UNIT- 12: WORKER RESISTANCE IN COLONIAL INDIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 British Industrial Policies and Their Effects

12.4 Labour Policies

12.5 Resistance: nature, forms, causes and consequences

12.6 Let Us Sum Up

12.7 Further Reading

12.8 Answer to Check Your Progress

12.9 Model Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain how British colonial industrial policies (e.g. “free trade” and railways) reshaped the Indian economy and working conditions.
- identify the economic, social and political causes of worker unrest in colonial India.
- describe the different types of worker resistance, such as everyday resistance, strikes, trade unionism, and political protest.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

Under British colonial rule, India’s traditional economy underwent profound transformation. Colonial industrial policies were designed to serve British industry, not Indian development. High taxes on Indian handicrafts and tariffs on imports protected Britain’s manufactures, while cheap Indian raw materials (cotton, jute, tea, coal) were exported to Britain (Chandra, Mukherjee, Mukherjee, Panikkar, & Mahajan, 1989). This led to the deindustrialization of many indigenous crafts and the growth of a colonial export economy centered on a few commodities. Historian Bipan Chandra observes that the imposition of “free trade” in India and discriminatory tariffs in Britain “pauperized millions of artisans” as handicraft industries collapsed (Chandra, Mukherjee, Mukherjee, Panikkar, & Mahajan, 1989). At the same time, colonial land revenue policies (e.g. Zamindari system) dispossessed peasants, creating a pool of landless labourers available for new factories, plantations and mines. Railways and steam navigation were expanded chiefly to facilitate the export of these raw materials. Industrial towns like Bombay, Calcutta, Kanpur and Jamshedpur grew rapidly, but

working conditions were harsh: low wages, long hours, child labour and unsafe factories were the norm.

The British colonial government introduced some labourregulations (factory laws, occasional relief measures), but mostly under pressure from British trade unions or to prevent unrest. The motivation was not worker welfare. Indeed, as Romesh Dutt and others argued, colonial economic policy acted against Indian industries, extracting wealth and keeping workers in poverty. As Dutt put it, colonial rule “discouraged Indian industries” for Britain’s profit (Dutt, 1950). This oppressive regime inevitably provoked resistance from workers. Their struggles would take multiple forms, from small acts of defiance within workplaces to mass strikes and participation in anti-colonial movements. This unit explores those dynamics in detail.

12.3 BRITISH INDUSTRIAL POLICIES AND THEIR EFFECTS

British industrial policies in India were primarily designed to serve the economic interests of the British Empire rather than promote India's industrial development. Following the Charter Act of 1813, the British introduced a policy of free trade, which opened Indian markets to British-manufactured goods while restricting the competitiveness of indigenous industries. The removal of trade barriers for British products, coupled with discriminatory tariffs on Indian manufactures exported to Britain, led to the decline of traditional handicrafts and textile industries. Colonial free trade did not create equal economic opportunities but subordinated the Indian economy to the needs of British capitalism (Chandra, Mukherjee, Mukherjee, Panikkar, & Mahajan, 1989).

One of the most significant consequences of British industrial policy was deindustrialisation. Before British dominance, India was a leading producer of textiles and handicrafts. However, the influx of machine-made British goods devastated indigenous industries, forcing millions of artisans into agriculture or wage labour. Romesh Chunder Dutt argued that British economic policies systematically destroyed India's traditional industries and transformed the country into "a supplier of raw materials and a market for British manufactures" (Dutt, 1950). Economic historians estimate that India's share of global manufacturing output declined from about 24-25 per cent in the mid-eighteenth century to nearly 2 per cent by 1900 (Allen, 2011; Bairoch, 1982).

The colonial state also promoted the export-oriented production of raw materials such as cotton, jute, tea, indigo, coffee and coal to meet the requirements of British industries. Railways, ports and telegraph lines were constructed mainly to transport these raw materials to ports and to distribute British-manufactured goods across India. Although railways represented technological advancement, historians argue that they primarily strengthened colonial trade and administrative control rather than encouraging balanced industrial development (Sarkar, 2014).

British industrial policy further encouraged foreign capital by providing favourable conditions for British-owned plantations, jute mills, coal mines and managing agencies. Indian entrepreneurs received comparatively little institutional or financial support. Amiya Kumar Bagchi (1972) observes that colonial economic policies favoured British investment and restricted the independent growth of Indian industries. Protective tariffs

for Indian industries were introduced only after the First World War and were largely motivated by Britain's strategic interests rather than a genuine commitment to Indian industrialization (Roy, 2011).

The rapid growth of industries also necessitated a large labour force, leading to the introduction of colonial labour legislation such as the Factory Acts (1881, 1891 and 1911), the Workmen's Compensation Act (1923), the Trade Unions Act (1926) and the Factories Act (1934). Although these laws introduced limited regulations concerning working hours, child labour and factory safety, they were enacted largely in response to labour unrest and international pressure rather than concern for workers' welfare (Chandra et al., 2016).

British industrial policies reshaped India's economy by integrating it into the global capitalist system as a colonial dependency. While modern industries such as cotton textiles, jute, tea, coal and railways developed, this industrialization remained uneven and largely served imperial interests. These policies resulted in deindustrialisation, economic dependency, exploitation of labour and the creation of a large industrial working class whose deteriorating conditions later became the basis of organized labour movements and worker resistance in colonial India.

