

## CHAPTER-II

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA

#### INTRODUCTION :

When a man hires another man for wages, the labour problem is said to be born. Between these two persons, the relationship is that of a master and a servant. This relationship is governed by a tacit or written understanding between them about the terms and conditions of work, such as wages and allowances, hours of work, benefits and amenities. This is the simplest form of labour management relationship. The workers work for their master in return for some remuneration for the work done. With the development of industrialisation process the labour problem and the relationship tend to get more and more complex.<sup>1</sup>

Labour is a factor of production quite different from other factors of production, such as land, capital etc. Labour has certain peculiarities, which create labour problems e.g. labour sells his work only, and he himself remains his own property. Labour is inseparable from labourer. Labour is a perishable commodity. Labour is not so mobile as capital. Individually labour has very weak bargaining power. Labour is not only a factor of production, but also the ultimate end of production. In short, labour is a living thing and that makes all the difference. Therefore, not only economic, but moral and social consideration should also be taken into account in discussion of labour problems.

Trade Unionism is the product of factory system of production. Under the complex factory system personal contacts between the employers and the workers are not possible. This factory system created various problems along with the developments such as private property, concentration of means of production in the hands of few capitalist, emergence of class of divergent interest, disparity in wealth and income and unemployment etc. In the process of industrialisation entrepreneurs tried for maximisation of profit and minimisation of cost. Consequently these practices lead to various evils such as, prolonged working hours, low wages, and exploitation of workers etc. So there is need of labour unions to solve the above problems and to mitigate these evils. Individually labour has very weak bargaining power, but when workers organise and take group action, they become strongest of all. So Karl Marx said, "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries unite."<sup>2</sup>

#### DEFINITIONS :

Discussion on any 'term' first requires precise definition of that term. So the terms 'Labour' and 'Trade Union' need to be defined precisely.

#### Labour -

The term labour is used in various senses. In economics any work whether manual or mental, which is undertaken for a monetary consider-

ration is called labour. Thus labour today includes workers both of hand and head, who work for others for a given payment in cash or kind. Therefore, highly trained and skilled technicians, supervisors, clerical and salaried staff are as much a part of labour as the unskilled or semiskilled manual workers.

In the discussion on labour problems the terms - Labour, Labourer, Worker, Workman and employee are practically synonymous. The term 'wage labour' which may be defined as workers, who do not have any other adequate source of livelihood except the sale of their labour power (i.e. that is capacity to work either physically or mentally).

Sometimes the term labour is used in a very broad sense of total working force or labour force, which includes all persons, who work for a living as distinguished from those who do not or are not expected to work for living, such as housewives, children, old persons etc. In this sense labour is synonymous with human resources.

Dr. Marshall defined labour as - "Any exertion of mind or body undergone partly or wholly with a view to some good other than the pleasure derived directly from the work, is called labour."<sup>3</sup>

#### Trade Union -

Any attempt to give a precise definition of the term 'Trade Union' is bound to fail, because it is a complex institution which has many aspects - economic, social, political and psychological. There is a wide

difference in the use of the term in the different countries.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that there is no 'normal' trade union activity in socialist economy like U.S.S.R. But supporters of the socialist system argued that the trade unions perform important functions there. In a Communist country they (trade union) may act as a department of the Government. In a democracy trade unions may act as political pressure groups and where they are not numerically strong, they may act as a wing of some political party or parties. Further the unions change with the change in environment. However, the term 'trade union' has been defined variously in different countries by different authors. Some of the oft-quoted definitions are as follows

1) "A trade union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives."<sup>5</sup>

- Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

2) "A trade union means an association of workers in one or more professions for the purpose of protecting and advancing the member's economic interest in connection with their daily work."<sup>6</sup>

- G.D.H. Cole.

3) It is an association of workers in a particular trade or craft organised to promote a common interest and to further that interest through negotiation of wages, hours and other conditions of employment."<sup>7</sup>

- Robert Dictionary of Industrial Relations.

