



Changing Nature, Growth And Leadership Role Of Trade Unions In India: A Theoretical Explications

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to analyse the changing nature of the Indian trade union movement in terms of their ideology and the role of leadership. Historically, Trade Unions emerged as a result of the industrial revolution that took place in England during the eighteenth century. In India, trade unions emerged over a century ago in the middle of the 19th century. Trade unions in India have evolved from their early period of focusing solely on workers' rights to becoming more diverse in their atrocities, engaging in political and social issues and adapting to changes in the economic and political landscape. The present article makes a humble attempt to shed some light on the historical background and political orientation of trade unions in India.

Key Words: Trade Union, Leadership, Ideology

Introduction:

Trade Unions play a significant role in representing the interests of workers and safeguarding their rights in the workplace. They are essential in negotiating with employers and the government on issues related to wages, working conditions and labour laws. In India, trade unions emerged over a century ago in the middle of the 19th century. In India, the trade union movement is considered to be an inevitable response to the modern industrial system. It can be said that it mediated numerous unfair labour practices such as the use of women and children for heavy manual labour, long working hours, low wages, insecurity of employment, unhealthy working conditions during the colonial period etc. The workers in industries like coal, tea, oil, and other similar industries have been exploited by the colonial rulers in several ways. Amidst such an outrageous state of affairs, the emergence of the concept of a trade union among the workers from such industrial agreements was quite inevitable. Though Trade Unions were a potent force, its leaders alone could not shoulder the responsibilities of its members as the challenges that members face are manifold and require a multipronged approach to overcome them. Therefore, in India, a strong alliance arose between political parties and trade unions. The Indian political parties have its union based on this, which can be termed as a labourers' wing or workers' wing. The workers' wing seems to play a crucial role in contemporary politics of India as well as in Assam. It is a well-known platform on which political parties can popularize their ideologies and mobilize the opinions of workers. Many political parties have even supported their unions for the benefit of their parties. This factor has stimulated the emergence of many unions in India. So, the trade union remains the central force in the political life of India. Almost all the Indian political parties do not hesitate to resort to trade unions to secure an advantageous position in the power struggle. Moreover, in India, the trade union movement has also evolved as a facet of nationalist movements. There was no trade union untouched by the political colour of national independence. Wherever colonial countries had been struggling for national independence, the trade unions have been an integral part of the national movement. Therefore, the leaders of the freedom movement were the leaders of the trade union movement as well and were pioneers in organizing trade unions. Under these circumstances, the trade unions of India were unable to remain independent without participating in the freedom movement, which was the basic nature of trade unions in colonial India. The growth and development of the trade union movement in India have undergone different phases. The pattern of growth and nature of the movement in different periods was shaped by the existing socio-economic and political characteristics of each period. Therefore, the present article intends to explore the different phases of the Indian trade union movement in terms of their ideology and the role of the leadership.

This article is an outcome of qualitative research where it has been carried out using the historic-analytical method. Furthermore, it is based on secondary sources, as several books, papers, and journals, as well as related websites, were reviewed when preparing this article.

Changing Nature, Growth and Leadership Role of Trade Union Movement in India Since Pre-First War Period

The pre-first war period of the trade union movement in India was carried out under the leadership of some social reformers with a humanitarian and philanthropic spirit. They were inspired by the ideas of social reforms of the downtrodden in society. According to the leaders of this era, the working class was the only section of society, who was mostly oppressed and exploited. The workers' poverty, ignorance, and helplessness called for sympathy, and hence, the leaders of this period drew the attention of the administration towards the miserable working conditions of the labourers and demanded early legislation to protect the workers' interests. They considered it a social obligation to focus on the workers' problems and hoped that by pleading for social justice, they would be capable of convincing the employers to take steps to ameliorate the plight of the labourers to some extent, which, in turn, influenced the growth of trade unions in India. In this context, in 1875, a philanthropic leader, Sorabjee Shapurjee Bengalee, started an agitation in Bombay to draw the attention of the government to the appalling conditions of workers in factories, especially those of women and children, and to appeal to the authorities to introduce legislation for the amelioration of their working conditions.ⁱ As a result, the first Factories Act of 1881 was enacted. However, the provisions of this act prohibited child and women's labour, which caused great disappointment to the workers. However, in 1884, N.M. Lokhandey, a factory worker, who was said to be the founder and leader of the organized trade union movement in India, organized an agitation and called for a conference of workers in Bombay to make representations to another Factory Commission. Thus, in the same year itself, another Factory Commission was appointed for the unsuitable working conditions and demanded legislation.ⁱⁱ Similarly, another organization namely the Bombay Mills Hands Association came into existence in 1890 under the leadership of N.M. Lokhandey, who was the president of this association, and this association published a journal of its own called 'Dinabandhu'. While discussing the initiatives carried out by N.M. Lokhandey, it is worthwhile to mention the fact that his efforts played a crucial role in the amendment of the Factories Act, of 1891.ⁱⁱⁱ Most importantly, N.M. Lokhanday deserves a special mention in the discourse of the trade union movement in India as his efforts achieved success in receiving a weekly holiday in 1890.

