



Movement of the Working Class

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Introduction

- **Rise of Working Class:**

- The modern working class **arose in India with the introduction of capitalism in the 19th century** under colonial dispensation.

It was a modern working class in the sense of relatively modern organisation of labour and a relatively free market for labour.

- This development was due to the establishment of modern factories, railways, dockyards and construction activities relating to roads and buildings.

Plantations and railways were the initial enterprises to herald the era of colonial capitalism in Indian subcontinent.

- **Industrialisation in India:**

- 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 the cities of Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Solapur and Nagpur.
- The **first jute mill of India** was set up in **Calcutta in 1854** by a Scottish entrepreneur.
- The **ownership of the cotton mills was with the Indian** entrepreneurs, while that of **jute was with the foreigners** for a long time.

Workers' Movement in Pre-Independence India

- **Initial Attempts to Improve Workers' Conditions:** Attempts were made in 1870-1880 to better the working conditions of the workers by legislation.
 - Till the **Swadeshi surge of 1903-08**, there was **no concerted effort** to better the working conditions of the labour.
 - Again between 1915-1922, there was **resurgence of workers' movement** along with the **Home Rule Movement** and the **Non-Cooperation Movement**.
 - The earlier attempts to improve the economic conditions of the workers were in the nature of **philanthropic efforts which were isolated, sporadic and aimed at specific local grievances**.
- **Workers' Movements before the Emergence of Trade Unions:**
 - **Plantation and Mine Workers:** The plantation and mine workers were heavily exploited but their conditions **did not attract much attention initially** as they were away from the notice of early social reformers, journalists and public activists.

Despite this isolation, the plantation workers, **on their own, registered their protests against the exploitation and oppression** by the plantation owners and managers.
 - **Industrial Workers:** The **cotton and jute industry** workers were **more in the public gaze**.

The early social workers and **philanthropists were also involved** with them facilitating better organisational work as well as **better reporting and public support**.
 - **Formation of Organisations:**
 - In Bengal, **Sasipada Banerjee** 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 1890 in Maharashtra, **N.M. Lokhandey** established the '**Bombay Millhands' Association**', and in 1898, he started publishing a journal entitled '**Dinbandhu**' in Marathi.

The **Bombay Millhands Defence Association** formed by **Bal Gangadhar Tilak** in 1908.
 - However, these bodies were primarily **interested in welfare activities** and **did not have much organisational base** among the workers.

Emergence and Growth of Trade Unions:

- **Cause of Emergence:** The trade unions emerged in India after World War I. The main factors that led to the emergence of trade unions include:
 - 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 Indian industries.
 - **Gandhi's** call for the Non-Cooperation Movement.
 - The Russian Revolution.
- **Formation of Trade Unions:**
 - 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.
 - The **Textile Labour Association**, also known as **Majur Mahajan Sangh**, was established in Ahmedabad in 1920.
 - The union was formed following the agitation of mill workers of Ahmedabad demanding for a bonus to compensate for the rise in prices.
 - This union worked along Gandhian lines and became very strong over the years.

All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC):

- **A New Edge to the Workers' Movement:** The most important development in the workers' movement was the formation of **All-India Trade Union Congress** under the **leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak** and Lala Lajpat Rai.
 - Since then the working class movement became strong and by 1930 onwards, an ideological tone was added to the movement.
- **Cause of Formation:** 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.
 - The **formation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO)** in 1919 acted as a catalyst for it.
 - The members selected from AITUC represented the Indian Labour at the ILO.
- **Leaders Involved:** **Bal Gangadhar Tilak, N.M.Joshi, B.P.Wadia, Diwan Chamanlall, Lala Lajpat Rai and Joseph Baptista** were the **main leaders behind the formation of AITUC**.
 - Lala Lajpat Rai **became the first president** of the AITUC and Joseph Baptista its **vice president**.
 - Lajpat Rai was the **first to link capitalism with imperialism**: "imperialism and militarism are the twin children of capitalism".