4) "A trade union is a monopolistic combination of wage earners who as individual producers are complementary to one another, but who stand to employers in a relation of dependence for the sale of their labour and even for its production, and that the general purpose of association is, in view of that dependence, to strengthen their power to bargain with the employers or bargaining collectively."<sup>8</sup>

- J. Cunison.

5) "A trade union is any combination whether temporary or permanent, formed primarily for the purpose of regulating the relations between workmen and workmen, between the employers and employees or for imposing restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business and include any federation of two or more trade unions."<sup>9</sup>

- Indian Trade Union Act, 1926.

Thus in short, trade union is a voluntary organisation of workers formed to promote and protect their interest by collective action.

#### ORIGINS OF TRADE UNIONISM :

The term  
 [ ] labour movement and trade union movement are used synonymously. But there is slight distinction between the two. The labour movement is 'for the workers', whereas trade union movement is 'by the workers'. This distinction needs to be noted, because till the workers organised themselves into trade unions, efforts were made by the social reformers, to improve the working and living conditions of labour. These efforts should be taken as labour movement and not that of trade union movement. In India the labour movement started from 1875, on the other hand trade union movement

started after IInd World War. In short trade union movement is a part of labour movement.<sup>10</sup>

The origin of trade unions has been interpreted in different ways by different authorities. There views are expressed in the form of ideology, principles, theories or approaches. The purpose of such theories has been to explain -

- 1) What factors lead to the original organisation of the union?
- 2) What conditions are favourable to bring a union into existence ?
- 3) What are the ultimate goals of the union ?
- 4) How do unions decide which goals to seek through collective bargaining ? and
- 5) How do unions decide which techniques to use in accomplishing their goals ?

These questions are inter-dependent and the answer to one will dertermine answersto others. To answer these questions various approaches of labour movement will prove useful.

The Marxist approach looks upon unionism as the instrument for the complete displacement of capitalists both in Government and industry by its revolutionary programme. The working class created by industrialisation will over-throw the capitalists and substitute common ownership of all on capital and property with economic equality for all.<sup>11</sup>

2) Perlman viewed trade unionism as essentially pragmatic and thought that it struggles constantly for the improvement of economic conditions and relationship through broad schemes of social and economic reform.<sup>12</sup>

3) Hoxie also viewed trade unionism as essentially pragmatic and non-revolutionary in its functioning. But unlike Perlman he did not emphasise pluralistic group responses to the underlying process of industrialisation.<sup>13</sup>

4) According to Tannenbaum trade unionism is "unconscious rebellion against automatisation of industrial society."<sup>14</sup> The main characteristics of unionism is its lack of ideology and its concentration on immediate ends.

5) The Webbs believed that, trade unions represent a means by which the principles of democracy applied to the political sphere could be stretched to the industrial field. The trade union movement in their view was an important instrument of evolutionary process.<sup>15</sup>

6) The Gandhian approach views trade unionism as essentially reformist organisation to promote class collaboration. Capital and labour should supplement and help each other. They should be a great family living in unity and harmony.<sup>16</sup>

Thus basic objective of trade union everywhere and at every time continues to be economic - the safeguarding and furthering of economic interest of its members.

In recent times, the trade union activities have become increasingly more diversified. Unionism touches all aspects of human being and economic system of the society. According to J.S. Laski - "The union problem is a complex of economic, legal, ethical, social and political problems, which can be understood only by knowing the facts and genesis of the view point of organised labour in all its diversity - contradictions and shifting character and by considering this view point in relation to developing social conditions and social traditions."<sup>17</sup>

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN INDIA :

The Indian trade union movement has a short history, but it has crowded more experience. Trade union movement in India like other industrialised countries is the product of modern industrial system. In India growth of modern industries can be traced as far back as 16th century. But after 1850 modern factory system brought in its wake evils of capitalism. In order to face the circumstances imposed by industrial system an organisational consciousness emerged amongst the industrial workers. This consciousness ultimately manifested in terms of trade union movement.<sup>18</sup>

The growth and development of the trade union movement in India can be briefly given under following six periods.

