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Trade Unions In India: Role And Significance In The Changing World.

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Abstract

Trade Unions are necessary for protecting labour rights in all walks of life. They have the responsibility to closely observe the developments in the employment sector and act as the agency to empower the capability of the labour classes to meet the requirements of the globalised era. The Indian trade union movement has had a long history since the national movement. But globalisation brings certain challenges to employees and their unions. In this situation, trade unions should redefine their strategies and play a more active role in upholding and protecting labour rights.

Key Words: Trade Union, Globalisation, Liberalisation, Privatisation.

Trade unions are organisations of labourers formed for the protection and promotion of labour interests. These organisations have historically been performed significant roles in protecting their rights, improving remuneration, ensuring a decent working environment and job security etc, to them. Instead of these functions, they act as a negotiating agency with the Government and employers to get justice, benefits and other desired security conditions.

The Indian Trade Union Movement had its origin during the period of the emergence of the factory system under British administration in the 19th Century. The condition of labourers of that time was too vulnerable and worse. No fixed working hours for poor, illiterate and ignorant workers of that time. They spent long hours in factories in a pathetic environment. The employers and government had no concern about the plight of the labourers. The condition of the labourers was just like slaves. In this situation, the government passed

the first Factories Act in 1881. The marked feature of enactment of this Act was prohibition of Child Labour in the first time of history of India.ⁱ(Sekhar, Srivastava and Pankaj 2015). Another landmark Act was the enactment of the Factories Act of 1891. It was considered very important because it introduced certain progressive provisions related to labour rights. For the first time in the history of the labour movement in India, it was introduced the concept of fixed working hours for labourers. ⁱⁱ(Jadav, 2019).

The Factories Act 1891 was caused by the beginning of the introduction of certain far-reaching changes in the labour relations in India. Regulation of working hours, simple provisions related to a decent working environment resulted in new dimensions in labour rights.ⁱⁱⁱGilbert, M.J.(1982). However, along with these reforms, the trade union movement in India had very slow growth. The Indian labourers of that time were poor, illiterate and ignorant about the struggles which happened in other parts of the world.

The Bombay Mill Hands Association was formed in the year 1890 and was considered the first labour union in India. The master brain behind this association was Shri. N.M. Lokhandey, the first labour leader in India. The Amalgamated Society in Calcutta in 1905 and the Bombay Postal Union were followed.^{iv}Upadyaya, S.(2022).

The labour movement gained wide momentum only after the Second World War. Various Trade Unions were formed in Industrial centres like Madras, Bombay, Ahmedabad and Jameshedpur etc.^v(Sharma, G.K. 1982).

Developments in other parts of the world, including the World Wars, the Russian Revolution (1917), the Freedom Movement in India and abroad, and the establishment of the International Labour Organisation at Geneva influenced the growth and development of the Trade Union movement in India. The major Trade Unions that emerged in that period were All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), United Trade Union Congress (UTUC), Bharatheeya Mazdoor Sangh etc.

Attainment of the Nation's freedom and adoption of a new Constitution which provides new role to trade unions in India. Major Trade Unions of that time were affiliated with Political Parties, and it gave them a chance to influence policy decisions of the government. However, they remained divided and weak. They gained immense support and strength from the part of government and the judiciary in the pre-reform period and exerted high influence over the formally organised sector in India (Suresh 2001: 15).

The primary functions of trade unions are to protect and promote the interests of the workers and improve their working conditions. It plays an important role and is helpful in effective communication between the workers and the management. They provide advice and support to ensure that the differences of opinion do not turn into major conflicts. The central function of a trade union is to represent people at work (Rajesh and Manoj 2014).

Generally, the Trade Unions in India are engaged in multifarious functions. The focused areas of Indian trade Unions are as follows:

Militant Functions: According to this view, the trade unions have given primary priority to the betterment of the positions of members to their employment. The trade unions are always vigilant to ensure that the wages are adequate for the work. They also ensure better treatment from the part of employer. If the employers are not willing to secure and maintain the above-mentioned conditions the trade unions employ pressure tactics like go-slow tactics, strikes, boycott, *gherao* etc. In short, they adopt militant or fighting functions. They are always ready to protect labourers from victimisation and injustice.

