organised and advanced form of labour organisation when they emerged. In this section we will introduce you to the labour movements in the period before the emergence of the trade unions.

Although the plantations and mines contained a large number of workers who were heavily exploited, their conditions did not attract much attention in the initial period because they were far from the urban areas, away from the notice of early social reformers, journalists and public activists. But, despite this isolation, the plantation workers, on their own, registered their protests against the exploitation and oppression by the plantation owners and managers. Reports of such resistance are available since 1884. Individual and collective abstention from work and abandonment of the tea gardens were forms of passive resistance by the workers. More active forms of protests were expressed in individual and collective violence against the assaults by the plantation authorities. All these protests were severely repressed by the planters' musclemen with the help of the colonial police.

The workers in the cotton and jute industries and in the railways, on the other hand, were more in the public gaze. The early social workers and philanthropists were also involved with them. This facilitated better organisational work as well as better reporting and public support. Records of open resistance are available since the 1870s in Bombay. In 1884, the Bombay cotton mill workers held a big meeting and submitted their demands to the government for lesser hours of work. There were also reports of strikes among the mill workers. By the 1890s, the strikes became so frequent that the authorities spoke about a 'strike mania' among the workers. These strikes and protests increasingly began to involve more and more workers. The increasing duration of strikes and involvement of larger number of workers forced the Bombay Millowners' Association to refer to the existence of a 'labour movement' in this country in 1913. The increasing intensity and frequency of strikes on wages and other issues created a situation where it was possible to combine at a wider level. The rising prices, declining real wages, and shortage of foodstuffs during the First World War created the situation for a larger action and it resulted in the general strike in 1919 involving all cotton textile mills in Bombay. There was another general strike in 1920 on the issue of wages and bonus. These took place before the existence of any trade unions in the Bombay mills.

In other industrial centres like Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Madras, Nagpur and Surat the situation was almost similar. The workers were slowly learning to protest and combine for the redress of their grievances. These combinations were increasingly growing bigger involving larger number of workers. The War years, which allowed the industrialists to make huge profits while the workers' real wages declined, made the workers extremely dissatisfied with their conditions and, therefore, created the atmosphere for a broader unity leading to bigger strikes in many industrial centres. Strike waves

spread in other places and engulfed non-factory concerns like railways, plantations, mines, ports and docks, engineering workshops, oil installations, government mint and presses, tramways, gas and electricity supply undertakings and even the municipal workers.

There were many people and organisations involved with these workers. In Bengal, Sasipada Banerjee initiated welfare activities among the workers since the early 1870s. He tried to educate them and to voice their grievances. For this purpose, he founded the 'Working Men's Club' in 1870 and started publishing a monthly journal in Bengali entitled *Bharat Shramjibi* in 1874. The Brahmo Samaj formed the 'Working Men's Mission' in Bengal in 1878 to impart moral education among the workers. It also established the 'Working Men's Institution' in 1905. In Bombay, N.M.Lokhanday was actively involved in welfare and organisational activities among the cotton mill workers since the 1880s. In 1890, he established the 'Bombay Millhands' Association', and in 1898, he started publishing a journal entitled *Dinbandhu* in Marathi. Besides him, S.S.Bengali was also actively propagating for improving the conditions of the workers since 1878. Some other important organisations active among the Bombay workers were the Bombay Millhands Defence Association formed by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in 1908, the *Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha* formed in 1909, and the Social Service League established in 1911. However, these bodies were primarily interested in welfare activities and did not have much organisational base among the workers. Workers' protests in this period were basically organised by the jobbers, the sardars and such other informal leaders or by the vocal and active sections among the workers themselves.

There were some organisations in this period which resembled the trade unions. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of India and Burma formed in 1897, the Printers' Union in Calcutta, and the Postal Union in Bombay were among these. But they could not maintain any continuity in their functioning and were in existence for a short period only.

14.5 EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF TRADE UNIONS

The Indian trade unions have developed in the specific context of colonialism and an underdeveloped economy. The problems of the developing economy still continue in the post-independence period. With lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment and underemployment, and lower wages, the workers in India face many problems which are also reflected in the union growth. In this section we will discuss the rise and growth of Indian trade unions and various features associated with them.

14.5.1 The Beginning

The trade unions emerged in India after the First World War. As you have already read in the section 14.4, even before the emergence of the trade unions in the post-first World War period, the workers in India were involved in the movement. This raised their consciousness. Further, the rising prices of essential commodities, decline in the real wages of workers, increase in the demand for the industrial products resulting in the expansion of India industries, Gandhi's call for the non-cooperation movement, the Russian Revolution, etc., were the main factors which led to the emergence of trade unions in the post-War period in India.