- 1) Social Welfare Period - 1875 to 1918.
- 2) Early Trade Union Period - 1918 to 1924.
- 3) Leftwing Trade Unionism Period - 1924 to 1934.



- 4) Trade Union Unity Period - 1935 to 1938,,
- 5) The Period Between - 1939 to 1946 and
- 6) Post-Independence Period - 1947 onwards.

1) Social Welfare Period (1875 to 1918) -

Modern Industrialisation in India commenced with the establishment of first Cotton Mill in 1854 in Bombay and first Jute Mill in 1855 in Bengal. Gradually, the number of factories increased in the country. The growth of factory system was accompanied by employment of women and children, long and excessive hours of work, low wages, undermining of morality, lack of amenities, poor housing etc. Some social reformers and philanthropists under the guidance and leadership of Mrs. S.S. Bengalee started an agitation in Bombay in 1875. This led to the appointment of the 'First Factory Commission' in 1875, and the First Factory Act was passed in 1881.<sup>19</sup> This act fixed nine working-hours per-day, and prohibited child labour below seven years of age to work in the factory.

The founder of labour movement in India is Mr. N.M. Lokhande. He was a factory worker himself. He organised an agitation and called for a conference of workers in Bombay to make representation to the Factory Commission. (1884) Mr. Lokhande organised a mass meeting of about 10,000 workers including women workers in Bombay on 24th April, 1890, and drew up a memorandum containing demands for, limitation of hours of work, weekly

rest day mid-day recess and compensation for injuries. In response to these demands a weekly holiday was actually granted by Mill owners of Bombay. Encouraged by this success Mr. Lokhande formed, "The Bombay Mill-hands Association" in 1890, of which he was the first elected President. This was the first labour union in India. Its immediate aim was to agitate for the revision of the first Factory Act of 1881. As the result Government passed a new Factory Act in 1891.

This association also took over 'Din-Bandhu' a social reform journal and converted it into the first labour journal in India.<sup>20</sup>

In this period several other labour associations were formed. viz. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of India (1897), The Printers Union, Calcutta (1905), The Bombay Postal Union (1907), Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha (1909) etc. These unions wanted to mitigate the evils of modern factory system and improve the lot of workers, but the lack of definite aims they turned out to be short lived. However, all these developments created a proper climate of awareness of labour problems.<sup>21</sup>

## 2) Early Trade Union Period - 1918 to 1924 -

The immediate post-war period (1918 to 1924) saw the birth of the Indian trade union movement. Factors which favoured its birth and infancy were as follows :

- I) During the war the entire economic situation of the country was changed. Prices of essential commodities had shot up and there had been no corresponding increase in wages. The employers had made fantastic profits. The cost of living was steadily increasing and wages lagged behind it. In this situation workers were prompted to organise and try collective action.
- II) The Home-Rule Movement and the non co-operation movement of Gandhiji provided political leaders to labour movement.
- III) The Russian Revolution made a favourable effect on labour movement. It held out a prospect of a new social order to the common man in the country.
- IV) The setting up of 'International Labour Organisation' (ILO) in 1919 gave status to the labour and labour movement in the world.
- V) The formation of "All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920 provided a platform where labour problems could be discussed and debated.<sup>22</sup>

All these factors brought about a total change in the outlook of the workers. They were unwilling to take things lying down. Therefore, a large number of trade unions were organised after 1918. The credit of forming the first trade union on systematic basis goes to Mr. B.P. Wadia. Mr. Wadia formed, "The Madras Labour Union" in 1918.<sup>23</sup> This was the first trade union of modern type in India. Not one textile worker in the city of Madras remained out of the union. At Ahmedabad under the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi occupational unions were established, which federated into the 'Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad.'

