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Original Article

The Role of the Labour Movement in Indian History

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Abstract:-

The labour movement has played a significant role in shaping India's social, economic, political, and industrial history. It emerged as a collective response to the exploitation of workers, poor working conditions, low wages, long working hours, and the absence of basic labour rights during the colonial period. The present study, entitled "The Role of the Labour Movement in Indian History," examines the historical development, major contributions, and socio-economic significance of labour movements in India from the colonial period to post-independence India.

The study focuses on the emergence of organised labour movements, the establishment of trade unions, workers' participation in the freedom struggle, and the contributions of prominent labour leaders and organisations towards improving workers' rights and welfare. It highlights important developments such as the formation of the Madras Labour Union in 1918, the establishment of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920, and the evolution of labour legislation in independent India. Special attention is given to the role of industrial workers, agricultural labourers, women workers, and trade union organisations in demanding fair wages, social security, job protection, and workplace equality.

The study aims to understand how labour movements contributed to the development of democratic values, workers' rights, social reforms, and industrial relations in India. It also seeks to highlight the continuing importance of collective bargaining, labour welfare, social security, and inclusive employment policies. Ultimately, the research demonstrates the historical significance of the labour movement in strengthening workers' dignity, promoting social and economic justice, and shaping modern India's democratic and industrial institutions.

Keywords: *Labour Movement, Indian History, Trade Union Movement, Workers' Rights, Industrialisation, Labour Legislation, Trade Unionism, Working Class, Colonial India, Freedom Struggle, Industrial Relations, Social Justice, Labour Welfare, Collective Bargaining, Economic Development.*

Introduction:-

The labour movement has played a significant role in shaping the social, economic and political history of India. It emerged as a response to exploitation, low wages, long working hours, poor working conditions and the lack of social security faced by workers during British colonial rule. The growth of modern industries-cotton textiles, jute mills, railways, coal mines and plantation-created a large industrial working class. The labour movement was not merely a struggle for higher wages and better working conditions.

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It also became an important part of India's freedom struggle, social reform movements and the development of democratic institutions. Workers gradually organised themselves into trade unions, participated in strikes and demonstrations and demanded justice, equality and dignity. After independence, the movement continued to influence government policies, labour legislation, industrial relations and welfare programmes. The Indian labour movement was a pivotal force in the sub-continent's modern history, acting as a crucial bridge between industrial modernization and the anti-colonial freedom struggle. Emerging in the late 19 th century alongside the rise of large-scale industries like textiles, railways and plantations the movement evolved from unorganized, localized protests into a formidable, politically conscious national force. It not only championed the rights of the working class against exploitative economic structures but also profoundly shaped the socio-political landscape of contemporary India.

Origin and Background of the Labour Movement :-

The origin of the modern labour movement in India is closely associated with growth under British colonial rule during the nineteenth century. The establishment of textile mills in Bombay, jute mills in Bengal, coal mines in eastern India and railway networks created new employment opportunities. Yet many workers experienced low wages, irregular payment, long working hours, unsafe workplaces, harsh supervision and limited access to medical care or social security. Women and children often worked under difficult conditions. Colonial industrial development primarily served commercial and imperial interests. These conditions encouraged workers to protest against wage reductions, excessive workloads and unfair treatment. Early protests were often local and spontaneous, but they gradually helped workers recognise the important of collective organisations.

Early Labour Initiatives :-

Social reformers and labour advocates helped bring workers problem into public discussion. Sasipada Banerjee supported workers education and welfare initiatives in Bengal. N. M. Lokhande emerged as an influential advocate for Bombay textile workers. The Bombay Mill Hands Association, founded in 1890 under Lokhande leadership is widely regarded as one of the earliest important workers organisations. Lokhande campaigned for weekly rest shorter working hours and better conditions. The Factories Act of 1881 represented an early, limited legislative intervention, particularly concerning child labour. Although the initial measures were inadequate. They signalled that industrial working conditions had become a subject of public debate and reform.

Growth of Trade Unions :-

The early twentieth century witnessed the expansion of trade union activities. The First World War (1914-1918) raised the cost of living, while wages often failed to keep pace. Workers increasingly organised strikes and demanded better pay and treatment. The Madras Union, established in 1918 and associated with B. P. Wadia was a major step in organised labour activity. In 1920 the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was established in Bombay. Lala Lajpat Rai became its first President. Leaders including N. M. Joshi and other labour activists contributed to the growth of organised representation. The AITUC provided a national platform for workers from different industries and regions. Trade unions demanded fair wages, reasonable hours, recognition, compensation for industrial accidents, better welfare facilities, protection against arbitrary dismissal and collective bargaining rights.