The Madras Labour Union, formed in April 1918, is generally considered to be the first trade union in India. B.P.Wadia, a nationalist leader and an associate of Annie Besant, was instrumental for its organisation. It was mainly an organisation based on the workers of Carnatic and Buckingham Mills in Madras. But workers from other trades such as tramways, rickshaw-pullers, etc. also joined the union in the initial stage. For the first time in India, there was a regular membership and the members were to contribute one *anna* as monthly subscription.

Around the same time, labour agitation had started in Ahmedabad which was to lead towards a completely different model of labour organisation. The workers in Ahmedabad were agitating for a bonus to compensate for the rise in prices. Ansuyaben Sarabhai, who was involved with the agitation, got in touch with Gandhi and requested him to come to Ahmedabad. Gandhi stood by the workers' side and demanded that the workers should be given 35 per cent bonus. On the refusal of the millowners, he called for a strike and insisted that the principle of arbitration should be accepted. He also went on a fast to persuade the millowners. Finally, the millowners accepted arbitration and as a compromise, the arbitrator recommended 27.5 per cent increase in wages. On the basis of this struggle and on the principle of arbitration, the Textile Labour Association, also known as *Majur Mahajan*, was established in Ahmedabad in 1920. This union worked along Gandhian lines and became very strong over the years.

The trade union movement now picked up momentum and many more unions were formed in many centres. By 1920, according to an estimate there were 125 unions consisting of 250,000 members. This was a fairly impressive growth by any standards. But if we consider the durability and consistency of these unions, we find that most of them were very temporary in nature and were little more than strike committees. They were formed basically to conduct strikes and dissolved soon after the strike ended. There was no regular membership, nor were there regular payments from the members. However, the impetus provided by the trade union growth was such that soon a national organisation of the working classes was established.

14.5.2 Formation of the AITUC and Subsequent Developments

The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in 1920 as a development of these trends towards union formation all over India. Many people connected with labour realised that there was a need for a central organisation of labour to coordinate the works of the trade unions all over India. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, N.M.Joshi, B.P.Wadia, Dewan Chamanlall, Lala Lajpat Rai, Joseph Baptista and many others were trying to achieve this goal. The formation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1919 acted as a catalyst for it. It was felt that there should be a national organisation of the trade unions whose nominees could be chosen to represent the Indian labour in the ILO.

Lala Lajpat Rai became the first president of the AITUC and Joseph Baptista its vice-president. Motilal Nehru and Vithalbhai Patel were also present. The AITUC received a lot of support from the Indian National Congress. There were about 107 unions which were affiliated or sympathetic to the AITUC. Out of these 64 unions had 140,854 members. One notable absence was the Gandhian trade union of Ahmedabad, the Textile Labour Union.

It was a promising beginning and the AITUC continued to grow until it split in 1929. In the aftermath of the First World War, there were numerous strikes by the workers all over India. As expected, most of these unions were present in the advanced industrial centres like Bombay, Calcutta, Kanpur, Ahmedabad, and Madras. The main industries where these unions were formed were cotton and jute textiles, railways, shipping, iron and steel and post and telegraphs.

In political terms, the most important phenomenon in the field of labour movement in India was the emergence of the communists. The communist ideology, deriving from the theories of Marx and Lenin, assigns the working class the central place. It was, therefore, natural that the communists would be closely involved with the labour movement in India.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) was formed abroad in Soviet Union in October 1920. M.N.Roy was the moving force behind this. Soon after the formation of the CPI, the communists became active in the labour movements. Bombay and Calcutta invited their particular attention due to the labour concentration and earlier labour struggles in these cities. The communists organised the workers in cotton mills of Bombay and jute mills of Calcutta, besides many other industries and led militant struggles. Due to their commitment to the cause of labour and their devotion to the organisational work, they were soon able to organise many new unions and gained ascendancy in the old ones. By 1928-29, they were able to gain a marginal majority in the AITUC. In the tenth session of the AITUC held in Nagpur and presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru, the communists were able to pass resolutions calling for the boycott of the Royal Commission on Labour, demanding dissociation from the ILO and association with the League against Imperialism. The moderate and reformist group, led by N.M.Joshi, Dewan Chaman Lall, V.V.Giri and B.Shiva Rao, was unable to digest these moves, and left the AITUC along with 30 unions and a membership of 95,639 and formed the Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), while the AITUC was left with only 21 unions and 92,797 members. This was almost a vertical split in this all India organisation of workers.

Another split occurred in 1931 due to divergence between the nationalist and communist opinions. The communists severely criticised Gandhi and condemned the Round Table Conference in which the Congress was participating. They wanted to pass a resolution to this effect. Unable to secure a majority for this, they walked out and formed another federation of trade unions, called the Red Trade Union Congress (RTUC). Thus, by 1931, there were three national federations of trade unions – the AITUC, the IFTU and the RTUC.

