

Understanding Trade Union Movement As A Social Movement: Some Reflections On Its Theoretical Schools

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to analyze the four schools of thought pertaining to the concept as well as practice of trade unionism, one of the major social movement emerged and carried out throughout the world. Though the notion of trade unionism is considered as an Marxist thought, but different thinkers, ideologies not directly belonging to the non-Marxists school have also contributed a lot towards the development of labour solidarity and trade unionism. Understanding these theoretical schools are instrumental not only in having an outlook towards the inherent meaning of the said concept and most importantly, it can also give an in-depth insight of the strategies and tactics to materialize the same.

Index Terms: Capitalism, Class Struggle, Gandhism, Labour, Marxism, Trade Union Movement, Social Movement,

1 INTRODUCTION

2. DEFINITIONS OF TRADE UNION:

Trade unionism and modern industrial set up can be considered as the both sides of a same coin. The very notion of trade unionism has been considered as the by product of the historic industrial revolution and it has been playing a vital role in ensuring various demands as well as interests of the entire labour or working class section of the society. Trade union movement is highly concerned with different issues associated with the labourers in modern industrial set up and with the rapid spread of the process of industrialization, trade union movement has emerged as an inalienable part of modern industrial society at large. The present paper is a humble attempt to develop a basic theoretical understanding of the role of the concept of trade unionism along with focusing the issues concerning the same.

1.2 OBJECTIVE

The present paper aims to unfold the basic theoretical schools pertaining to trade union movement, a major social movement.

1.3 METHODOLOGY: Methodology of the paper is qualitative in nature based on different books, journals and articles.

Different scholars have defined trade union differently. Some of such definitions have been given below. G.D.H Cole, a well known figure in the realm of classical political theory made an attempt to define trade union movement.

For him, trade union is an association of workers in one or more occupations –an association carried out mainly for the purpose of protecting and advancing the members economic interests in connection with daily work (1) V.V Giri former President of the Republic of India and a veteran figure of Indian Trade Union Movement defines trade union movement as “ Voluntary Organizations of workers formed to promote and protect their interests by collective action” (2) Trade Union Act, 1926 defines trade union “as any combination , whether temporary or permanent, formed primarily for the purpose of regulating the relations between workmen and employees or between workmen and workmen or between employers and employees for imposing restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade union or business and includes any federation of two or more trade unions. (3) Hence, from the above definitions it can be remarked that trade union is an organization of labourers involving continuous action for the ensuring various demands as well as interests of the working class section of the society believing in continuous and collective action on the part of the labourers under well organized leadership to deal with labour problems created by modern industrial set up.

3 MARXIST SCHOOL OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

The Marxist theory of trade unionism is based on the ideas put forwarded by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and a host of his followers. This theory is highly influenced by the doctrine of class struggle, one of the basic tenants of Marxism. Marx was of the view that the very development of capitalism gave birth to two different kinds of commodity possessors that came in to contact with confrontation.(4)These commodity possessors, in one hand , according to Marx, are free labourer , the seller who sells their own labour power. On the other hand, the owners of money, the means of production whose main intention is to increase the sum of values they possess through purchasing the labour powers of others. Marx has termed these commodity possessors and the owners or proletariats and bourgeoisie respectively. However, Marx has opined that polarization of market compels the labourers or the proletariats to alienate themselves from their product as well as most importantly, from their self too. Marxist theory of trade union movement believes that this process of primitive accumulation is nothing but the historical process of depriving

