

## CHANGING PERCEPTION OF EMPLOYEES TOWARDS TRADE UNIONISM: A STUDY IN ODISHA

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**Abstract:** *This paper is a study of various aspects of trade unionism in the state of Odisha, India. The findings in this paper are based on a survey conducted on trade union activists in the eastern part of India in the state of Odisha. The survey tries to comprehend the perception of unionised employees about the position of trade unions and their future. The study cover three important aspects of trade unionism i.e; characteristics of TUs, leadership and TUs membership. Effective leadership was found as the most important characteristic of present union. it was found that respondents rated aggressiveness as the most essential quality of a trade union leader. The most important factor inspired members to join a specific union is its linkage to a particular party and the most important factor counts for higher membership of a union is political belief with which it is associated.*

**Keywords:** *Trade Unionism, Leadership, Membership, Trade Union Movement, Changing Economic Environments.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

India has, by now, gone through more than two decade of economic reforms. Beginning in June 1991, the thrust of the reform was fiscal stabilization and initiation of major structural reforms aimed at deregulation of the economy to induce accelerated investment, growth, employment and hence reduction in poverty. A good number of these original objectives have been realized. It is evident that the industrial sector has been the focus of the economic reforms in India. The reforms were expected to result in sustained high growth in industrial production. During 2001 the labour movement celebrated 100 years of its existence in India. ITUM has seen many ups and down. Its activities have been more or less confined to the organized sector, more so to the public sector enterprises - from where over 70% of its membership is drawn. The number of trade unions and their federation has

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expanded. Further the state ownership on the one hand and trade unions closeness to political parties made not only the unionization work but also made easier securing non productivity related financial benefits in the public sector establishments. With the onset of the liberalization process that included disbanding of the public sector and the coalition form of government, the ITUM capacity to influence political leadership in securing undue demands weakened, causing the Labour Movement to move from one stage of marginalization to the other. In the meantime, some of the state governments have imposed restrictions on the formation of unions, and, if formed, then on its functioning. For example, the state governments of Kerala and West Bengal had passed orders restricting the functioning of trade unions. The Haryana State government has passed order preventing its employees from going on strike. The increased economic activities with more players have caught trade unions off guard. The concepts of competition and individualism were alien issues as the national trade unions have been functioning in an environment of government monopoly and political party patronage. This is indicative from the fact that over 70% of the membership of trade unions, which is in any case confined to the organized sector representing less than 10% of the workforce, is drawn from government controlled corporations. The emerging scenario has thus further marginalized the already weak and fragmented Indian trade union movement. The power has shifted in trade unions from their leaders to rank and file workforce in last two decades. The present workforce is more young, educated, skilled more urban apart from getting a good wage. Also the big change in workforce is that they seek recognition and also seek training and development along with opportunities. In this backdrop the present study was made to know the changing perception of employees towards trade unionism.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

India has 317 million labour force in which only 26 million persons work in the formal sector while the remaining 292 million are engaged in informal sector in which majority of them are not in wage employment. Within the formal sector, unionisation rate is high in the public sector (Ramaswamy, 1995). Indian workforce account for about 37 per cent of total population but only 8.5 per cent of the workforce are in organised sector where union presence is visible. Large segment of labour is out of the coverage of trade union. According to (Sheth, 1994) trade union cover less than two percent of the total labour force and according to (Sharma, 1996) “the reach of the trade unions is quite limited, only two to three percent of the labour force is organised”. Therefore very large segment of workforce are out of the coverage. The unorganised sector which account about 92 percent of the labour force is practically outside the trade union movement (Shinha, 1994). The large number of workers in the Unorganised sector and also considerable number of employees from the private sector have been left out from the trade union movement.

After independence in 1947, India has grown as a developed democratic country and protected the society through its “Planned Economy” policies till 1991. While the other neighbouring countries grew as “Asian Tigers” in economy through its export-oriented policies, India focussed on equity with policies on self-reliance and import-substitution to protect “Labour” (Behrman, 1990, Venkatratnam, 2006). But the year 1991 witnessed a change in the scenario. (Venkatratnam, 2006). State rolled back its power and allowed the market to play (Mamkottam, 2000). Policies which were in favour of labour are changed to labour neutral and investment friendly (Venkatratnam, 2006).

