

**FYUP**

**DC-1**

**Paper: Nationalism in India**

**Lesson: Peasant, Tribal and Workers Movement**

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## Introduction

Social Movements in India during the Colonial period have been an important phenomenon in the history of India and many historians have studied these movements. Therefore the historiography of social movements in India have been written from various perspectives and historians have made claims and counter claims to present the historical facts about these movements to the nearest accuracy. The chapter seeks to trace the nature, causes and course social movements in India in colonial age. A Social movement is a non-institutionalised collective political action which seeks political and social change in a society (Ghanshyam Shah). In India also various groups of the society, during the colonial period attempted to alter their situation by seeking to bring in change in the existing order through rebellions, uprisings, insurrections and militant outbreaks. These groups belonged to the deprived sections of the society including peasants, tribal, and workers who are termed as the subaltern group. There are historians who take a nationalist approach analyse that these were the anti-establishment movement against the British rule and projected them as a pre-history of modern nationalism Some historians like, Eric Stokes and Barington Moore, would call them 'primary resistance' and just a traditional society's defiance or reponse. While other historians like D.N Dhanagre calls such rebellion as pre- political in the absence of any organisation, programme and ideology. However, historians belonging to Subaltern group contest these views and hold that these movements were autonomous and independent of the nationalist vision (Shekhar Bandyopadhyaya:2004). These movements espouse a 'non-elitist history from below' and affirms, particularly the tribal movement during the colonial time in form of insurgency, was a deliberate and desperate way to escape from the clutches of extortionate usurers, venal police, irresponsible officials and the like. According to Ranjit Guha the rebellions were very

much political in nature. (Ranjit Guha:1982). These earlier uprisings were mainly by the peasants and the tribal peasants. This was mainly in defiance to the exploitative Land tenure System like Ryotwari in western and southern India and Zamindari in eastern and northern India, by the British govt. These two distinctive Systems of Land Tenure System, not just exorted huge sums of money in the form of revenue from the peasants, but also gave way to the rise of feudal Lords and sub feudal Lords who were exploitative. British systematically destroyed the indigenous class, cottage industries, transforming artisans into landless peasantry. The economic exploitation led to the resistance, in the form of uprisings, by the depressed section of the society.

### **Peasant Movement**

The Peasant movement in pre-colonial and post- colonial India have been studied by many historians, sociologists and political scientists. These studies approach the peasant revolt in colonial India from different perspectives. Barrington Moore, a sociologist analysed that peasant rebellion in India were ineffective and occurred at rare instances (Moore 1967:202). Another historian Eric stokes also supported Moore's analysis and made observation that peasant rebellion is missing from Indian history due to the caste system. According to him the main feature of the caste system, as a social structure, was based on relation of dominance and servitude and therefore peasants, who belonged to the lower ranks in the traditional Indian society, never raised their voices. Social scientists like Kathleen Gough, A R Desai, D N Dhanagre, Ranjit Guha, however, contested this narrow view and asserted that the peasant rebellions have been an important phenomenon and a common feature in Indian history, but have been overlooked by historians. They argue that peasants actively supported and participated in such movements and Indian mutiny of 1857 is one of the examples. Protests and militant struggles according to A R Desai involved 100's of villages and lasted for years.

The term peasant has been used differently by different historians and researchers. It has been used for a variety of people who have small landholdings, and those who are dependent on land like landless labours and the supervisory agriculturists. The Peasant movement in colonial India was initiated as a reaction to the changing economic relations in the colonial period, which contributed to the peasant grievances and their anguish found expression in various rebellions. The peasant economy in the pre-colonial period in India was based on subsistence ethic of the fulfilment of the basic needs. But the colonial administration introduced such a system in colonial agrarian economy, which was devastating in its impact. It completely transformed the pre-

existing agrarian relations. The Colonial power wished to draw Indian economy into the world capitalist system and thus attempted to create capitalist agriculture. Creation of property rights in land and consequently of a land market resulted in the replacement of the production relationship with contract. With the growth of commercialisation, tribute was gradually replaced by profit as the dominant mode of surplus extraction: but the process of transformation was never complete. As tribute and profit continued to exist side by side, the net result was breakdown of all familiar norms of agrarian relations.

