
EMERGENCE OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN COLONIAL PUNJAB

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Abstract

Trade unions provide a organized platform for workers to let know their problems and differences with their owners. A trade union works to unites and educates the workers to know and get their legal rights. The development of industries and trade union movement was reached late at colonial Punjab. The influence of some contemporary circumstances boost to industrial workers to organize themselves in trade unions. This research elaborates the conditions of early workers struggle and traces the effect of 'The Indian Trade Unions Act. 1926'. History of emergence of trade union movement in Punjab is important chapter of workers struggle, which is the big section of employees till now and always neglect in historical research. The present study is an effort to study the emergence of trade union movement in the area of colonial Punjab

Keywords: *Trade Union, India, Colonial Punjab, The Indian Trade Union Act 1926, AITUC, Indian National Congress.*

Growth of capitalism and industries became cause to an emergence of new industrial working class in India and Punjab. India has rural agriculture based economy and growth of industries was very slow. A small section of people worked in industries and even till 1850's there was coal-mining industry only. In big cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras there were railways, coal-Mining, Jute mills and cotton textile industries were established. Cotton textile industries spread in some other parts of India and huge workers worked there and earned their wages from these industries (V.B. Karnick, 1967). Low wages, long hours of duty, low standard of working conditions, child labour, deplorable living places and exploitation by owners were by birth evils of industrial workers. In last decades of Nineteenth century, S.S Bengalee, M. Lokhande and some other trade unionist make successful unions and set the platform for trade union movement in new century (Ruddar Dutt, K.P. Sundra, 2005). According to Bipan Chandra in the end of 19th century there were many agitations and strikes by workers in textile mills of Calcutta, Bombay Ahmadabad, Surat, Madras and wardha and so on in the railways and in the plantations also. Industrial workers realized their exploitation and their leaders trained them. Working class got social, political and economic supports in 1899 when Bal Gangadhar Tilak and other nationalists promoted the strike of workers in the Great Indian Peninsular Railway by their newspapers to arrange the public meetings and collected the fund for strikers. Madras Trade Union formed in 1918 and in 1920, Indian working class created their own association which represented all Indian workers as All India Trade Union Congress and Lala Lajpat Rai a famous leader of Punjab became the first president of AITUC. Again in 1922, all India railway men federation & all India post & telegraph unions were formed.

Trade Union movement in Punjab is comparatively a new development. As on organized movement, trade union began to appear in Punjab after First World War. Before 1926* the trade unions were however, a loose combination rather than a corporate body. It was a land

mark in the history of the growth of the trade union movement in all over India. This act gave legal status to trade union & thereby contributed for their rapid growth. There is no evidence of any trade union being setup in Punjab till 1919 with the emergence of trade union movement in Punjab. Large numbers of workers, who were employed in manufacturing units in large scale & small scale industries in Punjab region, had no unity to protect their rights. There were many reasons behind for it:

A large section of industrial labour in Punjab were illiterates & ignorant about their authorized rights. They do not even understand their own problems. There is no discipline among the industrial workers. Industrial labour in India is migratory in character then. Most of the laborers in industries were drawn from villages & returned to their homes during their busy agricultural seasons. The industrial labour in India was not united, but is divided on the behalf of language, region and caste. Workers of Punjab could not give up their religious and caste respect. They belonging to the various communities in the industries of the Punjab were balanced; it effected the growth of trade union movement. The prevalence of the environment of caste and communal parties least since 1909, further hampered the progress of trade unionism in the Punjab (Census of India, 1931). They are not capable to organize themselves for collective action. The factory Acts of 1881 & 1891 gave some regulations and rules for the workers and a big part of our industrial workers were ignorant of these Acts that's why they failed to promoting & protecting their interest through collective action.

The factors which contributed to the growth of trade union movement in colonial Punjab during the post war period were the following:-

- Awakening among their workers as a result of Russian Revolution.
- The Birth of AITUC.
- The Indian National freedom movement.

