

WORKING CLASS MOVEMENTS IN PRE AND POST- INDEPENDENT INDIA

*** ARIF AHMAD DAR & ZAHIED REHMAN GANIE****

**Counsellor IGNOU History, Government Degree College Kulgam Kashmir.*

***Lecturer History, Government Degree College Bijbehara Anantnag Kashmir.*

ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an enormous increase in the studies on social movement in India. The growth of interest is largely a result of the increasing number of movements surfacing in the post- colonial India. The movements are commonly and broadly classified as 'new' movements such as environmental movements, or 'old' movements such as the peasant or the working class movements. So far as approaches are concerned, these studies either follow the Marxian or the non-Marxian frameworks. The studies focus the nature of the grievances that throw up the movements, the support base of the movements, the strategy the leaders of the movements adopt and the response of the authorities to the movements and related issues. In this work, we shall briefly analyse two of the social movements, the peasant movements and the working class movements in the country.

KEYWORDS: *Movements, Pre, Post, India, Independent, Working, Class.*

INTRODUCTION

According to the labour historians, the span of working class activities in India is divided into four distinct phases. The first phase spans from 1850 to 1890; second phase from 1890 to 1918; the third phase from 1918 to 1947 and finally the post- independence period. A treatment of the working class movement will follow a brief discussion of some of the essential aspects of the class in colonial and post-colonial India. We shall however restrict our discussion to the industrial working class in India since it is this class, which, to a large extent, is organised whereas workers engaged in the unorganised sector largely remain out of the fold of organised working class activity.(1)

The modern Indian working class arose in consequence to the development and growth of factory industries in India from the second half of the nineteenth century. It is however about the turn of the twentieth century, it took the shape of working class. An exact estimate of the total population of the working class is difficult to arrive at but N. M. Joshi, on the basis of the 1931 census, calculated 'the labouring class at 50 million out of which roughly 10 percent were working in the organised industry'. So far as the major industries were concerned, the cotton textile industry in 1914 employed 2.6 lakh workers, the jute industry employed 2 lakh workers in 1912 the railways employed around 6 lakh workers. The number swell further and on the eve of World War II, in which, about 2 million were employed in manufacturing industry, 1.5 million in railways and 1.2 million in the British owned plantations. (2)

The number increased significantly after independence and this was largely due to the expansion of the modern manufacturing industries in various sectors and also because of the growth of the public sector utilities, corporations and government offices. According to the 1981 census, the total number of workers in the modern manufacturing industries alone in India numbered around 2.5 million. In 1993 the average daily employment in factories was 8.95 million, in the mines it was 7.79 lakhs, and in the plantations, it was 10.84 lakhs. Apart from this a large workforce was employed in the plantations, mining, construction, utilities, transportation etc. In recent years owing to a number of reasons the rate of increase in employment has gone down and this had affected the employment potential and the condition of the working class proper. (3)

WORKING CLASS MOVEMENTS IN THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

The labour historians classify the movement of the workers in India into four distinct phases.

FIRST PHASE: 1850S TILL 1918.

The actions of the working class in the earliest stage were sporadic and unorganised in nature and hence were mostly ineffective. It is only from the late 19th century in Madras, and from the second decade of the twentieth century in Bombay that serious attempts were made for the formation of associations that could lead organised form of protests. Prior to that some philanthropists in the 1880s sought to improve working conditions by urging the British authorities in India to introduce legislations for improving its condition. S. S. Bengalee in Bombay, Sasipada Banerjee in Bengal and Narayan Lokhandya in Maharashtra were prominent among them. (4)

Nationalist historians often argue that the organised working class movement in the country was associated with the Indian national movement, but this is only partially correct. Several movements took place even before the Congress took a serious note of the interests of the working class questions. Though the Congress

was formed in 1885, it seriously thought of organising the working class only in the early 1920s. The Working class in the country was organising struggles against capital much before the 1920s. In the last decades of the 19th century, there occurred strikes at Bombay, Kurla, Surat, Wardha, Ahmedabad and in other places. According to official sources there were two strikes per year in every factory. The strikes however were only sporadic, spontaneous, localised and short-lived and were caused by factors such as reduction in wages, imposition of fines, dismissal or reprimand of the worker. These actions and militancy, which they showed, helped in the development of class solidarity and consciousness, which was missing earlier. The resistance was mediated by outsiders or outside leaders. Agitations grew and they were not on individual issues but on broader economic questions, thus leading to a gradual improvement later on. (5)