In 1991, the new industrial policy announced by the government replaced the protective policies that were in favour of the workers through state-led organizations. It included privatization, modernization, technology up gradation, training and skill up gradation and relaxation of state control (ibid.). These programmes were opposed by the organized labour. Important sectors like infrastructure, civil aviation, power, automobiles have been opened for outside players. Voluntary Retirement Schemes (VRS) were introduced in banks and other public sectors. Government took initiatives to make the public sector more accountable. India ceased the advantage of cheap labour as the absolute wages of labour in India is cheaper than the other countries (Mamkottam, 2000). Labour laws have been relaxed in Export Processing Zones (EPZ) facilitating free flow of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) (Naidu, 2000). Labour standards have been eroded expressing a fear whether there is a “Race to the Bottom” (Ajit Singh, 2004). Structural reforms of IMF were not successful as expected (Mahadevan, 2000). There is a growing disparity and jobless growth in employment (Venkatratnam, 2006). Due to downsizing, VRS, privatization, retrenchment, closure, lay-offs, jobs were cut down, workers were contractualized and casualized, making the number of employees in the organized sector decline (Venkatratnam, 2006 & Shenoy, 2006). As a result of liberalization, there occurred a paradigm shift.

Trade Unions (TUs) – “weapons and powerful instruments to uphold the tenets of industrial democracy” are facing challenges as a result of trade liberalization (Jose, 2000 & Mahadevan, 2000). Global competition has applied a downward spiral in standards of employment making the unions at a disadvantaged position to fight mainly for survival of employees and increase in wages when there is a major thrust on labour cost. The movement that had its significance as a partner of social cohesion has been deteriorating in structure, density, tone and tenacity (Venkatratnam, 2000 & Naidu, 2000).

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

This paper focuses on the changing perception of unionised employees towards the trade unionism in the state of Odisha, India. The paper specifically tries to study the following objectives;

1. To study the perception of employees' towards the changing nature of trade unionism in the present context.
2. To study the perception of employees' towards the leadership aspect of trade unionism in the present context.
3. To study the perception of employees' towards the membership aspect of trade unionism in the present context.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Keeping the above aspects in view, the researchers had informal discussions with trade union leaders and members and after that distributed questionnaire to ascertain what they perceive about the present status and future of trade unionism in Odisha. Data for the study were collected from primary and secondary sources. Employees who are the trade union members belonging to three organisations namely NALCO, OMC, OPTCL constituted the primary sources. The secondary sources includes files, records and documents of these organisations along with the Odisha State labour department. The sample respondents - 306, drawn from the three union intensive organisation of Odisha through purposive random sampling method. The data were collected with the help of a structured questionnaire. The descriptive analysis of data is done with the help of SPSS package.

#### **5. ORGANISATIONAL PROFILE**

NALCO, truly and national venture to take the country forwarding the world aluminium market, a unique product of judicious deliberations and prudent planning gets incorporated in 1981, as a public sector enterprise of the government of India. National Aluminium Company Limited (Nalco) is Asia's largest integrated aluminium complex, encompassing bauxite mining, alumina refining, aluminium smelting and casting, power generation, rail and port operations. About 7426 persons possessing a variety of skills, qualifications and competence are at the services of NALCO. NALCO is truly youthful with the average age of the employees being below 40 yrs. Starting with a core group of 262 employees in 1982, the progressive growth in manpower has taken place in a planned manner matching the needs of the different stages of the project. At present no. of executives and no. of non-executives are working in NALCO.

Odisha Mining Corporation Limited (OMC) was born on 16th May' 1956 as a joint venture Company of Govt. of Odisha and Govt. of India to explore and harness mineral wealth of the State of Odisha and make value addition. It was the first Public Sector Undertaking in the Mining sector in India. Subsequently on 17th Nov' 1961, OMC became a wholly State-owned Corporation of Govt. of Odisha.

OMC has a large fleet of human resources (3219) for carrying out its activities. At present there are executives and non executives are working in OMC.

OPTCL is one of the largest Transmission Utility in the country was incorporated in March 2004 under the Companies Act,1956 as a company wholly owned by Govt. of Odisha to undertake the business of transmission and wheeling of electricity in the state. At present there are executives and non executives are working in OPTCL.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study deals with the perceptions of unionised employees about present status of trade unionism and its future. . The questionnaire was given to about 400 union leaders/members out of which 306 responded. The questionnaire consisted of mainly four parts: preliminary information, Characteristics of unions, union leadership and union membership.