It was felt by many trade union leaders that the division in their ranks was creating problems for their political and economic struggles. Therefore, there were attempts for unity immediately after the splits. As a beginning, the Railway unions and some unaffiliated unions united with the IFTU to form the National Federation of Trade Unions (NFTU) in 1933. It had 47 unions and 135,000 members. At another level also there was a move towards unity. The Red Trade Union Congress, led by the communists and the AITUC, led by radical nationalists, were coming closer. They united in 1935 and the name AITUC was retained for the unified organisation.

There was a strong desire for unity among the ranks of the trade unions. It was due to the intensified nationalist and anti-imperialist consciousness. To achieve unity among

the anti-imperialist forces, both the AITUC and NFTU were making intense efforts. The unity was achieved in 1940 when the NFTU merged with the AITUC and N.M.Joshi of the NFTU became its general secretary.

14.5.3 Division and Political Affiliation

As soon as the unity was achieved, the division resurfaced in the organisation owing to the varying politics of the trade union leaders. The Second World War created this rift. Some of the trade union leaders led by M.N.Roy believed that the fascist countries were the main enemies and the democratic countries should be supported against them. But the majority of the trade union leaders comprising the nationalists and communists in the initial stages, while agreeing with this opinion in principle, decided to remain neutral because Britain, which was in control of India, was not willing to promise independence to this country. The Roy Group broke from the AITUC in July 1941 and decided to support the British Indian Government in its War efforts by not sponsoring strikes and by trying to convince the workers to raise productivity. The Group set up the Indian Federation of Labour (IFL) and claimed the affiliation of 182 unions with a membership of over two lakh workers. It continued its active support to government's War efforts, while the AITUC maintained the stance of neutrality.

In the post-War period, when the contours of a national government was becoming apparent, the political rivalry within the trade unions became even more acute. The Congress tried to influence the AITUC and its unions to work along Gandhian lines and in support of the Congress. But by then the communist influence had grown very strong. The Congress, therefore, decided to form its own trade union organisation. The foundation of the in May 1947 Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was the result of this effort. In 1948, the unions under the influence of the Congress Socialists came out of the AITUC and formed the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat (HMP). In 1949, another organisation called United Trade Union Congress was formed under the famous trade union leader, Mrinal Kanti Bose. In 1949, the HMP and the IFL united to found the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). Thus, in 1949, there were four central trade union federations – the AITUC, the INTUC, the HMS and the UTUC.

14.6 THE MOVEMENT IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

The post-independence period also saw the formations *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* (BMS) in 1955, affiliated to the Jansangh, which was formed in 1952. In 1970, following the split in the Communist Party of India in 1964, the AITUC split leading to the formation of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) which was affiliated to the newly formed Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPM. Thus, we find that the trade union movement, which began with a central organisation (the AITUC) in 1920, had become divided into five major central organisations by 1970.

In the post-independence period, the state became the sole arbitrator in the relationships between the industry and the working class. During this period the main concern of government was to achieve growth, industrial peace, and proper management of the conflict between workers and the management. In order to achieve these goals the state passed laws like the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947, and introduced the Labour Relations Bill and Trade Unions Bills in 1949.

The economic recession in the late 1960s caused economic hardships for the workers in the Bombay. It was reflected in the growing unemployment and financial burden of the workers. Inability of the traditional trade unions to solve problems of the working class provided a fertile ground for the birth and growth of Shiv Sena. Shiv Sena founded a trade union the *Bharatiya Kamgar Sena*. It emerged as an alternative to the traditional trade unions. But *Bharatiya Kamgar Sena* divided the working class on the ethnic ground. It said that the problems of the working class were caused by the large number of workers who had come from other regions of the country, especially south India. The Shiv Sena argued that if the outsiders left Bombay, the workers who are natives of Maharashtra can get employment and lead better life. In the due course of time the Shiv Sena directed its attack against the communists. Shiv Sena's movement divided the working class on the ethnic basis and it gave blow to the unity of the working class in Bombay. This division once created continued in the latter period. Some argue that Shiv Sena worked on behalf of the industrialists to divide the working class. However, the *Bharatiya Kamgar Sena* also could not satisfy the workers. It not only generated a feeling of insecurity among the non-Maharashtrian workers but also divided them on the ethnic and communal lines.