The beginning of the trade union movement in India and was made towards the end of First World War. The Russian revolution which took place in 1917 gave boost to the birth of trade union movement in Punjab, which was known as workers victory over capitalists (Bourgeois). The trade union movement saw its real beginning by the country. With the rise of Russia, the communist ideology had spread all over the world and it was the time of emergence of united working class. In twentieth century, class based social struggles of working class and peasant movements came to India for fight their rights. Marxists must actively participate in the work of the Trade Unions, educational societies, the Congress Socialist Party and, in general, all mass organizations (Leon Trotsky, 1939). With the influence of Russian revolution, working class of India got the boost to fight against exploiters because the owners of big industries were from England and Europe (S.A. Dange, 1973). So there was dual aspect for labour class, first was to fight against exploitation and second was to gain freedom from British rule (Manifesto of Fourth International, 1992).

Earlier to this various small agitations and uprising were observed in agrarian section. People started to oppose the suppression and exploitation by the landlords. Tenants and agrarian labour classes started raising their voice with their leaders like Ajit Singh and Lal Lajpat Rai. '*Paggri sambhal o jattan*' movement was one of them. Punjab Land Alienation Act, passed by the government stirred the agitation among agrarian class and '*Punjab Disturbance*' during 1906-07 was the outcome of it. These acts were basically framed on

benefit the money lenders or land lords and to suppress the farmers and cultivators to position of tenants. Although this unrest did not transformed into Union but a group of labourer and workers against exploiters and prepared a structure of Unions in Punjab.

Thus in pre independence period the trade union movement of the entire country including Punjab was closely linked to the national freedom movement. In Amritsar conference 1919, Indian National Congress offered to promote and create the Trade Unions all over India, which show that National leaders and INC realized the power of workers and they wanted to organize them for joint action. The calls for strikes during the non-cooperation movement proved particularly helpful for the growth of trade unionism in the Punjab. Henceforth, the observation of *hartals* was treated as a national service (Reports of Administration, 1922). In September 1920, the Non-cooperation movement was launched by Indian National Congress and industrial labour of Punjab was also supported the call and participated in freedom movement. To support the non-cooperation movement the workers of Punjab organized themselves and started the trade union movement in Punjab because the Railway workshop & Bhiwani Spinning Mill's workers went on Strikes for two months and that the time to established first trade union in Punjab (Paramjit Sharma, 1993). As a result trade union movement of Punjab became integral part of the Indian National Movement.

Communist ideology of Russia influenced the Indian people. People of Punjab also acquired the colour of Communism. Prominent members of communist parties like Santokh Singh and Rattan Singh participated in the 4th congress of "The Communist International" held at Moscow from November 7 to December 3, 1922, to understand the meaning and scope of Communism in theory and practice (Bhagwan Josh, 1979).

There were certain checks on Communist Parties by the British Government. Communist Parties faced a trial in Kanpur Conspiracy Case and after this trial they could not work with the name of Communist Party. So they started working by forming "Worker and Peasants Parties", in many provinces of India like Bombay Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. In Punjab, the party was called as '*Kirti Kisan Party*, *Kirti* means workers and *Kisan* means peasants. The founders of Kirti Kisan Party were highly impressed by the Russian Revolution and organised the party to attain similar aims" (Bhupinder Singh, 2001). The Party collaboration with the Naujwan Bharat Sabha tried to also capture various Trade Unions, Press Unions and the Railways Porters Unions (Master Hari Singh, 1972). In the leadership of Sohan Singh Josh, The Kirti Kisan Party organized the both Industrial and agriculturalist workers of Punjab.

Trade union movement of Punjab faced many problems in early stages. Lacks of dedicated and educated union leaders, Majority of the workers had not taken the membership of the unions. Just a few number of the workers got membership. Lacks of funds was an important factor affecting the working of trade union in Punjab. Hence, the trade union could not undertake labour welfare & benefit schemes. The government did not take much interest in the formation & growth of trade unions. This indifferent attitude of the government is partly responsible for the slow growth of trade union movement in Punjab.

Conclusion

It's true that establishment of big industries and movement of trade unions was came later in Punjab but circumstances as Russian revolution 1917, formation of AITUC 1920 and Indian National Freedom Movement given the boost to the working classes. Early trade

unions faced many types of barriers but workers learnt from these problems and make their struggle with full capacity. Formations of early trade unions there were without Government's rule & regulations. The Indian Trade Union Act, 1926, which came into force on June 1, 1927 make the expansion of trade unions. According to Paramjit Sharma, in 1920 there was only one trade union in the Punjab, while in 1927-28 their number arose to six unions with 5799 members and The Weavers' Association, Ludhiana with 222 members became the first industrial trade union of Punjab in 1928.

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