### A. Sample Characteristics

The Table 1 shows the characteristics of sample respondents. The age of the sample is not evenly distributed. The majority (43%) of respondents belong to (50 yrs and above), followed by (35.6%) belong to (40-49 yrs) and (11.1%) belong to 30-39 years and (10.1%) belong to (20-29 yrs). So mostly older people are the respondents working in these organisations. Majority (96.7%) of the respondents are married. Majority of the respondents (39.5%) are post graduate followed by (31.0%) graduates followed by (20.3%) are matriculate. Almost 74% respondents are from non technical background whereas only 26% respondents are technically qualified. Majority of respondents (40.8%) are from rural background followed by 34% and 25.2% from urban and semi-urban background. 85.3% respondents to communicate using mother tongue. 54.2% respondents are ordinary members of the union where as 44.4 % are trade union activist. Duration of association with trade unions are evenly distributed among the sample. Majority (74.2) of the respondents are not holding any official position in unions where as 23.2% respondents are working as office bearers of unions. Majority (98%) respondents are males. Majority (54.2%) of respondents are drawn from NALCO, followed by 31.4% from OMC and 14.4% from OPTCL.

**Table 1**  
**Sample Characteristics: Distribution of Respondents according to Demographic Variables (N = 306)**

S.No.	Items	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1	Age	20-29 yrs	31	10.1
		30-39 YRS	34	11.1
		40-49 yrs	109	35.6
		50 yrs and above	132	43.1

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
2	Marital Status	Married	296	96.7
		Unmarried	10	3.3
3	Education	Matriculation	62	20.3
		Higher Secondary	26	8.5
		Graduation	95	31.0
		PG	121	39.5
4	Qualification	General	226	73.9
		Technical	80	26.1
5	Background	Rural	125	40.8
		Semi-urban	77	25.2
		Urban	104	34.0
6	Language	Mother tongue	261	85.3
		Other languages known	12	3.9
		Language commonly used for trade union activities	30	9.8
7	Membership	Ordinary	166	54.2
		T Activists	136	44.4
9	Duration of Association	Less than 5 yrs	27	8.8
		5-9 yrs	63	20.6
		10-19 yrs	96	31.4
		20-29 yrs	70	22.9
10	Holding of union Office	Without any office	50	16.3
		Members of the executive body	7	2.3
		Office bearer	71	23.2
11	Gender	Male	227	74.2
		Female	300	98.0
12	Organisation	NALCO	6	2.0
		OMC	166	54.2
		OPTCL	96	31.4
			44	14.4

## **B. Perception Towards Trade Unionism**

To assess the respondents' opinion towards the present status of trade unionism, leadership issues related to trade unionism and membership aspects of trade unionism. Respondents are asked to answer questions using seven point scales

where 1 – Not at all important, 2 – Low importance, 3 – Slightly important, 4 – Neutral, 5 – Moderately important, 6 – Very important, 7 – Extremely important.

### I. Nature of Trade Unionism in the Present Context

To know with the changing environment whether the characteristics of trade union has changed or not respondents were asked to give their opinion about the most important characteristic of present trade unions. Effective leadership was found as the most important characteristic of present union. This reiterate the fact that trade unions act as responsible body for its stability, strength and status depends upon its leadership. It is the leadership which motivate employees to become member of an union. An union is identified by its leader. Next to that, value based activities play an important role. Respondents believe that unions engaged in immoral or unethical activities may not sustain in future. Another important characteristic was found to be membership. The quantity and quality of members plays a very important role to shape the activities of trade unions.

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics for Nature of Trade Unionism in the Present Context**

S.No.		Items	Scale Value
1	Characteristics of union	Membership	4.73
		Affiliation	3.90
		Militancy	3.42
		Effective leadership	5.64
		Value based activities	5.30
2	Objectives of union	Maximisation of benefits to members	5.42
		Organising the workers as a major pressure group in the organization	4.72
		Promoting the workers' participation for overall development of the organization	6.01
		Improving skill of the workers	4.63
		Strengthening the political party to which the union is affiliated	2.25
3	Functions of Union	Protecting workers jobs, as it has been shown that union members are less likely to be dismissed.	
		Securing adequate work facilities	
		Ensuring satisfactory work conditions	
		Obtaining satisfactory rates of pay and negotiating bonuses for achieving targets	
		Negotiating employment conditions and job descriptions	

