

THE WORKERS MOVEMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

The Workers Movement in India, a pivotal facet of the country's modern history, has been characterized by the collective struggles of labourers against oppressive working conditions, economic exploitation, and social inequality. Emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the movement gained momentum alongside India's broader fight for independence from colonial rule. The exploitation of labour, coupled with the adverse effects of industrialization, prompted workers to unite and demand fair wages, improved working conditions, and the right to organize. This movement has traversed a complex trajectory, encompassing diverse ideologies and strategies, and has significantly shaped the socio-economic landscape of the nation. Examining the historical evolution of the Workers' Movement provides crucial insights into the challenges faced by the labouring class and their enduring struggle for dignity and justice in the face of an evolving socio-political milieu. For aspirants preparing for the UPSC examination, a comprehensive understanding of this movement is indispensable, as it serves as a lens through which to analyze the broader currents of modern Indian history.

KEYWORDS :

The second half of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of modern industry in India, with the construction of railways being a significant development. This brought about the emergence of a modern Indian working class. Alongside the railways, ancillary industries such as coal, cotton, and jute also flourished, employing a large workforce. However, the working class in India faced similar exploitative conditions as witnessed during the industrialization of Europe and the West. They endured low wages, long working hours, unsafe and unsanitary working conditions, the use of child labour, and a lack of basic amenities. What set the Indian working-class movement apart was the presence of colonialism. The exploitation of the working class in India was compounded by imperialist political rule and economic exploitation by both foreign and native capitalist classes. Consequently, the Indian working-class movement became intricately linked with the political struggle for national liberation. The Indian working class, while striving for better labour conditions and rights, also fought against the oppressive colonial rule. Their movement became intertwined with the broader fight for national emancipation, as they sought to address both political and economic injustices. Overall, the Indian working-class movement of this period was shaped by the impact of industrialization, colonialism, and the pursuit of political and economic rights. It represented a significant force in the struggle for national liberation and social justice in India.

INTRODUCTION :

During the early nationalist period, particularly among the Moderates, there was a lack of focus on the cause of labour. They made distinctions between workers in Indian-owned factories and those in British-owned factories. The Moderates believed that labour legislation would disadvantage Indian-owned

industries, leading to a division within the nationalist movement based on social class. As a result, they did not support the Factory Acts of 1881 and 1891, which aimed to improve working conditions for labourers. Early efforts to address the economic conditions of workers were sporadic and limited to specific local grievances. Some notable examples include: Sasipada Banerjee: In 1870, Banerjee established a workingmen's club and started the newspaper Bharat Shramjeevi. Sorabjee Shapoorji Bengalee: In 1878, Bengalee attempted to pass a bill in the Bombay Legislative Council to improve working conditions for labourers. Narain Meghajee Lokhanday: In 1880, Lokhanday founded the newspaper Deenbandhu and established the Bombay Mill and Millhands Association. Great Indian Peninsular Railways Strike: In 1899, a significant strike took place among the workers of the Great Indian Peninsular Railways. The strike garnered widespread support, and newspapers like Tilak's Kesari and Mahratta had been advocating for it for months. These early efforts were characterized by philanthropic initiatives and localized attempts to address labour grievances. However, they lacked a comprehensive and unified approach to tackling the broader issues faced by workers. It was only in the subsequent years, with the growth of the labour movement and the emergence of socialist and trade unionist leaders, that the organized efforts for labour rights and welfare gained momentum in India.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION AND MANUSCRIPT :

During the Swadeshi Upsurge, which was a period of intense nationalist movement and the promotion of indigenous goods, workers actively participated in wider political issues. Some notable developments during this time were: Strikes: Ashwini Coomar Banerjee, Prabhat Kumar Roy Chaudhuri, Premtosh Bose, and Apurba Kumar Ghosh organized strikes in various sectors, including government presses, railways, and the jute industry. These strikes were aimed at voicing the grievances of the workers and were aligned with the broader nationalist movement. Formation of Trade Unions: There were attempts to form trade unions during this period, although they were not very successful initially. These unions sought to unite workers and advocate for their rights and welfare. Leadership in Strikes: Leaders like Subramaniya Siva and Chidambaram Pillai played significant roles in organizing strikes in Tuticorin and Tirunelveli. These strikes were aimed at addressing the issues faced by workers in those regions. However, these leaders were eventually arrested for their involvement. The Tilak Trial and Strike: One of the most significant strikes during this period took place after the arrest and trial of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a prominent nationalist leader. His trial galvanized workers and activists, leading to a large-scale strike that demonstrated the unity and solidarity among various sections of society against British rule. These actions by workers during the Swadeshi Upsurge reflected their active engagement in the nationalist movement. Workers recognized the connection between their own struggles for better working conditions and the larger fight for India's independence. The participation of workers in strikes and their alignment with nationalist leaders demonstrated the interplay between labour activism and the broader political and social context of the time.

