ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION, DEMOCRATIC EXPANSION AND ORGANIZED LABOUR IN INDIA: TOWARDS A NEW POLITICS OF REVIVAL?

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In India, economic liberalization arguably began in the early 1980s, when the Indira Gandhi government abandoned a spate of interventionist measures the country's first Prime Minister, the Fabian socialist Jawaharlal Nehru, had championed, with the hope of taming markets and lessening inequality. Through the 1980s, trade controls were relaxed, corporate taxes lowered, and markets partially deregulated. This initial rupture with Nehruvian statism was completed, however, only in 1991, when a minority government, led by the historic Congress party, introduced a template of reform that echoed the audacious economic liberalism of the Washington Consensus model (for the specifics of these reforms, see Ahluwalia, 2006). The policies generated by India's "paradigm shift"[1] of 1991 have proved enormously resilient, and have survived multiple changes in government (on this, see Nayar, 2000). In the last, almost two decades, they have profoundly altered the country's economic landscape.

As in many other countries, market reform has hurt labour. The losses for labour have been particularly immense in the (more patently neoliberal) post-1991 period, with a painful withering away of the few, limited privileges it had earlier secured within the constraints of Indian capitalism. Besides a more aggressively pro-capital state, organized labour has had to contend with an acute contraction of formal employment, which has run down its already-meagre numbers. Labour has also been affected by another trend associated with the 1990s, namely, the rise of religion and caste-based politics. While the growth of identity politics is an outcome of democratic expansion in India, and thus should not be viewed as an inherently negative development, it has served to weaken labour's already-tenuous unity as a political movement.

In response to the challenges of market reform and democratic expansion, many of India's established, party-affiliated unions have altered their mobilizational strategies in novel ways. In fact, viewed from this perspective, India's rapid democratic expansion has actually helped labour, by churning out

new spaces and opportunities for political action, along with a fresh set of potential political allies. For labour, the hope, though still unmet, is one of revitalization and renewed impact. My essay explores the immediate factors that have contributed to labour's precipitous decline, and probes the implications of labour's emerging politics of revival. It attempts, furthermore, to identify some of the new areas of concern that have emerged as a result of the perceptible shifts in labour's outlook and strategizing.[2]

II. MYTHS AND REALITIES

Proponents of market reform usually disagree with the thesis that labour has suffered a loss of political power in the post-1991 period. Many insist that crucial aspects of the liberalization agenda – such as privatization and civil service reform – have been derailed due to opposition from labour prosperity (see *The Economist*, 8 March, 2008, p. 11). A great deal of ink is routinely spilled on the evident inability of reformist governments to repeal the Industrial Disputes Act (IDA) of 1947, which requires firms employing more than one hundred workers to obtain government permission before instituting layoffs and closures. It is said that without an easy "exit policy" for firms, India will not attract the foreign direct investment it so sorely needs. Opposition from labour is also said to have foiled the evolution of a more "flexible approach" to employment. Market enthusiasts argue that this could be easily achieved through a reform of the Contract Labour (Abolition and Regulation) Act of 1970, which currently bans contract labour in all forms of work deemed "perennial." It is said that state-level governments in India – intimidated as they are by the country's powerful party-affiliated trade unions – have interpreted the term too broadly, thus unreasonably restricting the use of contract labour. All in all, labour is viewed, from this perspective, as a political actor with considerable privilege; one that is coddled by state governments, and protected by India's generally pro-labour (and anti-business) legal-institutional framework.

Yet many prominent social scientists and industrial relations specialists hold a different view (for two important pieces, see Jha, 2005, and Saini, 2007). They argue that Indian labour unions (or trade unions) have experienced a steep decline in their ability to influence public policies since the onset of liberalization in the 1980s.[3] Pranab Bardhan (2003) has pointed out, for example, that the impressive range of laws and institutions that appears to protect labour in theory is largely subverted in practice, usually with the connivance of state-level governments and courts. He suggests that, in many cases, the IDA's restrictions on layoffs are undermined through the aggressive use of 'Voluntary Retirement Schemes,' which are often implemented alongside unreasonable freezes on recruitment. Moreover, an increasing amount of work is being subcontracted to

small-scale units that are not covered by the IDA. The Contract Labour Act is also being widely evaded, through cleverly designed job or task redefinition.

The heavier use of lockouts is another means of shedding workers under the radar of the law (on this, see Sundar, 2003). As indicated in Table 3, the proportion of strikes in the total number of industrial disputes has fallen quite dramatically in the last three decades, while the proportion of lockouts has risen, equally dramatically. State-level studies indicate, moreover, that many lockouts are "indefinite," in that they last several or more years, during which large numbers of workers migrate to neighbouring towns in search for work, or return permanently to their villages (see Datt, 2003, for a study of industrial disputes in West Bengal). It merits notice that many of the lockouts in the West Bengal study were "pure lockouts," in that they were not preceded by a strike, and were, in Datt's view, imposed on largely unsubstantiated charges of "worker indiscipline and violence." As Datt points out, this more intensive use of lockouts is a sign of management's strength and assertiveness.