In 1918 seven new unions were started out of these, four were started in Madras, two in Bombay and one in Calcutta. In 1919 ten more unions were organised - five in Bombay, two in Madras, and one each in Bengal, U.P. and Panjab. In 1920 AITUC was organised and 64 trade unions were affiliated to it, with total membership of 1,40,854. It is estimated that 75% of the unions died in the subsequent period. In 1923 there were 164 unions in the country.<sup>24</sup> In short some very good and stable trade unions were formed in this short period (1918-1924).

### 3) Leftwing Trade Unionism Period - 1924-1934 -

The third phase of the Indian labour movement is called the period of leftwing trade unionism. Since 1924 signs of militant tendencies and

revolutionary trade unionism in the labour movement of the country became apparent. During this period communists captured the labour movement. They conducted some of the most violent strikes in India. The years 1928 and 1929 were also the periods of large scale strikes in Bombay, Kanpur, Sholapur and Jamshedpur, and in the East and South Indian Railways. The Royal Commission on labour appointed in 1929, submitted the report in March, 1931. The main causes for the growth of these extremist feelings were the economic hardship of the workers, depression, cut in wages, unemployment etc. The attitude of the employers also enhanced such feelings.

In 1928, at the Jharia Session of the AITUC struggle started between two groups. In 1929 at the Nagpur Session first split took place in the AITUC. The reformist group under the leadership of Mr. N.M. Joshi formed 'Indian Trade Union Federation' (ITUF)<sup>25</sup> which was later named the 'National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) in 1933. Meanwhile the AITUC had another split in Calcutta in 1931, when communists walked out and started their 'Red Trade Union Congress' (RTUC). Thus, at the beginning of the thirties the trade union movement presented a picture of disunity.

The grip of the communists however, loosened after 1930, due to the failure of the general strike sponsored by the Communist. Government had to prosecute Communist trade unionist twice (Kanpur in 1924 and Meerat in 1929). In 1934 Government of India declared the Communist Party an

unlawful association, which also caused the decline of Communist's influence on the labour movement in the country.

The leaders of the trade union movement of this period were Nehru, N.M. Joshi, B.P. Wadia, V.V. Giri, B. Shiva Rao, B.T. Ranadive etc. During this period main significant development was the passing of the "Indian Trade Union Act" of 1926 which provided for voluntary registration and conferred certain rights and privileges upon registered unions in return for obligations.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4) Trade Union Unity Period - 1935 to 1938 -

Since depression period, efforts for trade union unity were made by some leading union leaders. The All India Railwaymen's Federation had taken initiative for the unity of trade unions. In 1932 this federation in its conference at Bombay formed a 'Trade Union Unity Committee'. In 1935 the Red Trade Union Congress merged itself with the AITUC. Further efforts were made by the Trade Union Unity Committee to bring together the two sections - The National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) and the AITUC and finally in 1938 an agreement was arrived at where by the NTUF affiliated itself with AITUC.<sup>27</sup>

In 1935, new Constitution of India was adopted under which labour representatives could get themselves elected through labour or trade union constituencies.<sup>28</sup> This political change also helped the unity efforts.

#### 5) The Period Between - 1939 to 1946

The Second World War posed a serious question to Indian trade unionist, because the war was between anti-labour Fascist Germany and Great Britain. The Communist following the Russian line first supported Germany but opposed when it invaded Russia. The Congressmen opposed Great Britain with the Quit India Movement. Mr. M.N. Roy and his followers bitterly opposed Germany and when the AITUC failed to accept this line, came out and started the 'Indian Federation of Labour' (IFL) in 1941 in support of war against Germany.<sup>29</sup>

The commencement of World War II consolidated unionism in the country. Many events during the war period had an impact on the trade union movement. These include - The formation of IFL and its recognition by the Government. The establishment of tripartite labour machinery, providing a platform for the discussion among the Government, employers and trade unions. Ordinances relating to defence of India, placing of restrictions on freedom of association and right to strike. The adverse economic conditions lowered down the real wages also. The employers' attitude had also changed. So trade unions made progress not only in respect of numbers and membership, but also in respect of funds.