Labour Movement and the Freedom Struggle :-

The labour movement contributed to India's struggle for independence. Although workers initially organised mainly around economic grievances, their activities increasingly connected with anti-colonial politics. Nationalist leaders recognised workers as a potentially powerful force against imperial rule. Strikes in textile mills, railway workshops, ports and other industries disrupted economic activity and demonstrated collective strength. Workers organisations helped spread awareness of nationalism, equality, socialism and democratic rights. In several places, workers participated in demonstrations and protests associated with national movements. Labour activism also challenged colonial economic arrangements that favoured British commercial interests. The relationship between nationalism and labour politics was not uniform. Worker's priorities differed by industry, region, caste, gender and ideology. Some unions focused on negotiation and workplace reform, while others adopted more militant political positions. Nevertheless, labour activism widened the social base of political mobilisation.

Important Labour Struggles :-

Ahmedabad Textile Workers Movement 1918: Mahatma Gandhi supported textile workers seeking improved wages. He encouraged peaceful protest, negotiation and non-violent methods. The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association, established in 1920, because associated with cooperation, arbitration and workers welfare. The movement showed how collective action could influence industrial relations. Bombay Textile Workers

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Movement: Bombay's textile workers faced rising prices, difficult housing and harsh employment conditions. Strikes, including the major 1928 strike, demonstrated the growing strength of organised labour. The Girni Kamgar Union and other organisations helped mobilise workers, while socialist and communist ideas influenced sections of the workforce. These struggles strengthened class consciousness and highlighted conflicts between labour and capital. Railway Workers Movement: Railway workers protested over wages, service conditions and unfair treatment. Their struggles illustrated the importance of workers in a strategically vital industry and helped expand organised labour activity. Regional circumstances and colonial administrative practices shaped the form of these movements. Quit India Movement 1942 Workers in several industrial centres took part in strikes, demonstrations and protests. Participation varied across regions and workplaces, influenced by wartime conditions, political affiliations and repression. Their actions reflected connections between economic grievances and political resistance, though labour did not act as one unified bloc.

Labour Legislation and Legal Recognition :-

One lasting contribution of labour activism was the growth of labour legislation. Important measures included the Workmen's Compensation Act 1923. Which recognised compensation for employment-related injuries. The Trade Unions Act 1926. Which established a framework for registration and certain protections and the Trade Disputes Act 1929. Which addressed aspects of industrial disputes. After independence, the Factories Act 1948. Provided provisions concerning health, safety, welfare and working hours, while the Minimum Wages Act 1948. Created a minimum-wages framework for scheduled employments. These laws were important milestones but legislation did not end exploitation. Enforcement was uneven and many agricultural and informal workers remained inadequately protected. Labour reforms reflected workers struggles alongside public debate, reform initiatives and changing state policy.

Labour Movement after Independence :-

After 1947, workers expected economic security, improved wages and social justice. The government pursued industrialisation and expanded the public sector, while trade unions became participants in industrial relations and policy discussions. Major trade union organisation included the AITUC 1920. Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC 1947), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS 1948), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS 1955) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU 1970). They represented different ideological traditions and political affiliations. Unions negotiated wages and benefits, raised workplace grievances, supported social insurance and provident funds, and advocate pensions, paid leave and occupational safety. Their activities helped make labour rights an established subject of democratic governance though political competition sometimes fragmented the movement. Political Fragmentation (1947-1970) Prior to 1947 the All India Trade Union Congress served as the umbrella body for organized labour. Following independence, ideological differences split the movement into central trade unions tied to major political parties. The independent Indian state adopted a heavily interventionist legal structure to prevent industrial action while ensuring basic welfare. Through the industrial disputes act of 1947 and the factories act of 1948, labour became a concurrent list subject under the constitution. The state prioritized compulsory adjudication over collective bargaining, making legal strikes difficult while giving government tribunals power over industrial disputes.

Major Historic Mobilization : 1974 Railway Strike led by George Fernandes, over 1.7 millions workers halted rail transit for 20 days demanding bonus pay and parity with public sector wages. It exposed state vulnerabililty and contributed directly to political turmoil prior to the 1975 emergency.

1982 Bombay Textile Strike : Led by Datta Samant, roughly 250,000 textile mill workers engaged in a year-long strike. The prolonged standoff failed to secure recognition, accelerating the closure of traditional mills and illustrating the limits of classic industrial strikes against structural industrial changes.

Social and Economic Contributions :-

The labour movement helped improve living standards for many organised workers through wage gains, shorter hours, leave and workplace benefits. It promoted social security arrangements, including compensation, provident funds and insurance schemes, although access remained uneven. It also challenged exploitative practices and raised questions of caste and gender inequality. Women workers, however, frequently experienced lower wages, occupational segregation and inadequate representation. Trade unions encouraged collective decision-making, leadership development, negotiation and protest. Their demand for workers participated in industrial decisions advanced the ideal of industrial democracy even though its realisation remained limited.