The factor behind the mobilisation of the labourers of colonial India and their ability to draw the attention of the colonial state mechanism was the efforts carried out by the leaders like Sorabjee Shapurjee Bengalee, and N.M. Lokhandey. A huge number of labour associations were formed in the country after 1890, such as the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of India (regarded as a quasi-labour union by the Bombay Labour Gazette) which was started in 1897, the Printers' Union in Calcutta in 1905, the Bombay Postal Union in 1907, the Kamagar Hit Vardhak Sabha and the Social Service League in 1910.^{iv} Such labour associations organized during this period were essential, but these organizations could hardly be regarded as modern trade unions. These associations performed various tasks such as conducting discussions with labour, constructing a definite structure of the workers' grievances, representing their case before the government, and pressing for suitable labour legislation. There were no suitable conditions for the growth and development of modern trade unions in this phase. The working-class population was devoid of class consciousness and the understanding of the evils of the modern factory system was incomplete and ineffective. The few attempts that were made during this period were simple manifestations of some local grievances that were felt strongly, and once they were solved or decided, the trade unions or labour associations became extinct or non-entities.^v Therefore, in the beginning, the trade union movement flourished on idealistic philosophy and the movement was for the workers rather than by the workers.^{vi}

The trade unions formed during this period required definite aims and constitutions because of the changed circumstances, which called for different types of ideologies and leadership to guide the trade union movement. During this period, leadership was provided by various kinds of persons. The first kind is the philanthropists who act as a catalytic force in accelerating social movements up to a point. However, they are steadily involved in the matters of workers. Along with such people, another group of persons i.e. the professionals, saw in the needs of workers opportunities for furthering their ends and jumped in masquerading as labour leaders. N.M. Lokhanday's efforts were commendable during the period, but, he was "more a philanthropic promoter of labour legislation and workers' welfare than a pioneer of a labour organization or labour struggle".^{vii} This period has been characterized as the social welfare period of the early trade union movement in India.

Changing Nature, Growth and Leadership Role of Trade Union Movement in India Since Inter-War Period or Pre-Independence Period

The inter-war period of the Indian trade union movement can be regarded as an epoch-making period as it marked the beginning of a new era in which leadership of trade unions passed from the hands of social workers into those of political leaders.^{viii} At that time, the workers were not in a position to be leaders on their own, but the political movement taking place throughout the country provided them with the services of the educated intelligentsia. The Royal Commission on Labour in India, therefore, precisely expressed its opinion, "the effect of this surge was enhanced by political turmoil which added to the prevailing feeling of unrest and assisted to provide willing leaders of a trade union movement".^{ix} These 'outside' leaders came to the labour field with different motivations and diverse political outlooks. The common background was India's political struggle

against foreign rule. Thus, the movement during this period gained a permanent political dimension and was closely associated with the Indian national movement.

In 1920, the nationalists started the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) with Lala Lajpat Rai as the president and Joseph Baptista as vice president primarily to facilitate the selection of delegates to represent Indian labour in the economy, social and political matters, and mobilising the labour force in the service of Swaraj Movement.^x After the formation of AITUC, the trade union movement remained very close to the national movement because its leaders were staunch nationalists such as B.P. Wadia, Annie Besant, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, V.V. Giri, Guljarilal Nanda, Dewan Chamanlal and others. The AITUC remained oriented towards the Indian National Congress (INC) due to the favourable predilections of the leaders of AITUC. The link between the AITUC and the INC was very much established since both shared the leadership of the same individuals.

During the period between 1921 and 1925, there were mostly three groups of leaders inside the AITUC. Firstly, there were leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai who could probably have given to the movement methods, ideas, policies, and a labour party too.^{xi} Secondly, there were leaders like C.R. Das, who believed that there was no conflict of interest between the national movement and the trade union movement in India and that the two could be assimilated. Thirdly, there was another group of leaders in the AITUC called moderates, who wanted to run the trade union movement primarily on economic lines. It wanted to keep economic and political considerations separate and distinct. The most active representative leader of this group was N.M. Joshi.^{xii} Other eminent leaders of this group were V.V. Giri and Dewan Chamanlal. All the union leaders belonging to the three groups were men of great moral stature, were honest and idealistic, and wanted to serve the Indian working class in the best possible manner.^{xiii} However, their outlook was conditioned by the historical experience of their times.