THE SECOND PHASE: 1918 TILL INDEPENDENCE

It was after World War I that the working class struggle in the country entered into a different phase. The unorganised movement of the workers took an organised form; trade unions were formed on modern lines. In several ways the decade of the 1920s is crucial in this regard. Firstly in the 1920s serious attempts were made by the Congress and the Communists to mobilise the working class and hence from then onwards the national movement established a connection with the working class. Secondly, it was in 1920 that the first attempt to form an all India organisation was made. Lokmanya Tilak, a Congressman from Bombay was instrumental in the formation of the **All India Trade Union Congress** (AITUC) with Chaman Lal and others as office bearers of the organisation. Thirdly, in this decade, India witnessed a large number of strikes; the strikes were prolonged and well participated by the workers. The number of strikes and the number of workers involved in these strikes went on increasing in the subsequent decades. (6)

The twenties, in fact, was a decade when a large number of strikes took place. According to official sources there were 396 strikes in 1921 involving 600,000 workers. In the period between 1921-1925, on an average 400,000 workers in a year were involved in strikes. Similarly the year 1928 saw protracted strikes throughout the country. Apart from the strikes in Bombay there were strikes in the jute mills in Calcutta and in the Eastern Railways; in the latter, the strike continued for four months. On the whole, there was a radicalisation of working class activity by the end of the 1920s but what is also crucial is that there also grew differences between the Moderates and the Communists; as a result, the AITUC split and the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) was formed by the moderate leaders such as N.M. Joshi, V.V. Giri, B. Shivarao etc. Differences also cropped up among the Leftists due to which the extreme Leftists under the leadership of S.K. Deshpande and B.T. Ranadive broke away from the AITUC in 1930 and formed the All India Red Trade Union Congress (RTUC). (7)

After a period of high activism, working class in the 1920s, there was a marked decline in the early 1930s between 1930-34, which were in fact the years of Great Depression. To Charnanlal Revri it was a period of setback to the entire trade union movement and that was due to the Meerut Conspiracy case in which many prominent Communist leaders were arrested and secondly, due to the successive splits that took place in the Trade Union Congress earlier. Though unions became weak, as a result of the depression and the effect, which it had on the living condition of the working class, workers continued their economic struggles in the years between 1931-1934. The number of industrial disputes increased from 141 in 1929 to 148 in 1930 and 166 in 1931, involving more than one lakh workers every year. Between 1931 and 1934, there were 589 disputes out of which around 52 percent of the disputes were in the cotton textile industry. Concerns regarding wage were the main questions that precipitated the disputes. (8)

The Left led the unions that had become weaker in the early 1930s, but were able to reassert their influence by the year 1934. India was to witness a new strike wave and the issues that precipitated the strikes were the demand for the restoration of wage cuts, wage increases and the stopping of new forms of offensives against labour. In the year 1935 there were, 135 disputes in which there was a heavy loss. In the following year 12 more disputes took place than that of 1935 but the number of workers involved during disputes was much higher than that of the previous year. The important strikes that took place were the strikes in cotton textile industry, jute industry and the strike in the railways. The number of registered trade unions also increased in these two years. In 1935 there were 213 registered unions in the country with a membership figure of 284,918. The number of unions increased to 241 by 1936. (9)

The RTUC merged with the AITUC in 1935 and the NTUF affiliated itself with the AITUC in 1938. As a result of this, there was a growth of trade unions and trade union activity throughout the 1930s and the 1940s. The number of strikes went up by the end of the 1930s. During the period 1937-1939 the frequency and the number of strikes increased. In 1937 there were 379 strikes and in 1938 there were 399 strikes. In 1939, 406 disputes took place. The involvement of workers in these strikes was also higher. Two developments of critical importance in this period were: firstly, the strikes spread to several smaller industrial towns in the country and secondly, the working class during these struggles were not only defensive but were also offensive in the sense that they demanded among other things restoration of wage cuts, recognition of their union rights and resisted new forms of oppression of labour. It has also been found that increasing number of women workers came to the forefront of the workers struggle. (10)

The movement entered into a decisive phase in the 1940s and this phase coincided with the final phase of the National Movement, when the latter entered into its last phase beginning with the Quit India Movement of 1942. On the industrial front, from 1939 onwards the working condition of the workers was affected seriously.

