

The Impact Of The COVID-19 Pandemic On Trade Unions In India: Challenges, Adaptations, And Future Prospects

Dr. Shweta Sethi

Abstract

Trade unions in India play a significant and multifaceted role in the country's socio-economic landscape. Their importance is deeply rooted in various aspects of workers' rights, workplace democracy, and social justice. The role of trade unions in India has evolved over the years, influenced by various contributory factors. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the widespread incorporation of digital technologies in workplaces, the economy, and social interactions. A significant portion of the workforce comprises informal workers who are not affiliated with trade unions. By adopting technology, concentrating on enhancing skills, broadening their member base, and actively participating in advocacy initiatives, trade unions can successfully overcome the obstacles presented by the pandemic and emerge more robust and resilient in the post-pandemic era. By putting the plans into action, Indian trade unions can rejuvenate their influence, empower the workforce, and effectively champion for their rights within the constantly changing labor environment.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Trade Union, Workplace Analytics, Labour.

Introduction

Trade unions in India play a significant and multifaceted role in the country's socio-economic landscape. Their importance is deeply rooted in various aspects of workers' rights, workplace democracy, and social justice. The role of trade unions in India has evolved over the years, influenced by various contributory factors. The evolving functions of trade unions in India can be linked to a multifaceted interaction between economic, technological, demographic, legal, global, social, and pandemic-driven factors lately. (Koodamara, N. K. 2016) The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on trade unions worldwide, presenting both challenges and opportunities for organized labor. The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 triggered a global crisis that reshaped economies, societies, and the way people work. Among the entities significantly impacted by this pandemic were trade unions. Traditionally stalwarts of worker rights and workplace advocacy, trade unions faced a myriad of challenges as they endeavored to support and protect their members during these unprecedented times. The pandemic significantly impacted union membership dynamics worldwide. As businesses faced closures, layoffs, and economic uncertainties, the landscape of union membership saw fluctuations. Some workers turned to unions for collective representation and support during these uncertain times, recognizing the importance of solidarity in safeguarding their rights. In 2020, union

membership increased in diverse sectors primarily because public sector jobs held by union members were less impacted than non-union positions in the private sector, which were hit harder by the pandemic-induced recession. Consequently, the recession caused a rise in the proportion of union jobs across almost every industry. This effect began to diminish in 2021 as employment opportunities improved, returning unionization rates to their 2019 levels. However, in 2022, due to the continuing economic recovery and the reduced impact of the pandemic, unionization rates declined once again (ILO stat)

Challenges Posed by COVID-19 on Trade Unions (Mohammed Mwamazingo, Sylvester Kisonzo, Naome Chakanya. 2021)

The challenges posed by COVID-19 on trade union functioning encompassed the following various aspects:

- Remote work and Digitalization: The COVID-19 pandemic led to the widespread incorporation of digital technologies in workplaces, the economy, and social interactions. This shift was driven by the changes in the way people worked, which included telecommuting, practicing social distancing, and adhering to COVID-19 health guidelines. To address the spread of the virus and minimize its impact, businesses had to adopt new approaches. According to a 2020 report by Global Workplace Analytics, 56 percent of employees had jobs that could be partially done remotely. Moreover, employees' workstations remained unoccupied for 50 to 60 percent of the time. The rise of digitalization is causing trade unions to reevaluate their methods of operation, flexibility, and consider whether adopting "digital or online trade unionism" should become the standard practice. The growing accessibility of social media, both inside and outside the workplace, means that employers and trade unions cannot ignore this expanding trend any longer. The crucial challenge lies in balancing the need for incremental changes, such as enhancements in trade union processes, while upholding the fundamental principles and values of safeguarding workers' rights.
- Informal and gig workers advocacy: In India, a significant portion of the workforce comprises informal workers who are not affiliated with trade unions. These informal workers, often employed in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work, lack job security, social benefits, and legal protections. The below table 1 shows the proportion of informal employment in total employment by sector (%) from 2018 to 2021.

Table 1. proportion of informal employment in total employment.