During this period, there emerged another group of labour leaders known as communists. During that period, the political situation in India was particularly favourable for the reception of communist ideology. Most of the political leaders in India, at heart, were great sympathisers of Russia's new regime.^{xiv} According to them, Indian nationalism and Russian communism were linked by their high idealism and willpower to unshackle the masses from misery and starvation. Around 1923, a few Indian communists began to organise trade unions in centres like Bombay and Calcutta. Most of the strikes in 1927 were led by the communists in Bombay where they successfully formed a sizable group which consisted of S.A Dange, R.S. Nimbalkar, K.N. Joglekar, S.S. Marajkar, S.V. Ghate and some others. Around 1926, communists were actively involved in AITUC. They discovered a suitable environment to amplify their influence inside the AITUC under Dhundi Raj Thengdi, president-elect of the AITUC in 1925. They also successfully acquired S.V. Ghate, a well-known communist, who was elected as one of the secretaries in 1927. Their primary goals were to direct the organisation away from the ILO as well as to split the national movement. They attained success in 1927 when they gained control of the Kanpur session of the AITUC with the aid of other radical forces of the Congress party. After getting hold of the executive, they moved outward to consolidate their control over the organization.^{xv}

The first split in leadership took place at the 10th session of the AITUC held in Nagpur in 1929. After this split, the moderates formed the All India Trade Union Federation (AITUF) with V. V. Giri as president.^{xvi} The communists seized power in both the General Council and the Executive Committee of the AITUC with the aid of the Left nationalists. In 1931, there was another split in the leadership of AITUC at the Calcutta session caused by the fundamental differences between the communists and the left-wing nationalists. As a result, the Red Trade Union Congress (RTUC) was formed by the communists led by B.T. Ranadive and S.V. Deshpande. As such a condition of the separated labour movement was deemed detrimental, therefore, a trade union unity conference was convened in 1932 and on the motion of V.V. Giri, it adopted a 'Platform of Unity'. The final decision was taken in Delhi in 1933 when the National Federation of Labour was formed to smooth the progress of the challenge towards unity. The AITUF was integrated with the NFL with the adoption of a new name called the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF). The leaders of AITUC and RTUC remained detached from these efforts. In 1935, however, RTUC emerged as AITUC. However, it was only in 1935, through the efforts of V.V. Giri, that the path of unity was paved in Nagpur when the AITUC leadership finally decided to accept the conditions of the merger as laid down by the leaders of NTUF.^{xvii} Thus, after nine years of split, unity among the union leaders was complete in 1940 when the NTUF was dissolved and merged with AITUC. N.M. Joshi was made its secretary. Thus, AITUC again became the sole representative of organised labour.

However, the Second World War created new strains on the unity of trade union leadership, and consequently, a rift took place in 1941. The radicals left the AITUC and formed a new central labour federation known as the India Federation of Labour (IFL).^{xviii} In 1942, this federation was recognised by the government as an organ representing the Indian labour class. The shifts in the national political situation continued to the very fibre of the Indian trade union leadership. The INC party launched a policy of non-cooperation at the beginning of the war. By August 1942, the political atmosphere became highly charged and cries of 'quit India' flew about. A large number of congress leaders and socialists were arrested. As a result, the strength of non-communist leaders in the AITUC, especially at the top-level leadership, dwindled and the organization fell into the hands of the communist leaders. The later years of wars witnessed an intense rivalry between the two trade unions, the AITUC and IFL for primacy in the field of leadership. The investigation of the Chief Commission of Labour,

India in 1944 gave its verdict that 'AITUC was increasingly becoming more representative from almost every point of view and that IFL was gradually posing on that score'.

Thus, by the end of the war, there were three principal leadership groups in the field- the communists dominating the AITUC, the Royalists having a hold on the IFL and the Nationalists and the Socialists trying to build up a labour front, which was limited to only two centres- Ahmedabad and Jamshedpur.^{xix}

Changing Nature, Growth and Leadership Role of Trade Union Movement in India Since Post-Independence Period

With the dawn of independence in India, the trend in the growth of trade unions accelerated. However, unfortunately, in 1947, the history of the trade union movement in India set the rapidity for future polarization of the faction on political lines. Yet, trade unions have been rapidly developing as an effective tool for securing and protecting workers' interests in the post-independence era. Nonetheless, the attitude of political parties to the trade union movement has not changed. During this era, when attempts to restructure the AITUC failed, the leaders believing in aims and ideals other than those of the AITUC separated from the organization and established the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in May 1947.^{xx} The creation of the INTUC was a confusion regarding both the failure to generate favourable conditions for the AITUC and the impatience of the Government and Congress party with the leadership of AITUC, which completely came under the domination of the communists.^{xxi} The INTUC was formed by Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangha (HMSS), a creation of the pro-Gandhi wing in the Congress, which was associated with the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association (ATLA). The ATLA became the guiding and driving force behind the INTUC. The long experience of the ATLA in trade union affairs also resulted in a large proportion of the INTUC leaders coming from Ahmedabad. As Oranti puts it, 'Ideologically as well as administratively the bloodstream of the INTUC flows from Ahmedabad. Here the ATLA provides it with a strong membership nucleus, a rich treasury and a cadre with a long experience in labour work.'^{xxii} INTUC grew rapidly in strength and it had the claim of being recognised as 'the most representative central organization of organised labour in India.' The AITUC, which for nearly 30 years had been considered the 'voice of Indian labour', thus lost its premier position.