Another indicator of management's growing aggressiveness and power in relation to trade unions is that more and more firms have apparently succeeded in bypassing unions and collective bargaining structures altogether. In a firm, concerns around wages, benefits, job security and unreasonable production targets are usually raised by its party-affiliated unions. Such unions – especially those allied with the different Communist parties – tend to prefer strategies of agitation in their quest to protect workers' rights. Not surprisingly, managers would rather not deal with them. A standard practice developed by management to counter the more confrontational party-affiliated unions is to organize workers into plant-level "team-member" associations that focus on relatively non-political issues, such as the quality of canteen or transportation services. These ad hoc associations then compete with the more-established, party-affiliated unions for workers' attention and allegiance.

Until recently, managers could ill-afford to ignore the party-affiliated unions on their shop floors. Over the course of an industrial dispute, the relevant state-level government would insist that the firm's management negotiate with its party-affiliated unions. Now, however, managers reportedly disregard party-affiliated unions with impunity, justifying their actions with the argument that these unions are too "political" or, in any case, too "external" to their employees' concerns (Roychowdhury, 2003). Some managers have tried to circumvent unions altogether by pressing workers to sign individual contracts and pledges of "good behaviour" (these typically hinge on the promise of avoiding "political" activity) in return for a relatively higher-than-average wage. This trend is particularly strong in multinational companies, and in new "sunrise" industries such as information technology (IT) and business process outsourcing (BPO). Strikingly, in a dispute over wages in Pepsi's plant in Bangalore, the *parents* of employees were used to pressure their children into

signing "good behaviour" contracts. In addition, workers that chose to join party-affiliated unions faced suspension and dismissal (Roychowdhury, 2005).

The resort to such methods by management is hardly surprising. What is surprising, however, is the government's reluctance to intervene on side with labour, and to tolerate many clear violations of standard trade union practices. Regrettably, pitilessness towards unions now appears to be the norm. Some state governments, such as in Tamil Nadu, have invoked state-level versions of the notorious Essential Services Maintenance Act to defeat strikes in industries declared "essential services" (unions have complained that such declarations are often made on arbitrary grounds, under pressure from business interests in the concerned sector). Other state governments, like in West Bengal, have avoided open confrontation with labour, but have undermined unions nonetheless, by refusing timely interventions in industrial disputes. Conflicts are allowed to drag out for months, even years, until a depleted workforce is forced to submit to the management's demands (see Datt, 2003). To make matters worse, courts at both state and national levels have tended to weigh in against labour (see Venkataratnam, 1998). Most notable here is a judgment, rendered by the Supreme Court of India in 2003 that flatly prohibits strikes by government employees (see Datt, 2008).

Ultimately, the litmus test of a country's labour-power is the degree to which its corporate elites worry about their ability to successfully tackle industrial relations issues. Instructive in this regard is one survey, carried out in the mid-1990s, which sought the views of private firms, both domestic and foreign, on what makes for an attractive business environment at the state-level. Here, interviewees ranked peaceful industrial relations well below factors such as power supply, raw material availability, and transportation facilities, suggesting that, contrary to the popular myth on the subject, trade union activism was not a deterring factor of sufficient import in the making of investment decisions (see Business World, 8-9 September, 1995). The point was driven home all the more bluntly in 2003 by the patently pro-business *India Today* magazine: "The big and bulky of corporate India are boldly doing what nobody thought they could do: slash their workforce and transform themselves into leaner, meaner, flatter and more flexible organizations… 'Downsizing' is not longer a dirty word" (Saran, 2003, p. 38).

III. THE STEPS TO DECLINE

The hollowing out of the legal-institutional architecture designed to protect labour is not surprising, given the context of its development. Soon after independence, the Indian National Congress – the organization that had spearheaded India's decolonization struggle – tried to mobilize all sectors of society behind its leadership. In its new incarnation as India's ruling political

party, the Congress founded its own trade unions, student associations and peasant groups. Its hope was to build support for the fledgling government's social and economic programs (see Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Designed to lack autonomy, these groups were stringently controlled by the Congress. On their own, they were regarded with suspicion; as capable of disrupting the still-fragile social and political order. Many scholars have pointed out that the enactment of labour legislation in India was borne out of the post-colonial state's interest in maintaining industrial peace rather than out of any genuine concern for workers (see, for example, Amjad, 2001).

This utilitarian and somewhat antagonistic view of labour was also the result of the Congress's pre-independence alliance with the domestic business class, on whose material resources the organization had grown increasingly dependent (for a history of the Congress party's relationship with the business class, see Bagchi, 1982). Notably, this early bond between the Congress and the business class translated into crucial choices at the point of state formation, such as that of capitalism, liberal-democracy, and an industrial relations regime tilted heavily in favour of capital. Proposals for profit sharing and co-determination, advanced by the Congress's Left factions and the new government's Labour Ministry, were swiftly dismissed by the party's central command. Labour policy was definitively subordinated to industrial policy by the Planning Commission and other economic ministries, which worried that the concessions to labour recommended by the Labour Ministry would translate into prohibitive costs for industrialists (for an overview of such struggles, see Chibber, 2005).

