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CHAPTER 2: TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN MAHARASHTRA -  
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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Trade unions are one of the important weapons to safeguard the rights of the workers. These are voluntary organisations of workers to promote and protect their interests by collective action. Gordons Watkins and Paul A. Dadd point out: "A trade union must possess definite aims; its members must be welded together in a united front for the good of the whole group rather than for the promotion of any selfish, individual interests; and it must, to be effective, take on a definite and permanent form of organisation through which it strives to accomplish its goals."<sup>1</sup>

In Maharashtra, some form of trade union organisations have come into existence in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1875, a few social reformers and philanthropists, under the guidance and leadership of Sorabji Shapurji started trade union movement in Bombay to protect against the appalling conditions of workers in factories especially women and children.<sup>2</sup> The workers of the Empress Mills at Nagpur were on strike in 1877. But its nature was quite different from the industrial disputes which we are observing today. The early strikes, in which individual workers or groups of workers abandoned industrial undertakings and migrated to other industrial centres or went back to their villages, had no attempt for collective bargaining or at obtaining redress through concerted action.<sup>3</sup>

Trade union movement in India took birth in Maharashtra. N.M. Lokhande of the Satya Shodhak Movement was the founder of the organised labour movement not only in Maharashtra but in India. In 1884, he organised an agitation and called for a conference of workers in Bombay to make representation to the Factory Commission which was then just appointed. The workers presented a memorandum drawing attention to their grievances. As no redress was effected by government, Lokhande convened a mass meeting in Bombay on April 24, 1890, which was attended by about 10,000 workers. The meeting adopted a resolution for presentation of a memorial containing demands for limiting the hours of work, provision for weekly rest days, mid-day recess, and compensation for injuries sustained during work. In response to these demands, the Mill-owners of Bombay agreed to grant a weekly holiday to the workers. Further, N.M. Lokhande organised the Bombay Mill-hands Association which was the first of its kind. He was elected as the President of this association. The first working class newspaper, the Dinabandhu, was also established by Lokhande to bring to the notice of the authorities and the employers the legitimate grievances of workers.

After the end of the nineteenth century, the cotton trade was revived and many textile factories were established in Bombay. For the protection of the British industry at home, in 1911 the government had passed an Act which restricted the daily hours of work in textile mills to twelve for adults and six for children.<sup>4</sup>

The labour movement had become somewhat militant in 1908. The reason was that the government sentenced a great political leader for a period of six years' imprisonment for the offence of sedition. In Bombay, the workers were on strike for six days. In 1910, a Kamgar Hitvardhak Sabha (Workers' Welfare Association) was formed by the leading persons in Bombay. The motives of this association were to present petitions to government and to settle disputes between employers and workers.

Various Laws Which Recognised the Right of Association  
(Trade Union)

The International Labour Organisation 'Conventions' on freedom of association have helped much to secure for workers freedom of association and to protect their right to organise. The International Labour Conference in 1921 adopted a convention on the freedom of association which emphasised that workers should be given the fullest freedom to come together and form themselves into trade unions.

The Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926

This Act was not passed immediately. Five years of persistent efforts led to the enactment of the Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926. The said Act gave the trade unions legal status and immunity to its officers and members from civil and criminal liability for concerted actions.

The Trade Disputes Act, 1929

The right to strike and lock-out was not recognized in India in the earlier days. For the first time, it was conceded indirectly under the provisions of the Indian Trade Disputes Act, 1929 which had the main object of providing a conciliation machinery to bring about peaceful settlement of industrial disputes.

The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947

More restrictions not only in the public utility services but also in other services have been incorporated in the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. This Act took into consideration many of the features of the Defence of India Rules and also the provisions of the Trade Disputes Act of 1929, and remains, even now, the instrument governing industrial relations. The need for a provision for recognition of unions was stressed in the Second Plan.<sup>5</sup> The National Commission on Labour in its Report has stated, "it would be desirable to make union recognition compulsory under a central law, in all undertakings employing 100 or more workers or where the capital invested is above a stipulated size."<sup>6</sup> The formation of a union of workers can hardly achieve its objective if the employer refuses to recognize the union and discuss with it, matters of common interest. In the absence of such recognition the only course open to the union is to resort to a trial of strength. This leads to continuous industrial strife and unrest

culminating sometimes in strikes.

A trade union is an essential institution in an industrial organisation. It is essential to create industrial democracy in the industries. It will not succeed unless all concerned - workers, employers, government and the public - fully realise its importance and its due place in the national life. While workers on their part should endeavour to make their union strong, responsible and democratic, the employers should recognize the union and accept a strong union as an asset in the planning of the industry.

#### Why Trade Union Movement in Ichalkaranji

The immediate objectives with which trade unions have been formed in different parts of the world are essentially the same, namely, to safeguard and improve the working conditions of their members, to promote their vocational interests and to raise their status in general. In Ichalkaranji, the above objectives were considered for the forming of the trade unions. Yet there were certain other important causes for trade unions.