In 1946, there was a tussle between the AITUC and IFL regarding the representative character of the organisation. An enquiry conducted by the Chief Labour Commissioner established the representative charter of the AITUC.<sup>30</sup>

#### 6) Post-Independence Period - 1947 onwards -

After World War II 'Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh' was acting as an advisory body and not as federation of unions. The central board of this Sangh called upon its various member unions to affiliate themselves to the AITUC. As their attempts to change the policy of AITUC failed, the labour leader in the National Congress Party felt a necessity to form a new central trade union organisation. Thus "Indian National Trade Union Congress" (INTUC) was formed in May 1947, under the leadership of Sardar Patel of Congress party. After the setting up of INTUC the Communist dominated AITUC. INTUC is now the largest federation of trade unions.<sup>31</sup>

In the post-independence period, with the formation of the 'Socialist Party' another central labour organisation the "Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) was formed in 1948. The Royist Federation (IFL) formed in 1941 merged into HMS.

In 1949 some splinter groups from the HMS and AITUC set up a separate central organisation viz. the "United Trade Union Congress" (UTUC)<sup>32</sup>



The Government of India recognised these four (AITUC, INTUC, HMS and UTUC) central organisations of workers for the purpose of representation at national and international conferences and for occasional consultation.<sup>33</sup>

Besides these four central organisations, some other national federations have come into existence since independence. "Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) was formed in 1955,<sup>34</sup> with the emergence of Jan-Sangh as a new Political Party. Now BMS is dominated by Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

'Hind Mazdoor Panchayat' (HMP) was formed in 1962 with the formation of the new political party Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP).

There was again a rift in the AITUC in 1970, when the Communist divided themselves into the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party, Marxist (CPM). The AITUC came under the control of CPI and CPM started a new central organisation 'Centre of Indian Trade Union' (CITU)<sup>35</sup>

There are some other federations also functioning as central organisations e.g. 'National Federation of Post and Telegraph Workers', 'National Federation of Indian Railwaymen', 'All India Mine Workers Federation'. In addition, there are many unions which are not affiliated to any central organisation. A number of trade unions operate as separate units, through at times they may collaborate with one organisation or the other.

The trade union movement in India has also been associated with two international trade union federations viz. - the "World Federation of Trade Unions" (WFTU) supported by Communist bloc formed in 1946, and the "International Confederation of Free Trade Unions" (ICFTU) supported by Anglo-American bloc set up in 1949. The INTUC and HMS are affiliated to ICFTU and the AITUC is affiliated WFTU. The ICFTU is running the Asian Trade Union College in India. The WFTU also organises occasional seminars in India.<sup>36</sup>

In the mixed economy of India, trade unionism reflects neither pure 'business unionism' as seen in the U.S.A. nor 'radical unionism' of the non-capitalist bloc. Indian trade union movement stands mid-way between the two poles of business unionism and radical unionism.

In India at apex of labour movement are the national federations such as, ATTUC, INTUC, HMS and UTUC. The ideology of each federation is different from others. AITUC has faithfully followed the policies of CPI. It aims to establish a socialist state in India. It believes in the nationalisation of means of production and abolition of wage-slavery. INTUC is now dominated by Congress (I) Party. The ideology of the INTUC is to pursue industrial relations in Gandhian traditions, with its emphasis on truth on non-violence. INTUC is committed to negotiation, conciliation and, arbitration before resorting to militant actions. The HMS is composed of the the congress socialist and Forward bloc. It lies midway between the soft

line of INTUC and the radical stance of the communist. The main objective of UTUC is to conduct trade union activities on the broadest basis free from politics. In fact its leadership is made up of members of various left-wing political groups. Its policy on many issues is similar to AITUC. BMS is now dominated by BJP, which is known as a rightist party in India. CITU is now dominated by CPM. The aims of CITU are not different from the aims of AITUC.

In short trade unionism in India is a mixture of non-violent behaviourism and radicalism and stands between communism and democracy.

Figures regarding relative strength of Central Organisations in India as on December 1981 are shown in the following Table No. 1.