In time, the Congress party's paternalistic relationship with trade unions was reproduced by other political parties, which created their own labour wings, thus splintering an already anaemic labour movement into a gaggle of competing unions vying for the favour of government and management. As Rudolph & Rudolph (1987, pp. 276-77) point out, the state "created a legal and procedural environment that induce[d] unions to depend on government and management more than on their membership for recognition as bargaining agents and in dispute settlement," and, in fact, facilitated the multiplication of bargaining agents in the same enterprise, a situation in which management or government could easily exploit inter-union rivalries. Indeed, it is no secret that trade unions in India remain thoroughly divided along political and ideological lines. Currently, there are thirteen Central Trade Union Organizations (CTUOs) recognized by the national government. Most are affiliated with national or regional political parties, and tend to defend their parent parties' programs and policies while opposing those of the opposition's (see Table 1 for a complete list of India's CTUOs and their party affiliations). Unions have notoriously lacked autonomy, and probably the worst in this respect – as the Rudolphs (1987) repeatedly stress – is the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the labour federation affiliated to the Congress Party. INTUC protested neither the

Indira Gandhi government's virulently anti-labour actions in the 1980s, nor the Narasimha Rao government's neoliberal reform agenda in 1991.

The easy subordination of labour by political parties is, no doubt, facilitated by the fact that Indian trade unions, despite their claims to the contrary, have traditionally spoken for a very narrow pool of workers. Trade unions have focused, almost exclusively, on organizing workers in the formal or "organized sector." Since independence, employment in the organized sector has not exceeded more than eight percent of India's workforce, and the available statistics suggest that this proportion is diminishing steadily (see IAMR, 2008, p. 197; also see Table 5). For unions, however, the decision to focus on workers in the organized sector is probably the most sensible strategy in the short run. Such workers tend to be more educated, articulate, and more easily mobilized than are workers in the informal or "unorganized" sector (for the Government of India's position on the distinction between organized and unorganized workers, see Table 5). Notably, unions have heavily targeted white-collar workers in industries such as banking, engineering and insurance, as these tend to present a potent combination of a strong sense of entitlement and a fiery discontentment (stoked by comparisons of their wages and emoluments with those of private sector workers).

In the long run, however, following this path of least resistance has meant that most trade unions have failed to expand their bases of support in any meaningful way. Here, a couple of points are worthy of mention. The reader will note that, according to Table 6, the number of registered trade unions has expanded quite significantly in the last thirty or so years (from 37, 539 in 1981 to 68,544 in 2002). Table 2 indicates, furthermore, that the CTUOs have more than doubled their memberships since 1980 (12.39 million in 1980 to 24.88 million in 2002). Taken together, these numbers suggest that Indian unions have been fairly successful in recruiting new members. If one returns to Table 6, however, it is evident that the number of unions submitting returns (USRs), along with the average membership of USRs, has remained more or less the same. Thus, the number of workers counted as members of USRs was about 5.4 million in 1981; a figure that shifted only marginally to about 6.9 million in 2002. When seen as a proportion of the total work force, of course, this represents a substantial decline.

My point about the USRs is significant because, in India, it is only the USRs that truly matter. These are the unions that actually bother to file information about their membership numbers and finances with the government. It is well-known that many "registered unions" are inactive, and even "ghost unions" (with no real members), which are set up by various party-affiliated unions to artificially inflate their numbers. Thus, in real terms, most unions have fared poorly in terms of recruiting new members, and this has led, quite predictably, to an erosion of their clout within their parent political parties. My interviews with senior party officials suggest that, in the eyes of many party

elites, labour's potential for mobilizing votes has become less and less promising. Some officials I spoke with could not name a single leader associated with their "labour wings."

The scenario was quite different in the first few decades following independence. At this time, labour's persistent disadvantage of fragmentation amid small numbers was compensated by its superior level of political organization relative to other social and economic actors. It was also compensated – and ironically so – by labour's clientelistic relationship with political parties. Paternalism had its advantages, especially at a time when many among the political-bureaucratic elite valued employment and welfare above profitability, albeit within the bounds of capitalist development. The relationship between the state and labour was highly unequal, but within the parameters of this asymmetrical relationship, public officials were willing to award labour a sympathetic hearing. Labour was widely consulted, and functioned as a pressure group of some relevance inside the institutional framework of the state.

With the onset of economic liberalization, however, growth and profitability were ranked more clearly above employment and welfare. With unions and their politics regarded as an obvious nuisance, labour soon found itself stripped of the few, limited benefits of the state's paternalism. State governments were less willing to protect labour, and political parties, less responsive to the advice and reproach of their labour wings. For example, in 2001, a coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) developed proposals to radically amend the Industrial Disputes Act and the Contract Labour Act without any form of consultation with its affiliated labour organization, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS). If anything, this was done over the BMS's vehement objections (see *Hindustan Times*, 11 May, 2001).