During the First World War and After

During and after the First World War, several significant developments took place in the labour movement in India. These include: Economic Discontent: The war and its aftermath led to a rise in exports,

soaring prices, and massive profiteering opportunities for industrialists. However, workers' wages remained low, creating widespread discontent among the labouring class. Formation of Trade Unions: The unfavourable economic conditions and the need to address workers' grievances resulted in a growing realization of the importance of organizing trade unions. The formation of trade unions became crucial for advocating for workers' rights and improving their working conditions. Influence of International Events: International events, such as the establishment of a socialist republic in the Soviet Union, the formation of the Communist International (Comintern), and the establishment of the International Labour Organization (ILO), had a significant impact on the Indian labour movement. These events provided inspiration and a new dimension to the workers' movement in India, emphasizing the need for solidarity and collective action. The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC): On October 31, 1920, the AITUC was founded. Lala Lajpat Rai, the president of the Indian National Congress that year, was elected as the first president of AITUC, with Dewan Chaman Lai serving as the first general secretary. Lajpat Rai was instrumental in linking capitalism with imperialism, highlighting the intertwined nature of these systems. He famously stated, "Imperialism and militarism are the twin children of capitalism." The establishment of the AITUC marked a significant milestone in the labour movement in India, providing a platform for workers' collective action, representation, and the articulation of their demands. The AITUC played a crucial role in advocating for workers' rights and became an important force in shaping labour policies and advocating for social and economic justice for the working class.

The Trade Union Act, 1926

The Trade Union Act of 1926, enacted in British India, had several important provisions that affected the legal status and activities of trade unions. These include: Recognition of Trade Unions: The Act officially recognized trade unions as legal associations. This recognition gave trade unions a legal standing and acknowledged their role in representing the interests of workers. Registration and Regulation: The Act laid down conditions for the registration and regulation of trade union activities. Trade unions were required to meet certain criteria and fulfil specific formalities to be eligible for registration. This allowed for greater accountability and organization within the trade union movement. Immunity from Prosecution: The Act provided immunity, both civil and criminal, for trade unions from prosecution for their legitimate activities. This protection ensured that trade unions could carry out their functions without fear of legal repercussions. Restrictions on Political Activities: While trade unions were granted legal recognition and protection, the Act placed some restrictions on their political activities. This meant that trade unions had limitations on their involvement in political matters, particularly partisan political activities. Overall, the Trade Union Act of 1926 provided a legal framework for the functioning of trade unions in British India. It recognized their importance, regulated their activities, and granted them certain legal protections. The Act aimed to strike a balance between acknowledging trade unions' role in representing workers' interests while placing some restrictions on their involvement in partisan politics.

The late 1920s

During the late 1920s, the labour movement in India experienced a strong influence from communist ideologies. This influence brought a militant and revolutionary character to the movement. Several significant events and developments took place during this period: **Bombay Textile Mills Strike:** In 1928, a six-month-long strike took place in the Bombay Textile Mills, led by the Girni Kamgar Union. This strike was one of the largest industrial actions during that time and showcased the growing strength of the labour movement. **Emergence of Communist Groups:** The late 1920s saw the crystallization of various communist groups in India. Leaders like S.A. Dange, Muzaffar Ahmed, P.C. Joshi, and Sohan Singh Joshi played prominent roles in these groups. These leaders advocated for radical change and a socialist revolution. In response to the growing labour unrest, the colonial administration introduced legislation to control and regulate the labour movement: **Public Safety Ordinance (1929):** This ordinance provided the government with additional powers to suppress any perceived threat to public safety. It gave authorities the ability to arrest and detain individuals deemed to be engaging in subversive activities. **Trade Disputes Act (TDA), 1929:** This act introduced regulations aimed at managing industrial disputes. It made the appointment of Courts of Inquiry and Consultation Boards mandatory for resolving such disputes. The TDA also placed restrictions on strikes in public utility services and prohibited trade union activities of a coercive or purely political nature. These legislative measures were seen as attempts to curtail the growing influence and militancy of the labour movement. The colonial administration aimed to maintain control and prevent disruptions to essential services and public order. Overall, the late 1920s marked a period of heightened labour unrest and the rise of communist influence in the Indian labour movement. The response from the colonial administration included both suppressions through legislation and attempts to address labour grievances through regulations governing industrial disputes.

Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929)

The Meerut Conspiracy Case, which occurred in 1929, had a significant impact on the labour movement in India: **Arrests and Trial:** In March 1929, the British colonial government arrested 31 labour leaders, including prominent communist figures such as Muzaffar Ahmed, S.A. Dange, Joglekar, Philip Spratt, Ben Bradley, and Shaukat Usmani. These leaders were accused of conspiring against British rule and were put on trial. The trial lasted for three and a half years and resulted in the conviction of several labour leaders. The case gained worldwide attention and publicity, but it weakened the working-class movement in India by removing key leaders from the forefront of the struggle. **During the period of Congress Ministries in the late 1930s:** **Support from AITUC:** The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) extended its support to Congress candidates during the 1937 elections. This cooperation between the trade union movement and the political leadership of Congress provided a boost to trade union activities. **Sympathy towards Workers' Demands:** The Congress-led provincial governments were generally sympathetic to the demands of the workers. Several favourable labour legislations were enacted during this period to address grievances and improve the conditions of the workers. The Congress ministries recognized the importance of the labour movement and sought to address the concerns of the working class through legislative measures. This period witnessed efforts to improve workers' rights, working conditions, and economic well-being.

Overall, the Meerut Conspiracy Case had a detrimental effect on the labour movement by removing key leaders, but the support from the AITUC and the sympathetic approach of Congress-led governments provided some respite and progress for the workers' demands during the period of Congress Ministries.

During and After the Second World War

During and after the Second World War, the labour movement in India witnessed significant developments: **Attitude towards the War:** Initially, there was opposition to the war among workers. However, after 1941, when the Soviet Union joined the war on the side of the Allies, the Communist Party described it as a "people's war" and supported it. They dissociated themselves from the Quit India Movement and advocated for a policy of industrial peace. **Workers' Participation in National Upsurges:** In the period between 1945 and 1947, workers actively participated in the post-war national upsurges. For example, in 1945, dockworkers in Bombay and Calcutta refused to load ships carrying supplies for the warring troops in Indonesia. In 1946, workers went on strike in support of the Naval Ratings. During the final year of foreign rule, there were strikes by workers in ports, railways, and various other establishments. These actions demonstrated the active involvement of the working class in the broader struggle for independence and social justice. Workers utilized strikes and industrial actions as a means to assert their rights and push for their demands. The labour movement played a crucial role during this period, highlighting the power and unity of the working class in challenging oppressive systems and demanding change. Their actions contributed to the overall momentum and eventual attainment of independence for India in 1947.

Workers' Movement in Post-Independence India

In post-independence India, the workers' movement experienced various changes and challenges: **Formation of New Unions:** Following independence, new trade unions emerged, representing different ideological affiliations and interests. The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) were prominent among them. CITU was formed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after splitting from AITUC. **Legislations and Acts:** The government introduced several legislations to regulate industrial disputes and labour relations. The Industrial Disputes Act, of 1947, and the Labor Relations Bill and Trade Unions Bills, of 1949, were among the key legislations introduced during this period. **The decline in Strikes:** In the initial years after independence, there was a relative improvement in the conditions of the working class, leading to a decline in the number of strikes between 1947 and 1960. The government's efforts towards industrial development and social welfare contributed to this trend. **Economic Recession and Increased Disputes:** The late 1960s witnessed an economic recession, which resulted in a decline in wages for the working class. This led to an increase in labour disputes as workers demanded better conditions and rights in the face of economic challenges. **New Economic Policy of 1991:** The introduction of the Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) policy in 1991 brought significant changes to the labour landscape. Liberalization policies reduced the bargaining power of workers vis-a-vis capital. The policy did not provide statutory minimum wages, and employers gained greater control over hiring and firing decisions. These developments and policy changes had a significant impact on

the working class in post-independence India, shaping the dynamics of labour relations and the workers' struggle for their rights and improved working conditions.

Weaknesses of the Movement

The workers' movement in post-independence India also faced several weaknesses and challenges:

Incomplete Coverage: The trade unions predominantly focused on organized sectors, leaving a significant portion of the working class in the unorganized sector without representation. This limited the reach and impact of the movement.