Since the beginning, INTUC leaders shared and supported the political outlook of the Indian National Congress. Its popular image was identified with that of the Congress party. When socialists broke away from the Congress in 1948 and formed a new political party (Praja Socialist Party), the socialist trade union leaders who were operating within the INTUC seceded from it and formed a new central trade union organization called the Hindustan Mazdoor Panchayat (HMP). This organization and the Indian Federation of Labour came together under the title of Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). The HMS was launched apparently to keep the trade union movement free from domination by government and political parties, and the methods to be employed were to be peaceful, legitimate, and democratic.

However, a group of left-wing trade union leaders, dissatisfied with the attitude of the majority of the socialist leaders who influenced the HMS, formed yet another organization called United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) in 1949 'to conduct trade union activity on the broadest possible basis of trade union unity free from sectarian politics.' Led by leaders of the leftist parties, the UTUC cooperated with the communists even though they opposed the Communist Party's emphasis on violence. Thus by 1949, the trade union leadership was split again with the INTUC, AITUC, HMS, and UTUC – representing the four rival groups and a few national federations and unions remaining unaffiliated with any of them. The close relationship of the INTUC with the Congress party, the HMS with the Socialist Party, the AITUC with the Communist Party, and other splinter parties of the left is indicative of the continuing political involvement of the trade union leaders.

There was again a rift in the leadership of AITUC in 1970 when the CPM leaders split from it and formed a new central organization called the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU). Another attempt at unity at the top resulted in the formation of the National Council of Central Trade Union (NCCTU), which gained limited unity among INTUC, AITUC, and HMS. The leaders of CITU clarified that they refuse to be bound by any decision taken without their participation. One of its leaders B.T. Ranadive considered that the formation of the NCCTU is an attempt 'to forestall the unity of CITU, AITUC, HMS, and UTUC.' The limited unity brought about was mainly on political grounds.

The leadership of the trade unions has actively responded to periodic divisions and re-alignments among political parties during the post-independence era. The political affiliation of union officials has seen a significant transition, particularly over the past ten years. However, even after joining a political party with a different union base, many union officials continue to occupy significant roles in trade unions with whom they have had long relationships.¹ As a result, the leadership of some unions, such as HMS, is now less obviously related to a particular political party than that of other unions, such as AITUC, which has strong ties to the right-wing Communist Party of India. The fragmentation of the expression of the workers' wants and interests based on the leaders' ideologies is one of the key effects of this political leadership of Indian trade unions. While conservative leaders (in unions like INTUC) are more likely to be concerned with the values of peace, harmony, and productivity, radical leaders (in unions like AITUC) frequently assess workers' interests

¹ It is evident from the fact that a large number of socialists joined the congress party after 1970, but continued to hold executive positions in Hind Mazdoor Sabha which has long been associated with socialists.

primarily in terms of class conflict. Thus, the trade union movement in Indian history is inextricably linked to contemporary political parties and their policies. Each of the political parties associated with its federation of trade unions maintains its office in Assam.

Conclusion:

From the above discourse, it can be remarked that the trade union movement in India is dynamic and has grown over time. After analysing the different phases of the growth of the trade union movement in India in terms of their ideology and the role of leadership, it has been observed that the pre-first war period of the trade union movement in India was carried out under the leadership of social reformers with a humanitarian spirit and philanthropic spirit, while in the inter-war or pre-independence period of the Indian trade union movement, trade union leadership passed from social reformers to political leaders. During this era, after the formation of the AITUC, there emerged a triangular clash. This led to the formation of three groups of leaders, namely communists, nationalists, and moderates. These groups of leaders saw trade unions from different points of view which led to the formation of different trade unions in India. For instance, personalities like M.N. Roy, Dange, Gandhi, Nehru, N.M. Joshi, V.V. Giri, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Lala Lajpat Rai and a host of other such leaders dominated the Indian trade union movement in various phases of history, and most importantly, under the leadership of such personalities, the Indian trade union movement flourished and grew in a large volume over the period of time. Again, in the post-independence era, the leadership of trade unions diligently responded to cleavages and re-alignments among political parties from time to time. This is the phase of pluralism of the Indian trade union movement with multiple trade unions. Thus, the contemporary political scenario of both the domestic and international spectrum played a momentous role in the development of the very notion of the Indian trade union movement.

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