There are many textile factories (units) in Ichalkaranji. So, the large number of workers/working in the various factories. Individually the workers were not able to complain about their problems to the owners. For that purpose they had to organize themselves into trade unions. The trade union through its organised action can eliminate exploitation and can solve the

problems of the workers. To fight for the workers, to provide better welfare facilities, is the important cause for the trade union movement. Webb, Sidney and Beatrice write, "a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives."<sup>7</sup> Trade union has been intimately associated with the theory and practice of an organised campaign against the rights of private property. It means, with the help of trade unions, the united workers wanted to organise campaign against the rights of private property. In fact, trade unions have come into existence with the growth of capitalism. But elimination of the private entrepreneur has always been the ultimate goal of trade unions.

Political leaders greatly helped in the formation and development of the trade unions. The mass movement started by Lokamanya Tilak, Annie Besant and Mahatma Gandhi, caused ripples in the trade union movement. In particular, the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhiji during 1919-21 and the espousal by him of the cause of the peasants and industrial labour had a profound impact on the working class. Gandhiji was also greatly responsible for the re-orientation given to the labour movement by establishing the 'Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association', which had, as its main plank, the settlement of trade disputes by negotiations and peaceful methods before resorting to direct action. After independence, the leading political parties in

India played an important role for the formation of the trade unions. In Ichalkaranji, every trade union is connected with the political parties. With the help of ideology of their parties the trade unions' formation took place.

The Government also has agreed to recognize the association of workers, the first five year Plan's report explains: "The worker's right of association, organisation and collective bargaining is to be accepted without reservation as the fundamental basis of mutual relationship. The attitude to trade unions should not be just a matter of toleration. They should be welcome and helped to function as part and parcel of the industrial system."<sup>8</sup> Further, even the society also has supported the trade unions: "So long as working people have a grievance, they will find a way of expressing it. Grievance is endemic to modern organisations and the trade union is the medium through which it is expressed."<sup>9</sup> All these developments have influenced for the rise of organised labour unions in Ichalkaranji.

#### Various Trade Unions in Ichalkaranji

While the labour movement in Maharashtra began in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it was limited only to Bombay city. In the other parts of Maharashtra, the organised movement started only during the Second World War. Both economic and political conditions, alike, contributed to the new awakening. Prices had



shot up during the war and there had been no corresponding increase in the wages, though the employers had amassed fantastic profits. In the political field, new ideas were in the air. The Indian National Congress had started the Quit India Movement. All this reflected in considerable labour unrest. In Ichalkaranji also during the same period, the workers' union had its birth: "The workers realised the necessity of forming their organisation to protect their interests, particularly against the consequences of inflationary rise in prices. In 1943 'Girani Kamagar Samiti' was established. In 1948 it was recognized as 'The Ichalkaranji Girani Kamgar Samiti'. This Samiti was affiliated to the INTUC".<sup>10</sup>

The Birth of INTUC: The Congress leaders, who assumed power after the war, wanted to restore normal conditions in India, where the whole economy had been disrupted by war and partition. They realised the need for greater production and a policy of reconstruction. On 3rd May 1947, a conference of leading Congress and trade union workers met at New Delhi, under the Chairmanship of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who was the President of the Central Board of the Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh, in which trade unions in nearly all the trades and occupations were represented. Many Pradesh Congress Committees had also sent their representatives. This conference passed a resolution pointing out the necessity of forming a central organisation which would look after the well being of the working class and which would take

concerted action to safeguard and promote the interests of workers. Thus, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was formed.<sup>11</sup>

INTUC is one of the important trade unions which the majority of the workers have joined. In Ichalkaranji, the said union is working under the various names as follows:

- (1) Rashtriya Processing Labour Union,
- (2) Ichalkaranji Girani Kamgar Samiti,
- (3) General Kamgar Sanghatana,
- (4) Rashtriya Kapad Kamgar Sanghatana.

Hind Mazdoor Sabha: When the Indian National Trade Union was formed in May 1947, the socialist leaders felt that an organisation following explicitly and implicitly the policies of the Congress could not be in the interests of the workers. Early in 1948, the socialists seceded from the Indian National Congress. At a session held on 22nd March 1948 at Nasik, the trade union of the socialist party decided to establish a new 'All-India Labour Organisation' to guide and coordinate the activities of affiliated organisations, and to safeguard and promote the interests and rights of the workers. The meeting appointed an adhoc committee to complete the affiliation of the trade unions in various industries to the proposed new organisation, which was named the Indian Labour Congress.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the socialist leaders were making efforts in consultation with other trade union leaders, to form an organisation free from political affiliation. Various leaders belonging to the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat, the Indian Federation of Labour - an influential section of the 'All India Trade Union Congress' - and representatives of some trade unions that had not joined any central organisation, met in Calcutta on December 24, 1948. In that conference, it was decided to establish a new organisation, namely, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha. Its objective was primarily to bring into being a socialist state in which the worker would have an opportunity for the full development of his mental and physical personality. In Ichalkaranji, there is only one union under the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, that is known as Kapad Kamagar Sabha.

Another important union in Ichalkaranji is, Lal Bawata General Kamgar Union. It is working under the CITU which is one of the important unions in India under the control of Communist leaders. More than 20 thousand workers are members of this union. Though there are various unions in Ichalkaranji, it is found that there are only two major unions, viz., Lal Bawata General Kamgar Union and Rashtriya Processing Labour Union. The Lal Bawata General Kamgar Union belongs to the small units engaged in powerlooms, whereas the Rashtriya Processing Labour Union belongs to all the processing units.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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