There was an increase in the working hours, multiple shift systems were introduced, wages were significantly reduced, and workers. On the whole, were subjected to great hardships. As a result, strikes erupted throughout the country and probably the most important demand of the workers was the demand for a Dearness Allowance against rising prices and cost of living. In 1942 there were 694 disputes, this increased to 820 in 1945. The number of workers involved in these disputes also increased to 7.47 lakhs in 1945. Between 1945- 1947, after the end of the war, the working class confronted two distinct problems. First, was the problem of large- scale retrenchments and second, the problem of decline in earnings. As a result, the number of strikes reached a peak in 1947; there were 1811 strikes involving 1840 thousand workers. (11)

MOVEMENTS SINCE INDEPENDENCE

The transfer of power and Independence in 1947 meant a different atmosphere for the entire working class in the country. The movement entered into a different phase. In the initial years after independence between 1947- 1960 due to the coming of several new industries whether in the private sector or in the public sector under the Five- year plans the working class in the country as a whole was in a better condition; therefore organised action was not resorted to very frequently. As a result the number of conflicts including strikes declined between 1947 and 1960. The situation however changed in the 1960s and 1970s. The inflation years of the mid-1 960s saw the real wages of the working class declining; as a result, disputes in the industrial front increased. In 1964 there were 2,151 disputes involving 1,002 thousand workers in which 7,725 man-days were lost. The number of man-days lost probably points out to the severity of the movements. (12)

One of the important features in the trade union front was the establishment of trade unions that were to be dominated by the parties. As a result of this, most of the unions that came up functioned as an organ (mass organisations) of their parent parties. It is because of this control of the parties over the unions, the latter lost all autonomy and the programmes and policies of the parties, in every important way, became the programmes and policies of the unions. The number of national unions in the country multiplied. By the end of World War II there were two all India organisations. The Indian Federation of Labour (IFL) and the largest union, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). By 1949 there were four unions and all these unions were linked or affiliated to and controlled by political parties. The Communists dominated the AITUC, IFL was affiliated to the Radical Democratic Party of M.N.Roy, the Indian National Congress controlled the INTUC and the Socialist Party members dominated the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). The HMS splitted further and the UTUC was formed. The AITUC also split in 1970 and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) was born and affiliated to the CPI (M). (13)

For the country as a whole, the period between the late 1960s to the imposition of the

emergency was a period of political turmoil and this significantly affected and shaped the working class movement in the country. Indira Gandhi started centralising and concentrating power in her hands after the elections of 1971. Taking advantage, the capitalist class resorted to new forms of offensives, lockouts being the main, due to which large number of man-days was lost. For example, in the period 1971-75 the average annual workdays lost through lockouts was as high as 60.23 thousand. The figure rose to 105.46 thousand in the period 1976-80. So far as the working class in the public sector undertakings were concerned, they were hit directly by the centralised bureaucratic state apparatus. As a result of this the working class in both the sectors responded with strikes due to which the number of disputes in the country increased significantly. In the period between 1965 and 1975 the number of workdays lost (from strikes or lockouts) increased by almost 500 percent. The most important strike that took place was the Railway strike of 1974, which till date remains the most serious of all the direct working class actions in the country. The strike was important because it was the only strike that was able to challenge the might of the Indian state. (14)

In the country as a whole, since the emergency, the working class had to face a number of offensives from the employers. Lockouts in the private sector increased as a result, of which a large percentage of workdays were lost. During the years 1980-1987, lockouts made up from 29 to 65 percent of workdays lost in industrial disputes. The loss of workdays in the 1980s went on increasing. To one estimate during 1985, 1987 and 1988, workdays lost in lockouts actually exceeded those lost in strikes by as much as 55, 52, and 71 percent respectively. This growth in lockouts has adversely affected the industrial working class in the country since it throws the working class to a condition of unemployment. Along with other kind of problems, industrial sickness also affected the working class in the 1980s. In 1976, 241 large industrial units were sick. In 1986, the figure had risen to 714. Among the medium scale industrial units, in 1986, 1,250 units were closed due to sickness. The number of sick small units also increased in the 1980s. For example, in 1988, 217,436 small units were lying sick. Thus the working class was hit hard in the 1980s by lockouts, closures and sickness. The problem of Lockout continues even today and has assumed a serious proportion. In 1999, according to the Labour Bureau, there were 387 lockouts; in 2000, there were 345 and in the year 2001, there were 302 lockouts. (15)