Table No. 1

Name of the Central Organisation	Claimed		Verified	
	No. of Unions affilia- ted	Membership	No. of Unions affilia- ted	Membership
INTUC	3,457	35,09,326	1,604	22,36,128
BMS	1,725	18,79,728	1,333	12,11,345
HMS	1,122	18,48,147	426	7,62,882
UTUC (LS)	154	12,38,891	134	6,21,359
UTUC	618	6,08,052	175	1,65,614
AITUC	1,366	10,64,330	1,080	3,44,746
CITU	1,737	10,33,432	1,474	3,31,031

Source : "India 1985", Publication Division, Ministry of  
Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India,  
p. 491.

Efforts to forge unity in labour movement have been made since 1952. A joint conference of AITUC and UTUC was convened in 1953, but it could not achieve much success. Various central federations showed interest in unity in 1956. The INTUC and HMS endeavoured to frame code of behaviour in 1958. The General Secretary of ICFTU made an effort to forge unity in INTUC and HMS but success could not be achieved. Shri V.V. Giri advised the AITUC, INTUC, HMS and UTUC to collaborate with each other at some places on certain issues, but INTUC kept itself aloof from all such efforts.

Another effort towards unity at apex level was witnessed in the shape of the formation of "National Council of Central Trade Unions" (NCCTU). The decision to form it, was taken by INTUC, AITUC and HMS but these organisations could achieve only partial success in the direction of unity. Communist trade unionist Mr. B.T. Ranadive of CITU viewed this organisation (NCCTU) as a parrallel front to the organisations outside its purview.<sup>37</sup> Thus unity in the members of NCCTU was confined only to the political basis. Practically they work and follow policies separately.

The aim of unity in trade union movement is not achieved till today, but it is also true that, there is tremendous increase in trade union activities after 1947. During post-independence period various reasons may be enumerated for the increase in trade union activities in the country. Though the main reason is worsening economic conditions of the workers due to inflationary conditions, other factors are, the political development inside the country and the desire of various political parties to increase their influence among the working class, and to get foothold in the labour movement, greater freedom of trade union workers and reduced fear of victimization, sympathetic industrial relations policy of the Government and the evolution of the socialistic pattern of society etc.

PRESENT SCENARIO OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT :

Progress of trade unions in post-independence period is shown in the following Table No.2.

Table No. 2

Composition of Trade Unions : Trends

Year	No. of registered Unions	No. of Unions submitting Returns	Average Membership per union
1951	4,626	2,556 ( 55.3% )	781
1956	8,554	4,399 ( 51.4% )	540
1961	11,614	7,087 ( 61.0% )	561
1966	14,686	7,244 ( 49.3% )	606
1971	22,484	9,029 ( 40.2% )	606
1976	29,350	9,778 ( 44.3% )	666
1981	37,539	6,682 ( 49.6% )	808
1982	38,313	5,044 ( 35.1% )	595

Figures in brackets show the percentage of unions submitting returns

Source : Agrawal, P.N., Verma H.O., Gupta R.C., "INDIA, Economic Information Year Book 1987-88", p. 138.  
National Publishing House, 32, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002, Ed. 1987.

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

The unions have achieved a remarkable status, where their voice is heard by the Government and the employers. They are consulted on matters pertaining to improvement in conditions of work, job security, wages, productivity and all matters concerning the interest of labour.

Following are the weaknesses of trade unions in India :

- 1) Low rate of unionisation in organised sector.
- 2) Financial inadequacy.
- 3) Lack of solidarity among the working class.
- 4) Inter and intra-union rivalries.
- 5) Political leadership and political interference in trade union activities.
- 6) Indifferent and hostile attitude of employers.
- 7) Indifferent attitude of Government.
- 8) Lack of welfare activities. etc.

The present scenario is thus characterised by "too many unions to little unity". So present day trade unionism in India has clear cut leaning towards rivalries and friction which have cancerous effects on its healthy growth.

The Government, political parties, trade unions and industrialists should join hands to accelerate the development of trade unions because that will help the establishment of the socialist society.



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