Fraternal functions: The activities of trade unions are extended beyond their working environment. The union extends its support and help to its members in times of need and improves their efficiency. It inculcates the spirit of cooperation among the members. It is the responsibility of the union to promote friendly industrial relations. Trade unions arrange necessary facilities to diffuse education and culture among its members. With the adoption of welfare measures like educational assistance, health insurance and other kinds of support in times of emergency, the trade unions can develop a kind of morale among its members. At the time of legal emergency, the trade unions offer such kind of assistance to its members. Certain well-organised trade unions have their own magazines and journals, and they spread news and opinions related to their work very fast and effectively among their members. The protection of women workers from discrimination also comes under the purview of fraternal functions. Trade unions collect funds and financial support from members, outside agencies and the public.

Political Functions: In our nation, the majority of trade unions are affiliated with political parties. So, it is the responsibility of the trade union to help their mother party at the time of crisis. They enroll members to the party, collect donations and work for the political party at the time of elections.

Social Functions: Trade unions are socially committed organisations. They carry out social service activities and discharge social responsibilities at the time of crisis. In India, trade unions organise certain activities which promote patriotism, legal awareness, eradication of social evils etc.

In general terms, the functions of trade unions pertain to the following:

1. Bargaining for higher wages and better working conditions for its members.
2. Assist employers in preparing policies and programmes concerning workers.
3. Helping the workers to hold control of industry.
4. Act as a guardian from discrimination and unfair practice from the part of employers.

In short, it is the responsibility of the trade unions to help the workers in all matters in connection with employment (Rao 2010).^{vi}

The National Labour Commission stated that the functions of trade union are: -

1. To secure fair wages for workers.
2. To safeguard security of tenure and improve conditions of service.
3. To improve opportunities for promotion and training.
4. To provide educational, cultural and recreational facilities.
5. To improve working and living conditions
6. To co-operate in and facilitate technological advance by broadening the understanding of workers of its underlying issues.
7. To offer responsive cooperation in improving levels of production and productivity, discipline and highest standard of quality generally to promote individual and collective welfare.

Over the last decades, India had entered into the world of liberalisation and privatisation. It has resulted in causing marked changes in the Indian economy and labour market. The inauguration of reforms in the Indian economy marked drastic changes in the role of trade unions. As a result of the capital formation boom that occurred in India, a large number of new job opportunities were created. Along with these developments, some related issues have also emerged, both at the employment and organisational levels.

Most of the employment opportunities are in insurance, banking, IT and other sectors. These companies recruited thousands of educated youths, both male and female, especially in cities. Unfortunately, many of these companies never encourage the organisational activities of trade unions on their premises. There are a lot of issues suffered by employees of these firms, including retrenchment without notice, excess work pressure and exploitation, long hours of work, frequent transfer, low payment compared to their effort and education, etc.

Along with educated youths, the poor, rural illiterate or low educated employees are working in retail shops, hospitality industries, machine assembling units etc. the employees of such firms are also undergoing above mentioned exploitations.

The present-day labour markets are facing issues like competition on the basis of cheap labour, jobless growth of economy, outsourcing of employment opportunities, informalisation of work etc. (Venkataratnam & Dhal 2017:41).^{vii}

After the emergence of globalisation, governments are forced to follow a pro-investor attitude, and this compels the government machinery to neglect various labour-related issues which arise from new generation industries. The number of worst industrial relation cases are reported these days in different parts of India.

Only 28 per cent of the labour force has trade union membership in India (Ravinder 2016: 22)^{viii}. Most of

the trade unions are working in the organised sector, and very few of them are operating in the unorganised sector. The majority of the workers of the unorganised sector are beyond the purview of the trade union support.

The trade union movement in India is at a cross road. Being the leaders of the working class, trade unions should redefine its role and priorities. Majority of the labourers in general and women in particular are beyond the coverage of the protective trade union mechanism. In this situation, the labourers especially women labours expect more crucial involvement of trade unions in various labour issues.

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