Labour's political decline, however, owes to more than its own inability to organize effectively, or, for that matter, to only market reform. It is also rooted in the rise to prominence of identity-based politics in India, a phenomenon that first took visible shape in the 1980s and 1990s. One manifestation of this was the rapid ascent of lower caste parties and politics in the 1990s – indeed, according to one of India's leading political scientists, Yogendra Yadav (2000), this signalled the country's "second democratic upsurge." Another manifestation was the intensification of the politics of religion, again mainly in the 1990s, which strengthened India's 'Hindutva' movement and its associated political party, the BJP.[4]

The emergence of the BJP as a major political actor in the late 1980s culminated in its electoral successes at both state and national (federal) levels (at the national level, the BJP was in power in an alliance with other parties from 1998 to 2004). As the BJP climbed from strength to strength through the 1990s, the membership of its affiliated trade union, the BMS, expanded rapidly.[5] Even

now, when the BJP's electoral fortunes appear to be in decline (the BJP was badly mauled in the 2009 national election), the BMS remains the largest trade union in India. While the BMS *does* advocate broadly for "workers" – the phrase "workers unite the world" flashes across its website's homepage – the organization also stresses virtues such as "Hindu pride" and "Hindi (language) pride." The waving about of such majoritarian themes by the BMS has had a deeply divisive impact on the country's tremendously diverse (multi-faith and multilingual) workforce. In light of this, the rapid expansion of the BMS is best seen as having adversely affected the labour *movement*, since its style and idiom usually serve to undermine working class unity.

Labour received another body blow in the 1990s with the rapid ascent of a spectrum of parties that spoke for the country's "lower castes," a category typically subdivided into (a) the "Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" (widely regarded as among the most underprivileged in the country) and (b) the "Other Backward Classes" (OBC), a more nebulous grouping, whose precise composition is under continual contestation. The latter category received a somewhat clearer, caste-based definition from a government-appointed commission in 1980, which recommended that 27 percent of central administration and public sector jobs be reserved for the OBC. This was to be in addition to the constitutionally proposed quotas already in place for the SC/ST. After receiving only half-hearted consideration for years, these quotas, along with other affirmative action policies, were vigorously implemented in the 1990s, when parties representing both categories of lower castes captured power in state after state across North India. As a result, the lower castes succeeded in penetrating a broad swathe of state institutions, and also gained tremendous sway over party politics.

Labour unions have reacted in different ways to the rise of these identity politics based on religion and caste. The BMS has arguably been the sole beneficiary of the former. In the meantime, the unions affiliated with the Left have distanced themselves from the Hindutva movement, as well as from the BMS.[6] In relation to caste politics, it is evident that labour organizations in general, along with their affiliated political parties, *do* recognize that lower castes now comprise a formidable political force. Entrenched national parties, such as the Congress and the BJP, have absorbed large numbers into their ranks (see Jaffrelot, 2002), and their respective unions (such as INTUC and BMS) have followed suit. For the unions affiliated to India's Communist parties, however, this process of change and adjustment has been particularly difficult, as they are typically opposed to identifying and/or recognizing workers as members of a particular religion or caste (favouring lower castes via quotas is, of course, premised on such practices of identification and recognition).[7] All in all, the politicization of religion and caste has brought to the surface socio-cultural fractures of considerable depth and ugliness within the labour movement. Caste

and religion are particularly potent at the plant-level, where charges of prejudice and discrimination among members can leave unions divided. Identity politics have also strained relations *between* trade unions – such as between the Left-affiliated unions and the BMS – making it difficult to organize broad-based labour fronts in opposition to neoliberal reform (more on this in the next section of this paper).

Identity-based politics in India should not be viewed as an entirely negative development. The rise of the lower castes is, without a doubt, a mark of progressive change; a refreshing departure from the elitism and upper-caste domination that have blighted Indian democracy. Nonetheless, it has presented a thorny problem for labour. The political ascent of the lower castes has only further drained away its already-limited potential for organizing the economically and socially disadvantaged. It does not help that the lower castes have precipitated a shift in the language of the politics of justice from issues of class to issues of representation.

Take the question of privatisation, for instance, which both the lower castes and labour have opposed, the lower castes, because only the public sector is legally bound to implement caste-based quotas, and labour, because it equates privatisation with layoffs and closures. While these initial anxieties over the loss of jobs are similar, labour and lower-caste groups have articulated their opposition to privatisation in dissimilar ways. While labour argues that privatisation will further enhance the power of capital, the lower castes say it will hinder their representation in government jobs. It is evident that the lower castes' argument is taken the more seriously, in fact, so much so, that the central government recently floated the idea of caste-based job quotas in the private sector as a means of countering lower-caste opposition to privatization, thus allowing the issue to move ahead.