Contemporary Relevance :-

Globalisation, technological change, outsourcing and the expansion of service industries have transformed employment. Current labour concerns

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include contractual work, wage inequality, job insecurity, occupational safety, migrant workers rights, women's employment and social protection for informal and platform workers. Many workers remain in informal or insecure arrangements and are difficult to reach through traditional factory-based union structures. Construction workers, domestic workers, agricultural labourers and delivery workers require forms of representation suited to their circumstances. The movement's contemporary relevance lies in extending fair treatment, collective voice and social protection to these groups.

Limitations and Challenges :-

The movement has faced political divisions, limited coverage, regional disparities and gender inequality. Party affiliations and ideological differences can weaken joint bargaining. Many informal workers remain outside established unions, while automation, outsourcing and platform work create new organising challenges, workers and governments may also disagree over wages, productivity, industrial peace and job security. Addressing these issues requires inclusive organising, worker education, effective labour administration, gender-sensitive leadership and constructive industrial relations.

Political Ideas in the Labour Movement :-

The labour movement was shaped by nationalism, socialism, communism and Gandhian thought. Nationalists connected independence with social and economic improvement, although tensions sometimes arose between political goals and workers immediate interests. Socialist ideas highlighted inequality and exploitation. Communist organisers influenced militant unions and supported strikes and class-based organisation. Gandhi emphasised non-violence, arbitration and moral responsibility between employers and workers. These diverse approaches brought energy to the movement but also generated disagreement.

Women in the Labour Movement :-

The history of women in the labour movement is a story of resistance, grassroots leadership, and systemic change. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Female workers fought for safe workplace standards, fair wages, shorter hours, and basic human dignity often while confronting dual marginalization from both corporate management and male dominated union leadership. During the industrial revolution, factories recruited women and young girl in large numbers, particularly in the textile, garment, and agricultural sectors. Working conditions were notoriously harsh shifts regularly exceeded 12 to 14 hours, workplace ventilation was non-existent, and pay was a fraction of what male labours earned.

(i) Early Factory Strikes Late 19th Century : In 1890 female textile mill workers in Bombay joined male counterparts in massive strikes demanding a compulsory weekly day off and regulated working hours.

(ii) The Textile and Jute Movements : Women like Usha Dange led textile strikes in Bombay while Dukhmath Didi organized thousands of jute mill workers in Bengal during the 1930s and 1940s directly confronting industrial management for wage parity and job security.

(iii) The Coir and Agriculture Struggles : In Kerala, teenage organizer K. Devayani formed unions for female workers in the 1930s and mobilized women during the historic Punnapra- Vayalar uprising.

Women worked in textiles, plantations, factories and other sectors, often under unequal wages and difficult conditions. Their participation drew attention to fair pay, maternity protection, safety, sanitation, healthcare and protection from harassment. Labour activism challenged restrictive gender roles, though women remained underrepresented in union leadership and their specific needs were not always prioritised.

Labour Rights and the constitution :-

Labour rights and the constitution establish the fundamental legal framework that protects workers from exploitation, ensures fair compensation, and guarantees dignity in the workplace. In most democratic legal systems, constitutional provisions serve as the supreme authority from which specific labour laws derive their legitimacy. By embedding these protections into a country's foundational text, states elevate workers rights from where statutory privileges to inviolable human rights.

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining :-This ensures workers have the legal right to form and join trade unions. It empowers employees to negotiate employment terms, wages and safety standards collectively, balancing the inherent power asymmetry between employers and individual workers.

Prohibition of Forced Labour and Exploitation : Most modern constitutions explicitly ban human trafficking, forced labour, and child labour. These provisions protect vulnerable populations and ensure that all employment is entered into freely and consensually.

Equality and Non-Discrimination : Constitutional guarantees ensure equal opportunities in hiring, promotion and pay. They strictly prohibit discrimination based on gender, race, religion, caste or disability, fostering inclusive work environment.

Rights to Just and Humane Conditions : Many foundational texts mandate that the state secure safe working environment, reasonable working hours, and adequate leisure time for its citizens.

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Historical Assessment :-

The labour movement was not a single unified organisation. It contained ideological divisions and disagreements about strategy and its achievements were uneven. Nonetheless, it expanded democratic participation by bringing working people into organised public life. It legitimised collective bargaining, strengthened demands for legal protection and connected economic grievances with colonialism, nationalism and social equality. It transformed relationships among workers, employers and the state.

Conclusion:-

The labour movement occupies an important place in Indian history. It arose from the hardships experienced by industrial workers under colonial rule and developed into a force for economic justice, social reforms and political awareness. Early workers associations the Madras Labour Union, the Ahmedabad textile struggles and the formation of the AITUC helped establish organised labour. The movement challenged colonial exploitation and contributed to political consciousness. After independence, it influenced labour laws, collective bargaining, welfare measures and democratic institutions. Despite persistent divisions, unequal representation and the challenges of informal employment, its legacy remains substantial. It helped strengthen the principle that workers deserve dignity, fair wages, safe conditions and social protection. The labour movement was therefore not merely an industrial phenomenon, but an important instrument of India's social, economic and political transformation.

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Conflicts of interest

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