Year	Economic Activity	Value
2021	Agriculture, Non-Agriculture: Total	89.10%
2020	Agriculture, Non-Agriculture: Total	90.30%
2019	Agriculture, Non-Agriculture: Total	88.90%
2018	Agriculture, Non-Agriculture: Total	88.60%

Source: ILO Stat, LFS - Periodic Labour Force Survey

Informal and gig economy workers, often lacking job security and social protections, faced heightened vulnerabilities during the pandemic. Trade unions in India have encountered significant challenges in effectively addressing the concerns of informal and gig workers. These workers, who are often employed in temporary, flexible jobs facilitated by digital platforms, lack the traditional job structures seen in formal employment. This unique work arrangement creates obstacles for trade unions in their efforts to advocate for the rights and welfare of gig workers.

- **The New Labour Codes:** India's recent overhaul of its labor laws through the introduction of new labor codes has ushered in a transformative era for the country's workforce. India implemented four significant labor codes: the Code on Wages, the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions, the Industrial Relations Code, and the Code on Social Security. Together, these codes aim to consolidate existing labor laws, ensuring uniformity and clarity in labor regulations. The Industrial Relations (IR) Code consolidates several existing laws including the Trade Union Act (1926), Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act (1946), and Industrial Disputes Act (1947). While aimed at simplifying regulations, the IR code has posed hurdles that trade unions must navigate adeptly. Government of India. (2020c) A few challenging factors for trade unions are as under:
- **Stringent conditions for strikes:** The Code on IR introduces stringent conditions for strikes and imposes higher quorum requirements. These provisions limit the ability of trade unions to organize effective industrial actions. Trade unions face the challenge of strategizing within the confines of these restrictions to ensure their members' concerns are adequately addressed.
- **Diminishment of Employment Stability:** The code allows companies with up to 300 employees to dismiss workers without government approval, reducing job security. Trade unions, traditionally champions of job stability, now find themselves advocating against policies that threaten workers' tenure. Adapting their strategies to safeguard employment rights in this new context is a considerable challenge.
- **Informal and Gig Workers:** The code presents a unique challenge concerning informal and gig workers. As these categories of workers gain formal recognition, trade unions must devise inclusive approaches to represent their interests effectively. Adapting to the nuances of these diverse work arrangements poses a substantial challenge for traditional trade union structures.
- **Recognition of Negotiating Unions and Negotiating Councils:** According to the code, every industrial establishment must have either a negotiating union or council. In cases with a single registered union, it becomes the negotiating union. However, when multiple unions exist, the negotiating union is the one supported by over 51% of workers. When no majority exists, a negotiating council is formed, with unions having at least 20% membership enjoying equal representation. The code outlines subjects for negotiation, such as working conditions, wages, and promotion policies. While this provision offers better bargaining power, transitioning from diverse demands of multiple unions to a unified approach poses a challenge.

Adaptations and Strategies to Meet Challenges

The most ideal strategy in addressing the above-mentioned challenges faced by trade unions is revitalization of unions. Revitalization signifies proactive efforts to revive and strengthen trade unions, enhancing their impact, membership, and effectiveness. These initiatives include organizing drives, member engagement, strategic campaigns, legislative advocacy, skill development programs, technological adoption, and international collaborations. Revitalization is crucial for unions to adapt, maintain their bargaining power, and effectively advocate for workers' rights amidst changing economic and social dynamics. Numerous successful examples demonstrate how unions adopting revitalization strategies can transform and thrive (Ghosh, B. 2008) Studying successful instances of union revitalization in countries such as South Africa, Australia, Panama, and Sweden provides a valuable blueprint for Indian trade unions (Rafael Peels & Mohammed Mwamadzingo 2022) By adopting similar revitalization strategies, unions in India can reclaim their influence and standing in the labor landscape. A few revitalization strategies followed by these countries which can be adopted by India are:

- **Attracting and Assisting New Members:** This includes young employees and those working in the informal or gig economy. Indian trade unions can take an example from South Africa and Australian trade unions of using innovative approaches and tailored strategies to attract the members from the untouched informal sector. Recognizing the specific challenges faced by gig and informal workers is vital. These may include job insecurity, lack of benefits, and limited job protections. Understanding their concerns is crucial in formulating appealing union offerings.
- **Ensuring Robust Internal Management and administration:** Effective internal democratic governance is essential not only for the efficient operation of trade unions but also for building trust and credibility among both workers and the general public. The Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) gives considerable importance to internal governance. It focuses on evaluating the performance of unions and leaders while also revamping the organizational structure. Similarly, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) of Ghana has made internal governance a central focus. The TUC prioritizes representatives who demonstrate expertise, honesty, openness, and responsibility in their actions. On similar grounds, Indian trade unions need to ensure democratic practices within the unions, allowing members to participate in decision-making processes and fostering a sense of ownership and belonging.
- **Comprehensive and Efficient Social Dialogue:** Comprehensive and efficient social dialogue is imperative for the revitalization of trade unions in India. In the face of evolving labor markets and shifting workplace dynamics, engaging in meaningful conversations with diverse stakeholders is essential. This dialogue should involve not only union members but also employers, policymakers, and civil society representatives. By fostering open, inclusive, and transparent discussions, trade unions can gain valuable insights into the concerns and aspirations of the workforce. These dialogues should be focused on addressing issues such as fair wages, job security, workplace safety, and social protections for all categories of workers, including those in the gig and informal sectors. Embracing a holistic approach to social dialogue empowers trade unions to advocate effectively for the rights and welfare of Indian workers, ensuring their relevance and impact in the contemporary labor landscape. (Bhattacharjea, A. 2020)

- **Technological Integration:** The unions need to improve on their Digital Outreach. They need to embrace technology for communication, outreach, and organizing. The utilization of social media, mobile apps, and online platforms to connect with members and disseminate information will help in mobilizing support for union initiatives. Affordable mobile data rates in India provide trade unions with an opportunity to leverage digital technologies and the Internet to their advantage. The average cost of one gigabyte (1GB) was calculated from over 5,600 mobile data plans worldwide w.e.f June – September 2023. The data of select Asian countries is depicted in table 2:

Table 2. The average cost of one gigabyte in select Asian countries.

Country	Average price of 1 GB (USD)
Cambodia	\$0.12
Pakistan	\$0.12
India	\$0.16
Bangladesh	\$0.23
Sri Lanka	\$0.25
Indonesia	\$0.28
Malaysia	\$0.28
Vietnam	\$0.29
China	\$0.38
Mongolia	\$0.38
Thailand	\$0.41
Singapore	\$0.63
Bhutan	\$0.71
Afghanistan	\$1.02

Source: A global

league table of mobile data costs (2023)

Conclusion

By adopting technology, concentrating on enhancing skills, broadening their member base, and actively participating in advocacy initiatives, trade unions can successfully overcome the obstacles presented by the pandemic and emerge more robust and resilient in the post-pandemic era. By putting the above mentioned plans into action, Indian trade unions can rejuvenate their influence, empower the workforce, and effectively champion for their rights within the constantly changing labor environment.

References

1. A global league table of mobile data costs (2023): Retrieved from <https://www.cable.co.uk/mobiles/worldwide-data-pricing/>
2. Bhattacharjea, A. 2020. Labour Market Flexibility in Indian Industry: A Critical Survey of the Literature. *International Labour Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12194>.

3. Ghosh, B. (2008). Economic reforms and trade unionism in India- A macro view. *The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 43(3), 355-384. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27768140>.
4. Global Workplace Analytics in 2020 : Retrieved from <https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/work-at-home-after-covid-19-our-forecast>
5. Government of India. (2020c). The Industrial Relations Code, 2020c (no. 35 of 2020c). Ministry of Labour and Employment: https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/IR_Gazette_of_India.pdf. Accessed 20 March 2023.
6. ILO Stat, LFS - Periodic Labour Force Survey (2018- 2021): Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer5/?lang=en&id=SDG_0831_SEX_ECO_RT_A
7. ILO Stat: Retrieved from <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/country-profiles/>
8. Koodamara, N. K. (2016). The Changing Role and Perspective of Trade Union in India. *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, 2(5), 72-72.
9. Mohammed Mwamadzingo , Sylvester Kisonzo, Naome Chakanya. (2021). Digitalize, adapt and innovate: Challenges and opportunities for trade unions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery period. *International Journal of Labour Research*, 10(1-2).
10. Rafael Peels & Mohammed Mwamadzingo (2022). Trade union revitalization: navigating uncertainty, change and resilience in the world of work. *International Journal of Labour Research*, 11(1-2).