The recasting of opposition to liberalisation and the quest for social justice in the language of representation has stolen labour's thunder, so to speak, depriving it of the leading role it might have otherwise obtained in the process of resisting neo-liberal reform. It is interesting to note that none of the thirteen CTUOs recognized by the central government – a complete list is provided in Table 2 – is affiliated with an explicitly (and, as some would say, exclusively) pro-lower-caste party such as the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party). This is perhaps unsurprising, since all trade unions, whatever their political colour, are founded on the idea that the class cleavage in Indian society is the most salient one, whereas caste-based parties challenge precisely this point.[8]

IV. THE STEPS TO RENEWAL?

The complex politics of decline has precipitated an urgent search by India's labour unions – particularly those aligned with the Left – for a strategy

that will allow them to reposition and reassert themselves on the shifting sands of India's economic and political terrain.

To counter the problems of fragmentation due to the rise of religious and caste based politics, the multiplication of unions and a patently more hostile state, many unions, especially the left have formed cross-party alliances or "labour fronts" to protest the aggressive economic liberalization programs implemented by government after government. Indeed, the leadership of the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM) proposed and adopted such as strategy at its 17th Party Congress (see Bandopadhaya, 2002).[9] In an interview with the author, the Secretary for the CPM-affiliated Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Tapan Sen, pointed out that, since 1991, CITU had participated in (and in most cases initiated the organization of) twelve such national-level labour fronts and "general strikes."[10] The last general strike was held on August 20th, 2008.

Sen said that support for such labour fronts extended well beyond the unions associated with the Communist Left. He further said that, while the two unions (INTUC and BMS) affiliated with the two big national parties in India (the Congress and the BJP) were not formally involved in the organization of nationwide general strikes, many workplace-level unions affiliated with the BMS and INTUC had supported the strikes nonetheless. Sen, along with other union officials (who did not wish to be identified), suggested that more and more unions were finding themselves in the uncomfortable, and previously unthinkable, position of having to oppose their parent parties' policies, and that this might be seen as an important shift integral to the post-1991 period.

Caste politics, however, remain a major impediment in the organization of (these otherwise successful) Left-led labour fronts. Lower-caste leaders appear to believe that the Communist parties' longstanding preoccupation with the economic dimensions of the class struggle renders them incapable of fully appreciating the issue of caste oppression, and, by connection, also unequipped to address the lower castes' specific economic interests. The various Communist and Socialist parties have strived hard to improve their standing among lower caste groups: much of their new political work is concentrated in Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. Nevertheless, feelings of distrust linger, and, in fact, are often mutual (see Bandopadhaya, 2002). As a result, smaller (mainly informal sector) labour organizations with large numbers of lower-caste members have been reluctant to join labour fronts organized by the Left. How such relationships will evolve in the future is an open question.

Another strategy used by unions, chiefly to combat the effect of shrinking numbers, is to seek alliances with workers' associations outside the formal or "organized" sector, as well as with student, environmental and other civil society groups. As Table 3 suggests, all CTUOs now claim that workers in the unorganized sector comprise a significant proportion of their memberships. The

main Communist trade unions, CITU and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), tend to regard themselves as pioneers with respect to organizing workers in the unorganized sector. Admittedly, the CITU-affiliated Bidi Workers and Packers Union in West Bengal is one of the better known and more vocal of the various unorganized sector workers' unions in India (*bidis* are thin cigarillos produced mainly by women in their homes). CITU has also emerged as an important force in the demand for a nationwide social security framework for unorganized sector workers in India. Nonetheless, when one counts the number of unorganized sector workers organized by all the CTUOs in 2002 (approximately 10.4 million, as reported in Table 4) as a percentage of the total number of unorganized workers across both organized and unorganized sectors (about 422.6 million in 2004-2005, as reported in Table 5), one is left with an underwhelming 2.4 percent. Table 4 suggests, furthermore, that unionized unorganized sector workers are concentrated in the politically important "agricultural and rural" sector, even though some of the most egregiously exploited and vulnerable unorganized workers are in the urban informal sector, working as domestics, or in the food preparation industry, as waiters, busboys and so on. It is evident, at any rate, that while the labour movement's recent focus on unorganized sector workers is a mark of progressive change, and will likely lend it considerable strength in the long run, a great deal still remains to be done.

Another perceptible shift is that unions are increasingly inclined to organize around welfare objectives, such as housing, healthcare, and sanitation, rather than around wages and job security alone. This development owes partly to the rise of independent (politically unaffiliated) unions at the plant and shop-floor levels, especially in the IT and BPO sectors, and partly to the attempt, by the established, party-affiliated unions, to network with existing unorganized workers' associations (such as street vendors' associations) and other civil society groups (such as women's micro-credit groups), all of which tend to organize around micro-level welfare demands (on this, see Agarwala, 2007). The proliferation of broad-based alliances with civil society actors will likely push labour organizations even further to mobilize, more frequently, around welfare demands pressed directly on the state than on wage-related demands pressed on managers and employers.