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labourers from their inherent means of production. Therefore, Marx prescribed class struggle to be initiated by the proletariat or the working class to overthrow the capitalist socio-political structure. Marx's idea on trade union can be traced through his two widely read pieces of work viz. *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) and *Communist Manifesto* (1848). In *Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx has held the view that capitalism with large scale industry makes the worker bound to unite in a common platform against their capitalist master. To speak more specifically, the antagonism between two classes i.e. proletariat and bourgeoisie finally leads to the emergence of Trade Union. Similarly, Marx, along with Friedrich Engels, in their renowned work *Communist Manifesto* has vehemently argued that the massive expansion of industries results in a very pathetic condition of labourers with minimal and uncertain wage. Moreover, they pointed out how a rapid economic development of machinery makes the entire scenario more vulnerable which ultimately led to the emergence of trade unions on the part of the labourers against bourgeoisie class. In the same line, Marx and Engels further opined that with the establishments of trade union the labourers would enable themselves to maintain wage rate and to go for temporary revolution which may turn in to class struggle. In this connection, Marx opined that communication system created by modern industrial set up would help in organizing trade unions and to communicate the proletariat labourers located in different places. Marx and Engels through their doctrine of class conflict and dialectical materialism has tried to create a new class i.e. the class of trade unionist who would regard labour organizations as a quite essential entity to bring revolutionary and fundamental change in the very social structure (5) Marxist theory of trade unionism not only believes in the emancipation of the labourers from the trap of modern capitalist industrial set up but to wither away the very capitalist socio-political structure that allows the bourgeoisie to exploit the labourers, the primary producers. Therefore, Marxist theory of trade union basically advocates for political dimension of trade union and portrays the activities carried out by trade union as a political struggle as Marx opined that "Every struggle is a political struggle"(6) Apart from Marx and Engels, Lenin is also considered as key exponent of Marxist theory of trade unionism. Lenin primarily focuses on the political aspects of trade union. He perceived the view that economic struggle of labour is a collective struggle against the employer and he was pessimistic that this struggle in the days to come would pave the way for a "future battle"(7) In this regard, Lenin has pointed out the role of outsider which is needed in order to infuse political class consciousness to trade unionism. Further, Lenin held the view that intellectuals of the society should be taken in to consideration while rejuvenating the political consciousness of trade union. Moreover, Lenin in this context opined that intellectuals should lead the struggle of working class not for having better terms of selling their labour power. But the intellectuals, according to Lenin should play a vital role in eradicating the very social structure that makes the labour bound to sell their labour power to the richer section of the society. Hence, trade union, according to Lenin is the political potent in their regular struggle and in fulfilling their mission to overthrow the very structure of wage salary. To speak in simple sense, Lenin defines trade union as the "educational organization..... a school of administration, school of economic management, a school of communism"(8)

4 NON-MARXIST THEORIES OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Apart from the Marxist theory of trade unionism, other theoretical school of the same also co-exists that has been discussed below.

4.1 BRITISH SCHOOL OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT.

Sydney and Beatrice Webb, G.D.H. Cole, Harold J Laski and Robert Owen are the pioneer figures of British school of trade unionism. Sydney and Beatrice Webb have penned down two piece of work on trade union called "The History of Trade Unionism" (1899) and "Industrial Democracy"(1897). Webbs, in their piece of work entitles as "The History of trade unionism defines trade union as a "continuous association of wage earners"(9) Here, they put emphasis on the continuity which is quite essential for all social movements including the trade union movement. But this definition is considered as a parochial one as it focuses only the monetary dimension of trade union ignoring other important issues like status of workers and methods and tactics of trade unions and the characters of trade unions Similarly, G.D.H Cole, a noted thinker in classical political theory and an exponent of guild socialism who authored the book "The world of Labour" (1913) has also portrayed his ideas on trade unionism. Cole held the view that class struggle is something "irrefutable" under capitalism. He has perceived the fact that control of industry is the future destiny of trade unions. (10) He further went on to say that trade union exists today to carry out class struggle(11). Apart from Cole, Harold J Laski in his celebrated piece of work "Trade Union in the New Society"(1950) has depicted his ideas of trade unionism. Laski was critical towards the short term goals of trade unions and vehemently believed that trade unions should aim to fulfill its long term goal of reconstruction of the society. He also believed that the supreme duty of trade union should be to frame economic policy in the existing political scenario. In addition Laski also went on to say that trade union is a combination of many relations such as social, political and economic relation. Apart from these two thinkers, Robert Owen, a forerunner of British school of Trade Unionism also contributed a lot towards the theoretical development of trade union movement. Owen in his book viz. "A New View of the Society" has given an account of the basic issues of trade union movement. Owen, being an industrialist perceived the evil effects of machine system and argued that entire machine system should be controlled socially and the labourers need to be sensitized enough to exercise their control to the entire machine system.

4.1 THE AMERICAN SCHOOL OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT:

The American school of trade union movement consists of the ideas developed by Prof. John R Commons and a host of other thinkers. Prof Commons, a faculty of University of Wisconsin considered as a pioneer figure of American trade unionism. Prof Commons in his book "Documentary History of American Industrial Society "(1910) reveals the scenario of American Trade Unionism. Prof Commons possessed the view that labour movement is nothing but the protest against capitalism. Apart from Prof Commons, his pupil Selig Perlman also contributed lot to the American school of trade union movement. Perlman in his book namely "Theory of Labour Movement" (1928) has opined that "trade union is the product

of the pessimistic outlook of a “mentalist”, a worker”(12) For him, trade union fights not only for any “ abstract” or mystical labour but for the millions of concrete human beings with their concrete wants and aspirations. Similarly, Frank Tannenbaum, a faculty of History at Colombia University has opined that trade union movement is nothing but a reaction of labourers to the domination of machine in the modern industrial set up. Tannenbaum has pointed out that all members of a trade union must be organized and he argued that monopoly of labour over machine is accomplished the labour and the labour will be strong enough to indulge in wage bargaining with employers. Importantly, Tannenbaum considered trade union as a dynamic organization having social and ethical norms.