Multiplicity of Trade Unions: The proliferation of trade unions in the country created fragmentation within the working class. The presence of numerous unions made it challenging to achieve unity and collective bargaining power, making workers more vulnerable to external pressures.

Unresponsiveness of Trade Unions: Trade unions, in some cases, were not adequately responsive to the concerns and issues faced by the working class. Internal divisions and rivalries among unions often hindered their ability to effectively address the challenges faced by workers.

Disunity among Workers: The lack of unity and collective action among different sections of the working class, such as industrial workers, peasants, and other marginalized groups, weakened the overall strength and impact of the movement. The limited political consciousness among the working class hindered their ability to form broader alliances and engage in collective direct action on political issues.

Neglect of Marginalized Sections: Trade unions in the organized sector sometimes overlooked the specific problems faced by women workers and those belonging to socially oppressed groups. This neglect further marginalized these sections and hindered their inclusion in the broader workers' movement.

Addressing these weaknesses and challenges required greater solidarity, inclusivity, and a broader understanding of the diverse issues faced by the working class. Overcoming these shortcomings would have strengthened the movement and allowed for more effective advocacy and representation of workers' rights and interests.

The Working Men's Club was a labour organization founded in Calcutta in 1870 by Sasipada Banerjee. It was one of the earliest labour organizations in India and played a significant role in the early trade union movement. The club's main objectives were to improve the working conditions of labourers, to provide them with education and training, and to promote social and cultural activities.

The Working Men's Club

The Working Men's Club was also involved in the publication of the journal 'Bharat Sramajibi', which was the first Indian journal of the working class. The journal covered a wide range of topics, including labour rights, social welfare, and political issues. The Working Men's Club was an important milestone in the history of the Indian trade union movement. It helped to raise awareness of the plight of labourers and to lay the foundation for the more formal trade unions that emerged in the later decades of the 19th century. The Working Men's Club is also a relevant topic for the UPSC exam, as it is an important part of the history of the Indian labour movement. Candidates can expect to be asked questions about the club in the General Studies paper of the exam.

Here are some additional details about the Working Men's Club that may be relevant for the UPSC exam:

The club was founded by Sasipada Banerjee, a social reformer and leader of the Brahmo Samaj. The club's headquarters were located in Calcutta. The club's membership was open to all working men, regardless of their caste or religion. The club's activities included providing education and training to members, organizing social and cultural events, and lobbying for better working conditions for labourers. The club's journal, 'Bharat Sramajibi', was a major source of information about the working class movement in India.

The Bombay Mill-Hands Association

The Bombay Mill-Hands Association was the first trade union in India. It was founded in 1890 by Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, a social reformer and labour leader. The association was formed to improve the working conditions of mill workers in Bombay, who were often exploited by their employers.

The Bombay Mill-Hands Association achieved a number of significant successes, including:

Securing a weekly holiday for mill workers on Sundays. Reducing the working hours of mill workers from 12 to 10 hours a day. Introducing a half-hour recess for mill workers in the afternoon. Providing compensation for injuries sustained by mill workers in the course of their work. The Bombay Mill-Hands Association was an important milestone in the history of the Indian trade union movement. It helped to raise awareness of the plight of mill workers and to lay the foundation for the more formal trade unions that emerged in the later decades of the 19th century. The Bombay Mill-Hands Association is also a relevant topic for the UPSC exam, as it is an important part of the history of the Indian labour movement. Candidates can expect to be asked questions about the association in the General Studies paper of the exam.

Here are some additional details about the Bombay Mill-Hands Association that may be relevant for the UPSC exam:

The association was founded by Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, a follower of Mahatma Phule. The association's headquarters were located in Bombay. The association's membership was open to all mill workers, regardless of their caste or religion. The association's activities included organizing strikes, lobbying for better working conditions, and providing legal aid to mill workers. The association's journal, 'Dinabandhu', was a major source of information about the working class movement in India.