Yet another perceptible trend, provoked by the attenuation of labour's linkages with political parties and state institutions, as well by as the emergence of broad-based alliances and networks, is the growing inclination of labour organizations to rely on mass protest tactics, such as rallies, demonstrations, blockades, and sit-ins, rather than on strikes alone. Trade unions are also now more likely than ever to pursue big, economy wide issues, such as privatization and trade liberalization, than purely sectoral or industry-specific concerns. In her study of anti-privatization mobilization in India and Peru, for example, Uba

(2007) finds that Indian trade unions have significantly widened their repertoire of protest tactics, and have collaborated with various environmental, consumer and student groups in a range of anti-privatization calls to action. Uba points out the declining incidence of strikes (see Table 3 for the official statistics) should not be taken to mean that Indian unions have become less politically engaged or proactive. She sees unions as a keen participant in post-1991 protest action in the country (Uba's period of study is 1991-2003; see Table 7 for a summary of her findings related to this issue).

Ultimately, one might say that, given their growing emphasis on welfare-oriented demands, economy wide issues and mass mobilization efforts, many trade unions in India have become indistinguishable from other popular actors, and at times, have fused into larger social movements. For labour, these strategies of potential revival bear both advantages and costs. Thanks to their relatively superior material resources and familiarity with the legal-institutional framework of the state, established party-affiliated unions may provide the more inchoate popular movements poised against neo-liberal reform with valuable advice, focus, strategy and even leadership. These unions' interactions with popular actors may also meaningfully transform their not altogether undeserved reputation of being ossified bastions of upper-caste, male privilege. On the other hand, labour's involvement with so many types of societal groups, and so many types of social and political struggles, may dissipate the energies and resources of individual unions, and even erode their numbers, as existing members may begin to feel that membership does not carry any special advantage.

Labour's immersion in wider social movement politics could also blunt a certain critical edge that labour still tends to bring to the agenda of progressive politics. The country's civil society groups – its thousands of NGOs and community-based organizations – often focus on forms of empowerment that are crucial, but nonetheless market-facilitating. They typically call for the provision of health, education, roads and electricity for the poor, which are essential for human dignity, but also for market activity. As a matter of fact, while the post-liberalization state regularly fails to meet these demands, it is not entirely hostile towards their being raised, especially since such demands are rarely framed as entitlements. Political-bureaucratic elites, along with the World Bank and other donors of foreign aid, generally concede that civil society groups should succeed in their goals, but argue that they cannot, due to "poor governance," corruption, limited resources, or whatever else (problems that, incidentally, civil society groups are expected to solve for themselves). If unions, particularly those on the Left, merge indistinguishably into popular movements, what might be lost is a more focused, class-based politics, that questions the persistent structural inequalities underlying problems such as limited resources and governance failure, and demands the redistribution of wealth from both the state and global actors.

For these reasons, unions do need to maintain their focus on issues directly related to labour and class, as polarizing as this may seem in the short-run. Their primary objective should be the inculcation of a new *class* consciousness founded on (yet not eclipsed by) the commitment to eradicate other forms of oppression based on caste, gender, race, and so on. An excellent complement to a domestic strategy in this vein might be the forging of alliances with non-Indian and trans-national unions. At the local-level, non-Indian unions are already proving their worth by intervening in labour disputes involving multinational corporations (MNC) head-quartered in their home country, and bringing public notice to the MNC's labour practices in India.[11] Indian unions can also work with unions and workers' movements outside India to coordinate global-level protest action, and to push the envelope on the much-talked-about development of enforceable core labour standards. Indeed, such trans-national or global linkages may assist Indian unions in highlighting, for a domestic audience, how forms of marginalization based on gender, race, and so on, tend to converge with class oppression, particularly in this new, more aggressive phase of globalization. In an interview with the author, CITU President M.K. Pandhe pointed out that many American and Canadian unions CITU has formed relationships with represent large numbers of immigrant and/or migrant workers, significant proportions of whom are women. Such collaborations drive home the point, he said, of the need for "unity against global capital."[12]

V. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this paper, I have analyzed the place and role of organized labour in India in the era of economic liberalization. Adopting a historical-structuralist view of the emergence of organized labour in India, I have focused on how different political actors involved in the struggle against British colonial rule developed their labour strategies, and why these strategies eventually translated into tight affiliations between labour unions and political parties in the post-colonial context. Additionally, I have examined some of the consequences of such tight party-union affiliations, suggesting that while the reach of capital has become increasingly global, labour's ambit is too often constrained to the local, with unions locked in narrow conflicts along party lines. I have also suggested that the explosion of identity-based politics in recent years, the consequence of several decades of democratic expansion, has further fragmented India's labour movement, complicating the process of alliance-building (both nationally and globally) that many unions have deemed a necessary response to the neoliberal state's increasingly brazen attacks on organized labour.