Due to changes in property relations, the peasants lost their occupancy rights and were turned into tenants at will, which meant a great transformation in their status. Not until 1859 the British government looked at the tenancy issue and did anything to protect their rights. The high land revenue demand of the state therefore could be passed onto the peasant, the corrupt practices and the harsh attitudes of the revenue officials added to their miseries. The landlords' power to oppress the peasant was greatly expanded by British law. The military power was exerted through the daroga-zamindar nexus, and the justice system and the judicial process was also very lengthy and expensive. The landlords were seen as an agent of oppression and they were more interested in extraction rather than in capitalist enterprise. They were too under constant pressure of burden of high revenue demand of the state. The development of land – market resulted in growing rate of land alienation. It accentuated the process of the new credit nexus. The high land revenue demand increased the peasants need for credit and that enhanced the power of the moneylenders and merchants over the rural society. Growing indebtedness led to eviction from land, which passed onto the hands of the non-cultivating classes. In the word of Ranjit Guha, the landlords, moneylenders and the state thus came to constitute a composite apparatus of dominant over the peasant. (Shekhar Bandyopadhyay)

The peasant struggles occurred in different parts of the country at different times and had different characteristics, raised different issues, involving different strata of the peasantry and tribal. Many historians and social scientists in India like T K Oommen and others have classified the Peasant movements on the basis of periods into pre-British, British or colonial, and post-independence. A.R. Desai (1986) classifies colonial India into jyotwari areas under British territory, zamindari areas under princely authority, and tribal zones. The phase 'agrarian struggles' is meant to convey that they involve not only peasants but others as

well. Kathleen Gough (1974) classifies peasant revolts on the basis of their 'goals, ideology and methods of organisation'. According to her, there were five types of peasant revolts:

1. Restorative rebellions to drive out the British and restore earlier rulers and social relations.



2. Religious movements for the liberation of a region or an ethnic group under a new form of government.
3. Social banditry.
4. Terrorist vengeance with the idea of meting out collective justice.
5. Mass insurrections for the redress of particular grievances.

This classification, though useful, is nevertheless unsatisfactory. It is based on the apparent goals of the revolts rather than on the classes of the peasants involved and the strategies that they adopted in attaining their goals. It also ignores some important peasant movements which were linked to the nationalist movement in some way or the other.

Tebhaga (1946-47) movements in Andhra and West Bengal (S. Banerjee 1980; Dhanagare 1983). A series of revolts by agricultural labourers and tenants in the late 1960s and 1970s of this century were also partly due to the rise in the prices of essential commodities.

In the early phase of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the peasant movement arose among all the sections of the peasantry in different parts of the country, due to the revenue policies and reform in land related policies of the British East India Company. The peasant movement was resistant and defiant to the colonial rule as the revenue reforms had drastically changed the rural society. Initially both the rich and the middle peasantry used to initiate and sustain peasant protest and movement. They were the more radical elements and the uprising during this period was more or less restorative in nature. The rebellions were mainly led by the upper strata of society including the local rulers, Mughal officials or dispossessed zamindars supported by the local peasants. It was against the alterations in the existing agrarian relations. In many peasant movements religion also played an important role and provided a base to the movements

### **Major Peasant uprisings during Colonial Period**

#### **Farazi Movement (1838-1848):**

This was the first ever no-tax campaign against the British Government led by Shariatullah Khan and Dadu Mian. Their band of volunteers fought heroically with the

armed group of Indigo planters and zamindars. It brought together all the cultivators of Bengal against the tyranny and illegal extractions by the landlords.

### **Wahabi Movement (1830's-1860's):**

The leader of the movement was Syed Ahmed Bareilvi of Rae Bareilly who was greatly influenced by the teachings of Abdul Wahab of Arabia and Shah Waliullah, a Delhi saint. The movement was primarily religious in its origin. It soon assumed the character of a class struggle in some places, especially in Bengal. Irrespective of communal distinctions, peasants united against their landlords.