By the mid-1970s, there was a general feeling among different social groups the country against the organised traditional political institutions and processes like political parties and organisations affiliated to them like trade unions, elections, professional political leaders. This created resentment against such notion of politics. Any alternative to such politics or anything "political" which could be available to the people attracted their support to a considerable extent. During the 1970s-1980s such alternatives emerged in the form of independent leaders, unaffiliated to any traditional political party/any party/ "apolitical" or organisations. Most significant among these included: Datta Samant, A.K. Roy and Shankar Guha Niyogy, Ela Bhatt. ; Working Women's Forum (Chennai), Self Employed Women's Association (Gujarat), Society for Technology and Development (Himachal Pradesh), *Ama Sangathana* (Orissa), *Kerala Dinesh Beedi* (Kerala) and *Kagad Kach Patra Kashtkari Panchayat* (Maharashtra). These leaders and organisations (independent in terms of not being affiliated to any party directly or indirectly) are also less hierarchical and bureaucratic, but mostly do not believe in radical changes. These organisations help their members to improve their conditions. However, they are not a substitute for the trade unions. The strikes of the workers in the textile industry and railways during 1970s and 1980s are considered to be the most significant developments in the history of the working class movement in the post-independence period.

In 1982-83 the textile workers of Bombay were mobilised into strike which was considered to have "few parallels" in the working class movement in the country. Dissatisfied with the traditional leadership and the trade unions the textile workers of Bombay responded to the call of a new leader and the organisation. Datta Samant, the president of the *Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU)* was able to mobilise a large section of the textile workers of Bombay. His focus of mobilisation was mainly the economic issues. Salim Lakra observes that his emphasis on economic issues opened him to the accusation of "economism" and neglect of the class-based political issues. Datta Samant posed a challenge to the leadership of other trade unions, especially the Shiv Sena affiliate — the *Bharatiya Kamgar Sena* and the *Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh* (RMMS) affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). Though the strike did not achieve its goals, it "did not damage the status of Datta Samant amongst the workers".

In 1974 the railway workers affiliated to the main trade unions, except the Congress affiliated INTUC organised a nation-wide strike. The rail operations came to a halt during the strike. The government responded with the strong anti-worker stand and tried to break the strike. Unable to sustain the strike in the face government's recalcitrant attitude, the workers could not continue the strike. A few years after this strike the Congress-led government imposed emergency during 1975-1977 in the country and introduced measures which restrained the workers to strike. In fact, as E. A. Ramaswami observes the government has largely favoured the management in the negotiations between the management and the striking workers.

With some exceptions the studies generally focus on the movements of the organised and formal sectors. While the political parties, especially those belonging to the left, have organised the agricultural labourers, some times the agricultural labourers have launched agitations without the leadership of trade unions on issues relating to the wages, the non-economic coercion on them, decrease in the time of working. For example, harvesters belonging to the low castes went on strike in the early 1980s in a village of western UP. They demanded increase in the wages and number of *rotis* served to them in the breakfast; increase in the sheaves for harvesting the wheat. In the agitation the harvesters showed a remarkable unity. The strike was observed at the peak season of harvesting in April for four days. The sanctions imposed by the Jat landowning classes on the agitating harvesters did not deter them. Ultimately the strike resulted in some success. The wages, the size of sheaves, and number of *rotis* were increased. There are number of examples of such protest by the agricultural labourers launched at their initiative. In several instances, the protest also assumes the form of what James Scott calls "everyday forms of resistance". Jan Breman in his *Footloose Labour: Working in the India's Informal Economy* discusses the collective actions of the seasonal migrant workers which took place around 1983 in the brickworks near Vadodra in Gujarat. At the initiative of local social activists, a trade union was set up there. However, their agitation did not meet any success.

The working class movement in India is constrained by several factors. H.I Rudolph and S.H. Rudolph argue that the organised working class forms a very small section of the working population in India. Therefore, there is no class politics in the country. In stead Indian politics is a centrist politics. Such statement overlooks the presence of a large number of trade unions and their mobilisation of the working class from time to time. No doubt, the rise of identity politics based on caste, language, religion, tribe, regions, etc., especially from the last two decades of the twentieth century pose serious challenges to unite the working class on their issues. The encouragement to the market with the decline role of the state as part of the globalisation agenda has further relegated the issues of working classes to the background.

14.7 SUMMARY

The modern working class movement in India is a result of the introduction of capitalist economy by the colonial government. The plantations, railways, cotton and jute mills, coal mining and various other industries made their appearance in colonial India. Initially, most of the capital was British while certain industries, such as cotton textile and iron and steel were Indian owned. Lakhs of workers were recruited for running these concerns. The abysmal working and living conditions in the early decades gave rise to protests

and ultimately led to movements among the workers. The trade unions which emerged later on provided organised expression to these early protests and movements. The organised struggles of the working class resulted in the betterment of their conditions. There were, however, many problems with these unions as they did not, and could not, cover the majority of workers. Thus there emerged several other organisations of the working class which were not part of these unions.

14.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What is meant by “working class movement”? Discuss the nature of the working class movement in the pre-independence period.
- 2) Write a note on emergence and growth of trade unions in India.
- 3) Discuss the main features of the working class movement in India during the post-independence period.