My paper has claimed that complex and demanding though it is, it is evident that many labour organizations in India are engaged in some sort of process of revitalization, and are altering their mobilizational and organizational

strategies accordingly. Ultimately, however, the results, repercussions, or even the true extent, of these difficult politics of revival are not yet fully known. My paper simply attempts to signal that they are, in fact, occurring. Studying the impact and implications of labour's ongoing politics of revival – especially the response to these politics from the grassroots – could prove to be a promising area of new research.

Table 1

Ranking of Indian Central Trade Union Organizations on the Basis of Their Membership, as of 31st December, 2002

Rank	Union	Party Affiliation	Membership (in millions)	% of Total
1	BMS (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh)	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	6.22	24.98
2	INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress)	Indian National Congress (INC)	3.95	15.89
3	AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress)	Communist Party of India (CPI)	3.44	13.83
4	HMS (Hind Mazdoor Sangh)	Socialist	3.34	13.42
5	CITU (Centre for Indian Trade Unions)	Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M)	2.68	10.76
6	UTUC LS (United Trade Union Centre Lenin Sarani)	Social Unity Centre	1.37	5.52
7	TUCC (Trade Union Coordination Committee)	All India Forward Bloc	0.73	2.94
8	SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association)	Unaffiliated	0.69	2.77
9	AICCTU (All India Central Council of Trade Unions)	Communist Party of India Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML)	0.64	2.57
10	LPF (Labour Progressive	Dravida Munnetra	0.61	2.46

	Federation)	Kazagham (DMK)		
11	UTUC (United Trade Union Congress)	Revolutionary Socialist Party	0.60	2.44
12.	NFITU (DHN) (National Front of Indian Trade Unions Dhanbad)	Unaffiliated	0.57	2.29
13	NFITU-KOL (National Front of Indian Trade Unions Kolkata)	Unaffiliated	0.03	0.14
TOTAL			24.88	100.00

Sources: Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India (as cited in Datt, 2008, p. 995).

Table 2

Membership of Selected Central Trade Unions, 1980 and 2002 (in Millions)

Union	1980	2002
INTUC	3.51	3.95
BMS	1.88	6.22
UTUC LS	1.23	0.84
HMS	1.84	3.34
TUCC	0.27	0.73
AITUC	1.06	3.44
CITU	1.03	2.68
All trade unions	12.39	24.88

Source: Verification of Membership of Central Trade Unions, Government of India, Ministry of Labour, 2002 (as cited in Das, 2008, p. 971).

Table 3

Industrial Disputes: Strikes Vs. Lockouts

Year	Strikes	Lockouts
1965	1697 (92.48)	138 (7.52)
1970	2598 (89.3)	291 (10.07)
1975	1644 (84.61)	299 (15.39)
1980	2501 (87.57)	355 (12.45)
1985	1355 (77.21)	400 (22.79)
1990	1459 (79.95)	366 (20.05)
1995	732 (68.67)	334 (31.33)
2000	426 (55.25)	345 (44.75)
2005	227 (49.78)	229 (50.21)

Note: Figures in parentheses are per cent of the

total number of industrial disputes for that year.
Source: Compiled from different issues of Indian Labour Statistics, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, and Economic Survey, Ministry of Finance, Government of India.

Table 4
Membership of Major Central Trade Unions in India, 2002 (in '000)

		Unorganized Sector		
Trade Union	**Organized sector**	**Non-agriculture**	**Agriculture**	**Total**
BMS	2842 (46)	2037 (33)	1336 (21)	6216
INTUC	2337 (59)	672 (17)	945 (24)	3954
CITU	946 (35)	1622 (61)	111 (4)	2678
AITUC	894 (35)	1078 (31)	1470 (43)	3442
HMS	1816 (26)	866 (26)	656 (20)	3338
UTUC (LS)	324 (54)	303 (22)	746 (54)	1373
Others	712 (24)	789 (20)	2381 (61)	3883
Total	9872 (18)	7368 (30)	7645 (31)	24855

Note: Figures in parentheses are per cent of total membership
Source: Verification of Membership of Central Trade Unions, Government of India, Ministry of Labour (as cited in Das, 2008, p. 972).

Table 5
Trade Union Membership of Selected Unorganized Sector Workers (USW)

Sectors	**# of USW who are CTUO members**	**% of total CTUO membership**
Agriculture & Rural Sectors	7,645,086	30.7
Building & Construction	1,070,278	4.3
Brick Kiln	457,718	1.8
Personal Services	446,748	1.8
Other	769,767	3.0
Total USW members of the CTUOs	10,389,597	41.7
Total membership of all CTUOs	24,884,802	100.0

Source: Compiled from data presented in Table 3, Datt, 2008, p. 995.