### **Bengal indigo cultivators Uprising 1860:**

One of the early peasant strike during the British period was reported from Bengal. In Bengal the European planters forced the local peasants to resort to indigo cultivation. The peasants were exploited blatantly by the planters and suffered a lot. In 1860 the peasants Pabna, and Nadia districts and Barasat sub-division refused to cultivate indigo and went on strike. Soon, the peasants from Dacca, Malda, Jessore, Khulna, Rajsahi and several other places also joined them and started protest. Seeing the situation the administrators came into action and issued order to different police stations to take due caution in protecting the peasants from the clutches of indigo planters. The administration also came up with the act of 1862, under which the peasants were freed from the clutches of the planters who left Bengal and ultimately went to Bihar and U. P.

### **Peasant uprising in Deccan, 1875:**

In Deccan the peasants situation was depriving due to the falling prices of cotton, manipulation by money lenders and heavy payment of government's revenue. In 1874 the peasants rose in protest of a court order under which a money-lender was permitted to evict a peasant from his land. The fire of discontent spread in Poona district. The peasants forcibly entered into the house of the money-lenders, burnt their houses and shops and the bond of loans. The government arrested hundreds of peasants but could not take any action against the peasants because there was no evidence to prove it.

### **Champaran Movement(1917), Kheda Satyagraha, (1918):**

The peasants of Champaran in Bihar started a movement against their planters who had forced them for indigo cultivation. The intervention of Mahatma Gandhi solved the problem (for details see 'Gandhiji and Champaran Satyagraha of 1917'). The peasant's in

Kheda in Gujarat in denied paying revenue to the government in 1918. Gandhiji and other leaders guided them and the government had to bend before them.

### **The Moplah uprising, 1921-22:**

The Moplah Uprising has been one of the major peasant movement in colonial India. In 1921 the Muslim peasants of the Malabar districts of Kerala known as the Moplahs rose against their landlords, the Namboodris and Nairs. These upper classes exploited the peasants. The Moplahs had no security of their tenure. The renewal of fees, high rents and other extractions by the zamindars, created bad condition of the Moplahs. They became united and made armed attacks on the Namboodris, Nair's and other higher castes. The British Government though repressed uprising.

Several other peasant rebellion like The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal, the Telengana Outbreak in Hyderabad, the revolt of the Varlis, mostly guided by the communist party, were other popular peasant movements that took place in pre-independent India. The All-India Kisan Congress was yet another movement which brought together the peasant from almost all the parts of India. AIKC carried on massive educative propaganda work to bring peasants of the country closer to each other.



### **Tribal Movements**

There have been many uprisings or rebellion by tribal population in colonial period in India and these uprisings were most militant in nature (Sumit Sarkar: 1983). Before understanding the causes, nature and the course of tribal rebellion during the colonial period it is important to know the meaning of the term Tribal. In India Tribal population are called as adivasis. The word *Adivasi* connotes the original and autonomous inhabitants of a given region. According to the Oxford dictionary Adivasi means aboriginal tribal peoples living in India before the arrival of the Aryans in the second millennium BC. So the term denotes a sense of past autonomy, which was disrupted during the colonial period in India and has since not been restored. The tribals in India were autonomous and were socially distinct from the caste system and the mainland but they were not completely cut off from the mainstream Indian society. The tribals were a

part of Indian society and form the lowest stratum of the peasantry practicing shifting cultivation, working as agricultural labourers, and increasingly, coolies recruited for work in distant plantations, mines and factories.(Sumit Sarkar) Some historians therefore believe that the tribal movement was a part of larger peasant rebellion and that tribal people exclusively participated in the peasant rebellion. They became the part of various uprisings as their political autonomy and control over local resources were threatened by the British establishment. Besides, there were other reasons too for the tribal outbreak. One of the main reasons for this was the British policies towards the tribal areas. Initially the British had adopted the policy of isolation with regard to the tribal areas. In practice however the policy of non-interference was compromised by the colonial state for maximising the revenue,(particularly 1870s and '80s) introduction of commercialisation and private property. The policy of isolation was followed mainly in the sphere of protecting the customs and traditions of the tribal population. But if they become barrier to the economic benefits of the colonial state the isolationist policy was compromised. Colonial state imposed on tribal communities the entirely alien and fundamentally destructive concepts of state ownership of forests and private property of land, which laid the foundation for the expropriation of tribal wealth which continues till the present day.