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Items</i>		<i>Scale Value</i>
4	Growth of trade union movement	Inside leadership	4.85
		Non-influence of politics	4.37
		No inter-union rivalry	4.26
		Financial stability	3.83
		Good judiciary system	3.37
		Management's attitude	3.63
		Literacy among the workers	3.28
		Few unions	1.83
5	Source of strength of the union	Support of political party	3.94
		Membership	6.27
		Support from Government	4.32
		Maximum goal achievement	5.41
		Militant attitude (show of strength)	3.06
6	Problems faced by unions	Financial constraint	4.12
		Non-cooperation of the management	5.84
		Lack of interest of the members	5.46
		Hostile attitude of Government officials towards unions	3.73
		Non-implementation of agreements/awards properly	3.86

With the changing time the objectives of trade unions have also changed. Respondents are asked about the main objective of the trade union in current time. Respondents revealed that promoting the workers' participation for overall development of the organization is the main objective of the TU. Besides, this the other objectives are maximization of benefits to members, Organising the workers as a major pressure group in the organization, Improving skill of the workers respectively. As a whole the changing objective of the trade union is to make workers as the partner of the organisation.

Ensuring satisfactory working conditions was chosen as the most important function of trade unions. In new economy, where new and advanced technology along with new form of organization and reorganization of work has changed the scenario the trade union has to safeguard the interest of workers in this regard. The other functions of TUs which rated high were securing adequate work facilities and protecting workers job. It is inferred from the respondents' opinion that trade union are still relevant, but need to adopt change to meet the modern challenges. In fact, its role, need and importance has increased manifold to protect economic as well as non-economic interests of working class people.

It was found that the respondents rated membership as the main source of strength of the union. Trade union worldwide is going through a difficult phase as retention of membership. It is a proposition with changing environment, thus



reducing the bargaining capacity of the union. High membership helps TUs to become part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Stability of the job is dependent upon trade union membership. Member often looks to permanency of the job to get involved in union activities. The second most important factor that is strengthening union was maximum goal achievement. Trade union should set constructive goals and try to achieve them.

Respondents were asked to sequence the problems faced by them regarding union activities. Non-cooperation of the management was rated as the main problem faced by them. Indian trade unions in the emerging scenario are facing the current dilemmas such as displacement due to technological advancement, failure to resist the closure sick units, failure to allurements of financial attraction MNCs, failure to prevent contractual labour. Respondents believe all these failures are as the result of non-cooperation from the management side. Lack of interest of the members in trade union activities was the next important problem faced by them. It can be inferred that workers as an effect of globalization and liberalisation are less interested in collective action or trade unionism.

## II. Leadership and Trade Unionism

When asked who should lead the union respondents opined that a trade union leader should be from among the workers as he knows the organisation and members well. A social worker would have their second choice followed by an educationist. Surprisingly a political leader and an advocate/legal practitioner were not chosen by the respondents to lead the members.

**Table 3**  
**Descriptive Statistics for Leadership and Trade Unionism**

S.No.	Items	Scale Value	
1	Who should be a trade union leader?	An advocate or legal practitioner	3.32
		A political leader	3.48
		A social leader	5.58
		An educationist	4.50
		From among the workers	6.09
2	What are the essential qualities of a trade union leader?	Diplomacy	5.72
		Understanding psychology of workers	2.85
		Sincerity and integrity	2.52
		Knowledge of legal, economic and social problems	3.84
		Experience in trade union work	3.70
		Political linkage	6.70
		Aggressiveness	7.35
		Oratory	6.95
Personality	5.28		

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Scale Value</i>	
3	What are the major functions of a trade union leader?	Negotiation/collective bargaining	5.69
		Solving problems of members	6.24
		Organising/motivating workers in favour of joining union	4.88
		Developing interest among workers towards the union	3.96
		Motivating workers towards the political interest of the leader	2.25
4	What are the advantages of inside leadership in trade union?	Leader has more time for trade union work	4.71
		More knowledge of labour laws and other issues	4.42
		Strong bargaining power	3.81
		Better relationship with management and workers	5.05
5	What are the reasons for lack of inside leadership?	Incompetent inside leadership	5.07
		Politicalisation of trade unions	4.48
		Fear of victimisation	5.07
		Role of management not allowing insiders to be leaders	3.39

Respondents are asked to specify the essential qualities should be possessed by a trade union leader. It was found that respondents rated aggressiveness as the most essential quality of a trade union leader. Oratory skill was rated second followed by political linkages. Diplomacy and the overall personality of the TU leader also found to be other important qualities should possessed by the leader. Knowledge of legal, economic and social problems, experience in trade union work, understanding psychology of workers and sincerity & integrity found to be less significant qualities by the respondents. An interesting result came out of this question that is respondents on one side don't preferred to be led by a political leader but on the other side wish the leader should have political connection.