The American school of trade union movement would be incomplete without dealing with the ideas of Robert Foxie, professor of Economics at the University of Chicago. Prof Foxie believed that the notion of trade union is highly associated with the group psychology of workers. It means that in order to have knowledge on trade unionism, one must go through not only the environmental conditions but also the temperamental characteristics of the worker concerned. He further classified trade unions on different categories based on their functional operations. Moreover, Foxie has predicted that with the rise of trade union, the power of collective bargaining would develop into the form of industrial democracy which would pave the way for ending the profit system.(13)

4.2 INDIAN SCHOOL OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENT.

The Indian school of trade union movement is based on the ideas perceived by the veteran leaders of India. In this connection, the names of Mahatma Gandhi deserve special mention. Mahatma Gandhi, considered as the father of the nation possessed a pro-labour outlook and the his ideas on trade union movement has been reflected in the pages of “ Young India” and “Harijan” Gandhi visualized that a society cannot be uplifted without ensuring the wellbeing of the same. He wholeheartedly believed that proper organization of worker is quite essential as it can make workers enriched in terms of wealth and resources through their labour than the capitalist.(14) Gandhi tried to form organization among the labourers of Ahmedabad cloth factory under the title of “Mazdoor Mandir” implying temple of the labour and has urged the labourers to treat trade union as a sacred entity and to involve in trade union movement with a dedicative mind. He further urged the labourers to keep themselves away from any sorts of violence while involving in trade union movements He also opined that no labour should be compelled to take part in strike and participation in strike must be voluntary in nature. Gandhi also opined that no labour during the course of strike should receive compensation and strike should be continued till the goal is achieved. Gandhi during the historic Champaran Satyagraha (1917) visualized the pathetic condition of the peasants and workers and perceived the very fact that mere juridical means couldn't be instrumental in order to get the problems of labourers solved and Gandhi believe that the labour section of the society should come forward and raise their voice against all sorts of injustices faced by them. Here, the fundamental differences between Gandhian version of Trade union movement from the Marxist one comes. Marx, being a believer of the notion of class struggle advocates for initiation of class struggle on the part of the proletariats or the labourers subjugated under capitalism. But Gandhi used to urge the labourers to go for “satyagraha” without involving in

violence. Gandhi, later on, realized that there must be proper degree of education among the labourers and the peasants to make the labourers and the peasants united. Therefore, Gandhi tried his best to spear the lights of education among the labourers by establishing schools during his involvement of Champaran Satyagraha. Above and all, these are the basic facts by which one can have a basic understanding of Gandhian notion of Trade Union Movement. Apart from Gandhi, Ashok Mehta is another forerunner of Indian Trade Union Movement who worked under Lokanayak Jay Prakash Narayan. Mehta has give an in-depth understanding of trade union movement in his piece of works namely “ The Role of Trade Union in Underdeveloped Countries” (1957) and “The Mediating Role of Trade Union in Underdeveloped Countries”. Mehta opined that trade union can be justified for increasing wage in developed countries. But in case of developing Countries, as opined by Mehta, trade union should dedicate itself for the increase of overall production. Form such innovative ideas, Ashok Mehta's theory of trade union movement is considered as “Non Consumption Theory of Trade Unionism”(15)So, above are the major theoretical debates of trade union movement. From the above discourse, it is transparent that there are various theories and ideas of trade union movement to have a basic understanding trade union movement. From such theories it can be remarked that the very notion of trade union movement is a by-product of historic industrial revolution. However, the meaning and objectives of trade union movement may vary from society to society and situation to situations. For example, trade union movement in Indian scenario is by and large is based on the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi that pays attention of peaceful settlement of disputes and infuses some sorts of ethical and moral values to the movement. Such tactics were the demands of that phase of history wherein making the whole movement an non violent one was of paramount importance. On the other hand, Lenin, a Marxist revolutionary believes in political role or trade union and class struggle to a great extent. .

5 CONCLUSIONS:

From the above discourse, it can be remarked that the very concept of trade unionism denotes a spirit of collectiveness of workers or labourers in modern industrial set up in order to ensure various interests of workers or labourers and trade union movement is the materialization of that spirit in continuous manner with well-organized organization under well-proficient leadership to ensure various of labourers of the labourers emerged in the different phases of time of a given socio-political system. Moreover, it can be remarked that theoretical understanding of trade unionism helps one to develop an insightful knowledge and understanding of trade unionism and trade union movement. Moreover, the basic theoretical understanding of trade union movement one of the major branches of social movement is essential for having prior knowledge regarding the research of the issues, ideological orientation, dynamics and articulation of interests of trade union movement of a country including ours too.

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