At the same time the british administrators encouraged the Christian missionaries which shows the assimilationist policy of British.The development policy also led to the destruction as road construction enable the combine of traders, forest contractors, moneylenders, liquor manufacturers to access this regions to expropriate their forest and mineral wealth, agricultural land, produce and women.

The British British policies resulted in contradiction and encounter of two systems causes a feeling of land alienation among the tribal.The process began with the Permanent Settlement of 1793, further strengthening of semi-feudal structures in India in order to support the growth of capitalism in Britain (Sarkar 1983:108). Among tribals such a a policy introduced the concept of landlordism and rent with which they were not familiar. Besides, individual written documents in foreign language not known to them were introduced in a society of illiterates who had till then obtain their legitimacy from the word of mouth and the community.

Some of the peasant rebellions in pre 1857 India were participated exclusively by the tribal population, whose political autonomy and control over local resources were threatened by the establishment of british rule and the advent of its on tribal agents

The introduction of commercialisation and legal conception of private property caused more interface with and penetration of tribal areas by outsiders from the mainland



plains. The commercialisation made the entry of moneylenders, traders, land-grabbers and contractors easy in the forests. The legalisation of private property also caused erosion of traditions of joint ownership (like that of the khuntkatti tenure system in Chota Nagpur) and generated tensions within tribal society. Secondly the policy of assimilation

The tribal response to this situation was occasional violent outbursts and at the same time also the movements of internal religious and socio-cultural reform. Such movements of 'revitalization', borrowing elements from Christianity or Hinduism and promising a sudden miraculous entry into a golden age, Millenarianism (particularly from 1860-1920) generally following in the wake of defeated uprisings under traditional chiefs. Thus the Santal rebellion (1855) was followed by the

Kherwar or Sapha Har movement of the 1870s, which preached monotheism and internal social reform at first but had begun to turn into a campaign against revenue settlement operations just before it was suppressed. Millenarianism (belief in an imminent golden age) could also take more violent forms. For instance the Naikda forest tribe in Gujarat attacked police stations in 1868 in a bid to establish a dharma-raj, or the Kacha Nagas of Cachar in 1882 attacked the whites under a miracle-worker named Sambhudan who claimed that his magic had made his followers immune to bullets.

### **The Santhal Movement**

The Santhal hool (rebellion) of 1855-56 was one of the most effective movement in the tribal region. The insurrection covered a wide area between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal and was succeeded in breaking the company's rule there. The uprising took place as a reaction to British land distribution policies under which the lands of people belonging to Santhal tribe were handed over to the non-santhal zamindars and moneylenders. The oppression by local police and the railroad construction added to their woes. Their population was scattered over a wide area covering the districts of Cuttack, Dhalbhum, Manbhum, Chota Nagpur, Palamau, Hazaribagh, Midnapur, Bankura and Birbhum. They were driven out of their lands and thus raised rebellion against outsiders, whom they called as dikus. The penetration of outsiders completely destroyed their world and forced them into action to raise against the unholy trinity of oppressors the zamindars, the mahajans and the government. But the British government took the Santhals held an assembly with 6000 of their people. Sidhu and Kanhu were the leaders of Santhals announced their intention to take possession of the country and setup a government of their own. Their slogan was '*Ending Kaliyug and establishing Satyayug.*'

Infrastructure was targeted by them. Postal and railway communication between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal was cut off. The British mobilized troops and military operations were begun in consequence. Out of 60000 Santhals mobilized, 15000 were killed including Sidhu. Konhu was arrested. Finally martial law was imposed in the areas where Santhals were prevalent.