Since the late 1980s and 1990s, the working class is confronted with two different forms of offensives that it has not faced earlier. The first problem that it faces is the growth of **Hindutva** based political parties, namely the Bhartya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena and the consequent growth of their labour organisations i.e., Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) and Bharatiya Kamgar Sena (BKS) respectively that has in turn fragmented the working class among communal lines. Secondly, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) since 1991 and the consequent globalisation of the Indian economy, labour in the country has been facing the might of capital in a different form. The first problem is divisive in nature since it had divided the working class in the

country among communal lines whereas the second development has affected the working class significantly and has thrown challenges to the organised working class movement in the country. The second problem is much more severe at this juncture and it is to this we now turn. (16)

The introduction of the New Economic Policy since 1991 had severely affected the working class in the country. There are different components of this New Economic Policy but the core emphasis is on Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG). Liberalisation has meant reduction of government control over the private sector; as a result, the bargaining position of the workers vis-a-vis capital has declined. The policies of privatisation under which several important public sector units in the country is being sold to private companies had opened up new challenges for the workers and the trade unions in the country. As a result of the overall policies, the likely problem will be, there will be no statutory minimum wages for labour, no obstructions to retrenchment giving the employers the complete right to hire and fire. The developments in the Indian economy in the last one decade or more have created fundamental problems for the working class and the unions are finding it difficult to resist the encroachment of capital on the rights of the workers.⁽¹⁷⁾

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the movement of the organised workers in the country dates back to the period when industrialisation started and the first working class in the country appeared. The movements however took an organised form after the First World War with the emergence of trade unions. Movement of the workers, since then, continues to surface even today but the organised movements in the country face a number of problems. Firstly, within the working class in the country a large section of the workforce, the unorganised ones even today remain outside the fold of trade unions. On the whole, the unions in this country have neglected the problems of the unorganised sector. In absolute terms the unorganised workers are poor and vulnerable to exploitation than the workers in the organised sector.

The second major problem, which confronts the working class movement, is the multiplicity of trade unions. We have noted earlier that after independence trade unions representing workers in the country have multiplied. By the end of the Second World War there were only two All India organisations, by 1949 there were four all India organisations and today there are more than ten national level organisations affiliated to the major parties in the country. Ideological problems are often cited as the reason for this state of affairs though in actual practice unions are less ideological and are striving for organising the workers principally on economic issues. Multiplicity of political parties may be accepted as a norm in a democracy but multiplicity of Unions in a capitalist system keeps the working class fragmented and vulnerable to all forms of pressures.

Trade unions in the country, as a whole, have not been responsive to the problems of the working class in the country. Unions lie fragmented from the factory to the national level that has produced bitter rivalry among unions and hence very often they have failed to respond to the issues of the working class. Due to the reasons cited above and also because of the fact that political parties control Unions, the latter have failed to become militant for addressing the grievances of the workers. The growing number of closures, suspensions of work and other forms of offensives in the country in recent years after the introduction of the New Economic Policy indicates the weakness of the movement. Various studies have also found that the industrial working class in the country has not 'allied with the peasants and other sections of the society in collective direct action on political issues'. This reflects the low level of political consciousness of the working class.

The most important of all the problems however, include the fragmentation of unions, affiliation of the unions with political parties, lack of militancy by the established unions and a general apathy towards organising workers employed in the unorganised sector of the economy. All these problems have affected the working class movement in the country adversely.

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Authors Bio.

***ARIF AHMAD DAR** is a young researcher, UGC-NET and JK-SET qualifier from the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Presently he teaches History 'IGNOU' at Government Degree College Kulgam. He hails from Pahloo Kulgam. The author can be mailed at: hsnarif37@gmail.com

****ZAHIED REHMAN GANIE** is a young researcher from the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Presently he teaches History at Government Degree College Bijbehara, Anantnag, Kashmir. The author can be mailed at: bazmazahied@gmail.com