Table 6
Employment in the Organized and Unorganized Sectors (in Millions)

Sector/Worker	**Informal/ Unorganized Worker**	**Formal/ Organized Worker**	**TOTAL**
1999-2000			
Informal/ Unorganized Sector	341.3 (99.6%)	1.4 (0.4%)	342.6 (100%)
Formal/ Organized Sector	20.5 (37.8%)	33.7 (62.2%)	54.1 (100%)
TOTAL	**361.7 (91.2%)**	**35.0 (8.8%)**	**396.8 (100%)**
2004-2005			
Informal/ Unorganized Sector	393.5 (99.6%)	1.4 (0.4%)	394.9 (100%)
Formal/Organized Sector	29.1 (46.6%)	33.4 (53.4%)	62.6 (100%)
TOTAL	**422.6 (92.4%)**	**34.9 (7.6%)**	**457.5 (100%)**

Source: *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganized Sector* (New Delhi: Government of India, National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, 2007), p. 4. According to this report (p.2), which reflects the prevailing understanding on the subject, the "unorganized sector consists of all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale and production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis, and with less than ten total workers." In contrast, "unorganized *workers* consist of those working in unorganized enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social benefits, and the workers in the formal/organized sector without any employment/social security benefits provided by employers" (emphasis mine).

Table 7
Number of Registered Trade Unions and Their Membership

Year	**Registered Trade Unions**	**Unions Submitting Returns (USR)**	**Average Membership per USR**
1961	11,312	6,813	589
1971	22,484	9,029	606
1981	37,539`	6,682	808
1985	45,067	7,815	823
1990	52,016	8,828	795
1994	56,872	6,277	652
1998	61,992	7,403	979
2000	66,056	7,253	747
2002	68,544	7,812	893

Source: *India Yearbook 2008 – Manpower Profile* (New Delhi: Institute of Applied Manpower Research, 2008), p.320.

Table 8
Protests Against Privatization by Type of Action

Protest tactics	Number of actions	Mean number of Participants	Mean duration in days
Blocking roads, occupying buildings	6	450	1.00
Demonstrations, marches and rallies	54	4,669	1.00
Strikes, slow downs	91	161,385	2.68
Sit-ins	17	35,646	1.13
General nation-wide protests	32	768,256	1.08
Other	26	11,980	1.27

Source: Uba, 2007, p. 59.

NOTES

1. Terms such as "paradigm change" or "paradigm shift" are frequently used to capture the scale of the changes represented by the economic reforms introduced in 1991. See, for example, the World Bank, 1996, pp. xvii, 31.
2. The essay is a revised and abridged version of a conference-paper prepared for the 50th annual meeting of the Indian Society for Labour Economics (ISLE), held in Lucknow, India, in December 2008. Though increasingly dominated by mainstream economists, ISLE conferences are guaranteed a strong showing from India's Marxist academe, as well from Left-allied scholars outside the country. The mix is always colourful and productive, and this essay owes a debt to the insight and reflections of the many, varied contributions at the Lucknow summit.
3. Indeed, this was the consensus among the scholars that participated in the 50th annual meeting of the Indian Society for Labour Economics (ISLE), held in Lucknow, India, in December 2008.
4. 'Hindutva' is the idea and argument – now in circulation for about a century – that India should be governed by Hindu principles, or that India, like Pakistan, should be a state founded on the religion of the majority of its population. The Hindutva movement's position on the status of religious minorities in India tends to be fiercely assimilationist, i.e., that they should integrate into the dominant 'Hindu culture' or simply leave. Because of its longstanding association with the Hindutva movement, the BJP is often referred to as 'Hindu Nationalist' or 'Hindu Fundamentalist.'
5. The BJP, a cadre-based party, is renowned for its organizational skills at the grassroots level.
6. In an interview with the author (New Delhi, 27th August, 2008), M.K. Pandhe, President of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union federation affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), described the BMS as a "destructive force in the trade union movement" due to its "communal politics" and insufficient support for Muslim workers.
7. The constitution of the CITU (affiliated to the Communist Party of India, Marxist) states that its fights "for the abolition of discrimination based on caste, like untouchability, on sex, and religion, in relation to employment, wages and promotion," while the AITUC (affiliated to the Communist Party of India) lists among its aims, "to abolish political and economic advantage based on caste, creed, community, race or religion; to fight against all forms of social oppression and injustice." See CPI (M) web site, http://www.citucentre.org/index.php and CPI website, http://aituc.org/
8. Of course, the rise of identity politics and the problems these create for labour are not unique to the Indian story. Politics around religion and ethnicity have also had a deleterious impact on labour movements in the advanced capitalist countries, where it is all too common for employers to exploit socio-cultural cleavages among workers.
9. The CPM has governed the state of West Bengal since 1977 as part of the 'Left Front' (an alliance of Left parties led by the CPM). CPM-led Left Fronts have also formed the government numerous times in the states of Kerala and Tripura.
10. Sen was interviewed on February 17th, 2009, in New Delhi.
11. In my interviews with CITU officials I learned that a South Korean union had proved most helpful in supporting striking workers at Hyundai Motors plant in Chennai in 2007. They appealed to Korean lawmakers and public policy officials on behalf of the Indian workers, and also took the story to the

(Korean) press. Soon after, Hyundai's Chennai managers relented to a number of the key demands advanced by their workers.

12. Interviewed on August 27th, 2008, in New Delhi.

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