## **Munda Rebellion**

Munda rebellion is known as the best of the tribal rebellions of this period, however, which took place in the south of Ranchi in 1899-1900. The leadership to this rebellion was provided by the charismatic leader Birsa Munda. The Munda tribe used to practice khuntkatti land system (joint holdings by khunts or tribal lineages). But after the introduction of the new land revenue system the interference of jagirdars and thikadars coming from the northern plains as merchants and moneylenders and contractors increased. The traditional khuntkatti land system got completely being eroded. The socio-religious reformers and Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic missions though promised some help, but could not do much to solve the basic land problems. The tribe also tried to sought justice through court particularly in fighting the alien landlords and the imposition of beth begari (forced labour) in the courts in the early 1890s. But they did not get their complaints redressed against the outsiders or Dikus. But they did sharpen their resistance and came up in open to take their save their lands when Birsa Munda (1874-1900), known as the saviour of Mundas, came to the fore. Birsa Munda was a son of a sharecropper and had received some education from the missionaries and had then come under Vaishnava influence. In 1895 young Birsa is said to have seen a vision of a supreme God, after which he claimed to be a prophet with miraculous healing powers. The Munda movement thus took the shape of a religious movement initially, but later got turned in to agrarian and a political movement. In 1898-99 Birsa allegedly urged the 'killing of Thikadars and Jagirdars and Rajas and Hakims and Christians' and promised 'that the guns and bullets would turn to water'. Effigies of the British Raj were solemnly burnt, and the Mundas responded enthusiastically to his call. The Munda Tribe under Birsa shot arrows and tried to burn down churches over an area covering six police stations in the districts of Ranchi and Singbhum. The police themselves became the main targets in January 1900, leading to a veritable panic in Ranchi. On 9 January, however, the rebels were defeated at Sail Rakab hill, and Birsa was captured three weeks later and died in jail. The survey and settlement operations of 1902-10 and the Chota nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, however, did provide some very belated recognition to khuntkatti rights and banned beth begari. Chota-nagpur tribals won a degree of legal protection for their land rights, a

generation in advance of the bulk of the Bihar peasantry however, that a certain primitive but basic anti-imperialist content be necessarily denied to his movement.

### **The Uprising of the Bhils (1818-1831):**

The Bhils were largely concentrated in Khandesh (present day Maharashtra & Gujarat). Khandesh came under British occupation in 1818. The Bhils considered them as outsiders. On the instigation of Trimbakji, rebel minister of Baji Rao II they revolted against the Britishers.

### **The Kol Uprising (1831-1832):**

The Kols of Singhbhum in the Chhotanagpur area enjoyed autonomy under their chiefs but the entry of the British threatened their independence. Later the transfer of tribal lands and the coming of moneylenders, merchants and British laws created a lot of tension. This

prompted the Kol tribe to organise themselves and rebel. The impact was such that the British had to rush troops from far off places to suppress it.

### **Workers Movement**

The working class movement in India is more than 150 years old and its span has been divided into two distinct phases. The first phase spans from 1850 to 1918 and the second phase from 1918 to 1947. The working class movement as claimed by many historians was, to a large extent, the most organized of all the social movements occurred in India during colonial rule. The origin workers movement can be traced back to 1850s and 1870s. But in actual, the movement gained momentum momentum in 1918 only, when the Madras labour union was formed with mill workers as members. In the initial phase the movement was more sporadic and unorganised in nature and hence not much effective. The main issues surfacing the workers class in this phase were related to the introduction of the legislations for improving the conditions of the workers. The issues were not raised by the workers themselves but some outsider philanthropists belonging to middle class like S. S. Bengalee in Bombay, Sasipada Banerjee in Bengal and Narayan Lokhandya in Maharashtra. Bengali intelligentsia leaders like Dwarkanath Ganguli did launch a also launched a campaign in the 1880s against the slave labour conditions in the tea plantations.

The modern Indian working class majorly 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.

### **Worker's Movements in First phase**

Many Nationalist historians claim that the organised working class movement was a part of the national movement in India. But as the facts account for the working class movement 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, however, was organising struggles against capital much before the 1920s.