Respondents were asked to suggest the major functions of a trade union leader in changing environmental conditions. It was found that the major functions of a trade union leader are solving problems of members followed by negotiation/collective bargaining and organising/motivating workers in favour of joining union. Developing interest among workers towards the union, motivating workers towards the political interest of the leader were rated low by respondents. It was found that the most important advantages of inside leadership in trade union is it leads to have better relationship with management and workers followed by leader has more time for trade union work. Respondents were asked if they understood the advantages of inside leadership then what are the reasons for lack of this in our industry. It was found that the reasons are fear of victimization, incompetent inside leadership and politicalisation of trade unions.

### III. Membership and Trade Unionism

It was found that at present employees join union for financial benefits followed by recognition and because most people at work are members. Belief in trade union, improved pay and conditions, and to get support if they face any problem were not rated high.

**Table 4**  
**Descriptive Statistics for Membership and TU**

S.No.	Items	Scale Value	
1	Why did you join the union?	(a) Support if I have a problem at work	2.31
		(b) Improved pay and conditions	2.72
		(c) Most people at work are members	3.60
		(d) I believe in trade unions	2.91
		(e) Recognition	4.47
		(f) Financial benefits	5.00
2	What was/were the major reasons behind your joining the union? (leaders)	(a) Financial benefits	3.13
		(b) Social prestige and power	2.66
		(c) To fight against injustice	1.44
		(d) Accepted as profession for self satisfaction	3.09
		(e) Help me to enter politics	4.68
3	What inspired you to join this particular union?	(a) High membership compared to others	2.49
		(b) Affiliated to a strong central union	2.21
		(c) Political linkage to a particular party	3.35
		(d) Strong ideology towards social justice	1.95
4	What motivates workers to join unions?	(a) To get higher wages	4.16
		(b) To get higher incentives	4.20
		(c) To safeguard against victimisation	2.21
		(d) For better welfare facilities	3.17
		(e) To have job security	3.43
		(f) To solve individual grievances	4.62
		(g) For getting help during strike and lock out	6.19
5	What counts most for higher membership of a union?	(a) Political belief	3.29
		(b) Social affiliation	2.37
		(c) Strong leadership	1.47
		(d) Affiliated to large central organisation	2.86
6	Which method do you prefer to select the office bearers of the union?	(a) Nomination by Central Trade Union	2.53
		(b) Consensus among workers	1.69
		(c) Election through secret ballot	1.78

It was found that for the leader the major reason behind joining the union is to enter politics, to get financial benefits. Taking it as a profession for self satisfaction, for social prestige and power and to fight against injustice were not rated highly by respondents. Respondents were asked what inspired them to join a particular union. Various factors inspired members to join specific union. These were linkage to a particular party, high membership compared to others, and strong ideology towards social justice followed by affiliated to a strong central union. It was found that the most important factor counts for higher membership of a union is political belief followed by affiliation to large central organization. When asked which method do you prefer to select the office bearers of the union respondents said they mostly prefer nomination by Central Trade Union followed by election through secret ballot and consensus among workers respectively.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Trade Unions are ever-relevant and the mission is more-enduring, but needs refocus, adjustments, compromise and cooperation. The present IR is dominated by antagonistic approach, multiplicity of unions and inter-rivalry of unions that challenges the movement. So, TUs need to reorient and reinvent themselves. Trade Unions should redefine their role by concentrating on non-bargainable activities to enrich workers life and increased membership gradually. While liberalization, globalisation and the other environmental changes are seen as hurdles for the growth of the movement, the same can also be seen as an opportunity for development. Trade unions will have to organise themselves counter-offensive, which is necessary and urgent for a radical change. A revived, combative trade unionism represents only hope of survival and fulfilment for the labour. The major task lies ahead is encouraging the emergence of a new generation of young trade unionists, who consider trade union work to be a mission and not just a job. They must rediscover bottom-up trade unionism and with committed activists who are willing to risk their jobs for the cause of membership.

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