- **Ideology of AITUC:** In the beginning, the AITUC was influenced by social democratic ideas of the British Labour Party.
 - The Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, trusteeship and class-collaboration had great influence on AITUC.
- **The Trade Union Act, 1926:**
 - The act recognised trade unions as legal associations.
 - It laid down conditions for registration and regulation of trade union activities.
 - It secured civil and criminal immunity for trade unions from prosecution for legitimate activities, but also put some restrictions on their political activities.

Role of Communists:

- **Emergence of Communists and CPI:** 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 **Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin**, assigns the working class the central place.
 - The **Communist Party of India (CPI)**, formed in Soviet Union in 1920, soon after its formation, **became active in the labour movements**.
- **Role in the Movements:** The communists organised the workers in cotton mills of Bombay and jute mills of Calcutta, besides many other industries and led militant struggles.
- **Role in Splitting the AITUC:** By 1928-29, the communists gained a marginal majority in the AITUC.
 - **Splitting the Moderates:** In the **tenth session of the AITUC held in Nagpur**, the communists **called for the dissociation from the ILO and association with the League against Imperialism**.
 - The moderate and reformist group were against the idea and consequently left the AITUC and formed the **Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU)**.
 - **Splitting the Nationalists:** 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 of 1931** in which the **Indian National Congress** was participating.
 - Unable to secure a majority for this condemnation, the **communists split from the nationalists** and formed the **Red Trade Union Congress (RTUC)**.
 - By 1931, there were three national federations of trade unions – the AITUC, the IFTU and the RTUC.

- **Reunion of Trade Unions:** It was felt by many trade union leaders that the division in their ranks was creating problems for their political and economic struggles.
As a result, the **Railway Unions and some unaffiliated unions united with the IFTU** to form the **National Federation of Trade Unions (NFTU)** in 1933.
Consequently, the **RTUC, and the AITUC also united** in 1935 and the name AITUC was retained for the unified organisation.

Workers' Movement in Post-Independence India

- **Formation of New Unions:** The post-independence period saw the formation of a number of trade unions such as **Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)** and **Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)**
CITU was formed by Communist Party of India (Marxist), splitting from AITUC.
- **Legislations Framed:** The **Industrial Dispute Act, 1947** and **Labour Relations Bill and Trade Unions Bills, 1949** were introduced.
- **Decline in Strikes:** Between 1947-1960, the condition of the working class improved and there was a decline in the number of strikes.
- **Economic Recession:** The period of late 1960s saw decline in the wages of the working class; as a result, **disputes in the industrial front increased.**
- **New Economic Policy, 1991:** It introduced **LPG** (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation).
 - Liberalisation **deteriorated the bargaining position of the workers** vis-a-vis capital.
 - The policy provided **no statutory minimum wages** for labour.
It gave the employers the **complete right to hire and fire.**

Weaknesses of the Movement

- **Incomplete Coverage:** A large section of the working class, the **unorganised sector, was left outside the fold of trade unions.**
The unions took the relatively easy path of pressing the demands of those who could be easily organised or whose demands were likely to be heard by the government.
- **Multiplicity of Trade Unions:** Post independence, the trade unions representing workers in the country have multiplied.
Multiplicity of unions in a capitalist system **keeps the working class fragmented and vulnerable to all forms of pressures.**
- **Irresponsive Trade Unions:** Trade unions in the country had not been responsive to the problems of the working class in the country.
Unions lay fragmented which produced bitter rivalry among them and hence very often they failed to respond to the issues of the working class.

- **Disunity among the Workers:** The **industrial working class of the country did not ally with the peasants** and other sections of the society in collective direct action on political issues'.

This reflected the **lack of political consciousness** among the working class.

- **Negligence for Marginalised Sections:** Trade unions in the organised sector **overlooked the problems of women workers and workers belonging to the socially oppressed groups.**