The workers movement in India prior to trade Union phase was unorganised. Labour Workers used to occasionally fight back in their own way, through assaults on overseers, sporadic riots and spontaneous short-lived strikes. For instance in Mumbai and Madras alone 25 important strikes have been recorded between the period of 1882 and 1890, several big strikes in Bombay in 1892-93 and 1901, and a new note of militancy was evident among Calcutta jute workers in the mid-1890s, leading the Indian Jute Mills' Association to ask the Bengal Government for 'additional police supervision' to curb 'riotous combinations' of mill-hands in April 1895. (Sumit Sarkar). The working class movement was mainly organised to raise the issues of low wages, long working hours, inhuman conditions of work and several other issues. The living and working conditions of mines and plantation workers were also very poor and they were exploited by the plantation owners and managers, their issues did not get any attention in this phase due to their distance from the urban areas. But, despite this these plantation workers registered their protests against the exploitation and oppression themselves, without any outside help from a social reformer, political activist or a journalist.

Their resistance, as reported in 1884, was mainly in form individual and collective abstention from work, and abandonment of the tea gardens. Passive resistance was the most practicable form of registering protest. But there were instances of active forms of protests too. It usually used to be expressed in individual and collective violence against the assaults by the plantation authorities. But all these protests were severely repressed by the planters' musclemen with the help of the colonial police. The workers in the cotton and jute industries and in the railways, on the other hand, were more in the public gaze. The early social workers and philanthropists were also involved with them. This facilitated better organizational work as well as better reporting and public support. In the mainland and big cities like Bombay instances of open resistance was reported in 1870. In 1884, the Bombay Cotton Mill Workers held a big meeting and submitted their demands to the government for lesser hours of work. Mill workers also resorted to strikes which became a frequent phenomenon in 1890's. The increasing intensity and frequency of strikes on wages and other issues created a situation where it was possible to combine at a wider level. The rising prices, declining real wages, and shortage of foodstuffs during the First World War created the situation for a larger action and it resulted in the general strike in 1919, involving all Cotton Textile Mills in Bombay.

There was another general strike in 1920 on the issue of wages and bonus. These took place before the existence of any trade unions in the Bombay Mills. In other industrial centres like Calcutta, Ahmadabad, Kanpur, Madras, Nagpur and Surat the situation was almost similar. The War years, which allowed the industrialists to make huge profits while the workers' real wages declined, made the workers extremely dissatisfied with their conditions and, therefore, created the atmosphere for a broader unity leading to bigger strikes in many industrial centres.

In this period strike waves spread in other places and engulfed non-factory concerns like railways, plantations, mines, ports and docks, engineering workshops, oil installations, government mint and presses, tramways, gas and electricity supply undertakings and even the municipal workers.

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.



## 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. We shall return to this later after a brief discussion of the Congress and the Communist party's approach to labour.

The Indian National Congress started thinking of mobilising the working class from the 1920s. There were at least two reasons behind that: firstly, it felt that if it failed to bring the working class into their fold and control, India might face a people's revolution and secondly, because it realised that to launch an effective struggle against imperialism all the sections of the Indian society were to be mobilised. Though some Congressmen formed the AITUC in 1920 and resolutions were passed in 1920, 1922, 1924 and in 1930 in the all India conferences, the clearest policy of the Congress came only in 1936 when it appointed a committee to look after labour matters. Thus it was from the late 1930s that the Congress established deep links with the working class in the country. The Congress, however, believed in the Gandhian strategy of class harmony and as a result it did not lead any radical working class agitations. In fact two different strategies were to be found in operation, one was a radical one to be seen in industries owned by foreign capital and the other, a mild one that was in operation in the Indian owned industries. All this was because the Congress, from the very beginning, attempted to become a political party of all the sections of the Indian society including the capitalists. Therefore, the Congress controlled and disciplined labour and was not seriously interested in radical working class movements.

The Communists who arrived in the 1920s seriously became interested in working class questions and therefore they sought to mobilise the working class through the Workers and Peasant Parties (WPPs) in which they were active throughout the country. It was

because of the seriousness of the Communists, the WPPs were able to organise the working class considerably. The WPPs were most successful in Bombay where it organised a strike in 1928 than in other cities of India. In the period from 1930-35, the Communists however played no meaningful role in mobilising the workers but from the second half of the 1930s by following a policy of 'United National Front', it was able to secure a foothold among the working class.

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).

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 Chamanlal 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.

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.

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 of strikes 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 an increasing number of women workers came to the forefront of the workers struggle.

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.