The Bombay Millhands Defence Association (BMDA)

The Bombay Millhands Defence Association (BMDA) was a trade union founded in 1908 by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a prominent Indian nationalist leader. The BMDA was formed in response to the Bombay Millhands Association's (BMA) decision to dissolve itself. The BMA had been founded in 1890 by Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, and it had been successful in achieving a number of reforms for mill workers, such as a weekly

holiday on Sundays and a reduction in working hours. However, the BMA had also been criticized for its close ties to the British government, and Tilak believed that a new trade union was needed that would be more independent and militant. The BMDA was based on the principles of Swadeshi and Swaraj, and it called for mill workers to boycott British goods and to support the Indian independence movement. The BMDA also organized strikes and protests, and it played a leading role in the 1918 Bombay textile strike. The strike lasted for 108 days, and it was one of the largest and most successful strikes in Indian history. The BMDA was disbanded in 1920, but it had a significant impact on the Indian trade union movement. It helped to spread the ideas of Swadeshi and Swaraj among mill workers, and it showed that trade unions could be a powerful force for social change.

Madras Labour Union, 1918

The Madras Labour Union, established in 1918, played a significant role in giving a voice to the concerns and rights of workers in British factories in India, particularly those working in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Perambur, present-day Chennai. The labourers, along with leaders Selvapati Chettiyar and Ramanujalu Naidu, recognized the need for a platform to address labour issues and advocate for worker rights. To effectively represent their demands and mobilize resources, Chettiyar and Naidu sought the support of prominent nationalist journalist V. Kalyanasundaram Mudaliar and labour activist B. P. Wadia. Together, they founded the first Labour Union of India in 1918, with Wadia serving as the President and Mudaliar and Kesava Pilai as Vice-Presidents. Chettiyar and Naidu were elected as Secretaries. The establishment of the Madras Labour Union had a profound impact, inspiring the formation of numerous trade unions throughout India. The union provided a platform for workers to unite, discuss their concerns, and collectively advocate for their rights. It represented a significant step forward in recognizing the importance of the working class as a force of its own and addressing their grievances under British rule. The founding of the Madras Labour Union remains a noteworthy event in India's labour history, highlighting the early efforts to organize and mobilize workers for their rights and laying the foundation for future labour movements in the country.

The Majoor Mahajan Sangh

The Majoor Mahajan Sangh, also known as the Textile Labour Association, is a trade union in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. It was founded in 1920 by Mahatma Gandhi, and it is one of the oldest and largest trade unions in India. The union's membership is open to all textile workers in Ahmedabad, regardless of their caste or religion. The Majoor Mahajan Sangh has been involved in a number of significant labour movements, including the 1918 Ahmedabad textile strike and the 1928 Dandi Salt March. The union has also been active in promoting social welfare and education among its members. The Majoor Mahajan Sangh is a follower of Gandhian principles, and it believes in the use of non-violence and persuasion to achieve its goals. The union has been successful in improving the working conditions of textile workers in Ahmedabad, and it has also played a role in the development of the city's civic infrastructure. The Majoor Mahajan Sangh is a relevant topic for the UPSC exam, as it is an important part of the history of the Indian trade union

movement. Candidates can expect to be asked questions about the union in the General Studies paper of the exam.

All India Trade Union Congress

The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) is indeed India's first Central Trade Union. It was established on October 31, 1920, and is one of the oldest and largest trade union federations in the country. It played a significant role in organizing workers and advocating for their rights during the Indian independence movement and beyond. The AITUC has been involved in various labour struggles and has represented workers from diverse industries and sectors. It has fought for issues such as workers' rights, improved working conditions, fair wages, social security, and social justice. The AITUC has also been actively engaged in promoting unity among trade unions and fostering solidarity among workers. While the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) is the largest trade union federation in India today, the AITUC continues to be an influential organization representing the interests of workers and contributing to the labour movement in the country.

CONCLUSION :

Trade unions are formal organizations that represent and advocate for the rights and interests of workers in specific trades or professions. They are formed to collectively bargain with employers on behalf of workers and to address various employment-related issues such as wages, working hours, working conditions, job security, and benefits. In India, the Trade Union Act of 1926 provides the legal framework for the registration and regulation of trade unions. According to this act, trade unions can be registered as legal entities, which grants them certain rights and privileges. The act outlines the procedures for registration, the rights and liabilities of registered trade unions, the obligations of trade unions, and the legal protections afforded to trade union activities. Trade unions play a vital role in protecting and advancing the rights and interests of workers. They negotiate with employers on matters related to wages, working conditions, and other employment terms. They also provide support and representation to workers in disciplinary actions, disputes, and grievances with employers. Additionally, trade unions often engage in advocacy and campaigning for labour rights, social justice, and the overall well-being of workers. Overall, trade unions serve as important mechanisms for collective representation and empowerment of workers, contributing to a more equitable and fair working environment.

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