12.4 COLONIAL LABOUR POLICIES

The growth of modern industries under British colonial rule created a large industrial workforce employed in factories, plantations, mines, railways and ports. However, the colonial state did not initially formulate labour policies to protect workers' rights or improve their welfare. Rather, labour legislation emerged gradually in response to humanitarian criticism in Britain, pressure from British manufacturers and trade unions, international labour standards, and the growing incidence of labour unrest in India (Chandra et al., 2016). Consequently, colonial labour policies sought primarily to regulate industrial production and maintain social order rather than ensure social justice for workers.

The **Factory Act of 1881** was the first labour legislation enacted in British India. Introduced mainly because British textile manufacturers argued that Indian factories enjoyed an unfair competitive advantage due to cheap labour, the Act prohibited the employment of children below seven years of age, limited the working hours of children and provided for four holidays each month. Nevertheless, the Act applied only to a limited number of factories employing more than one hundred workers and using mechanical power, leaving the majority of industrial workers outside its scope (Sarkar, 2014).

The **Factory Act of 1891** further raised the minimum working age for children to nine years, reduced their working hours and introduced restrictions on the employment of women during night shifts. Subsequent amendments, particularly the **Factory Act of 1911**, extended provisions relating to health, safety and working hours. However, enforcement remained weak because factory inspectors were few in number, and employers often violated legal regulations with minimal consequences (Roy, 2011).

The rapid expansion of industries after the First World War and the rise of organised labour compelled the colonial government to introduce additional legislation. The **Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923** required employers to compensate workers injured or killed during industrial employment. Although the Act represented an important legal recognition of workers' rights, compensation remained limited and excluded large sections of plantation and agricultural labourers.

The emergence of trade unionism led to the enactment of the **Trade Unions Act of 1926**, which legally recognised registered trade unions and granted them certain immunities from civil and criminal prosecution while carrying out legitimate trade union activities. This legislation facilitated the growth of organised labour movements and strengthened collective bargaining, although the government continued to monitor union activities closely, particularly those influenced by socialist and communist ideologies (Chandra et al., 2016).

To curb increasing labour militancy, the colonial administration passed the **Trade Disputes Act of 1929**. While the Act provided procedures for industrial dispute settlement, it imposed restrictions on strikes in public utility services and empowered the government to intervene in industrial conflicts. Many labour historians argue that this legislation was designed more to suppress industrial unrest than to safeguard workers' interests (Desai, 1986).

The **Factories Act of 1934** consolidated earlier factory legislation by regulating working hours, health, sanitation, ventilation and safety measures in industrial establishments. It also restricted the employment of women and children in hazardous occupations. Although the Act marked a significant improvement in labour regulation, its implementation remained uneven because of inadequate inspection machinery and the reluctance of employers to comply fully with statutory provisions (Roy, 2011).

Historians generally agree that colonial labour legislation was protective in appearance but restrictive in practice. Sumit Sarkar (2014) argues that labour laws reflected the contradictions of colonial rule: while they introduced limited reforms, they did not challenge the exploitative foundations of colonial industrialization. Similarly, labour legislation emerged largely under pressure from organised workers, British humanitarian opinion and the newly established International Labour Organization after 1919, rather than from any genuine concern for labour welfare (Chandra, Mukherjee, Mukherjee, Panikkar, & Mahajan, 1989).

Colonial labour policies represented a cautious attempt by the British government to regulate industrial labour without undermining the profitability of colonial enterprises. Although these laws introduced important legal principles regarding working hours, child labour, compensation and trade union recognition, they remained limited in coverage and weak in enforcement. Nevertheless, they provided an institutional framework within which Indian workers increasingly organised themselves, giving momentum to the growth of trade unions and the broader labour movement during the nationalist period.

Check Your Progress

Q.1. Which was the first Factory Act enacted in British India?

……

Q.2. Which Act legally recognized trade unions in British India?

……..

12.5 WORKER RESISTANCE: NATURE, FORMS, CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

The emergence of the industrial working class under British colonial rule fundamentally transformed the socio-economic landscape of India. Colonial industrialization created a large workforce employed in textile mills, jute factories, coal mines, railways, plantations and ports. However, industrial growth was accompanied by low wages, long working hours, unsafe working conditions, overcrowded housing and the absence of effective labour rights. These exploitative conditions gave rise to diverse forms of worker resistance, which evolved from spontaneous protests to organised trade union movements. Worker resistance in colonial India represented not merely economic struggles for better wages and working conditions but also an important dimension of the wider anti-colonial movement (Chandra et al., 2016; Sarkar, 2014).

Nature of Worker Resistance

The nature of worker resistance in colonial India was dynamic and evolved with the expansion of industrial capitalism. During the nineteenth century, resistance was largely spontaneous, localized and unorganised. Workers responded to immediate grievances such as wage reductions, harsh discipline, excessive working hours and poor living conditions. With the growth of industries and urban centres in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Kanpur, resistance gradually became more organised through labour associations and trade unions. By the early twentieth century, labour movements increasingly displayed political consciousness as workers established links with nationalist, socialist and communist organisations (Desai, 1986).

Rajnarayan Chandavarkar (1994) argues that worker politics in Bombay cannot be understood solely through class relations, as industrialization interacted with caste, regional identities and neighbourhood networks. He observes that the working class was not a homogeneous social category but one shaped by multiple social identities. Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) contends that labour consciousness in colonial India developed through the interaction of class, community and local cultural practices rather than through class relations alone.

Forms of Worker Resistance

Worker resistance assumed several forms depending upon the nature of industries and the political context.

The most common form was everyday resistance, which included absenteeism, slowdowns, desertion, sabotage of machinery and refusal to follow workplace discipline. These informal acts allowed workers to express dissatisfaction without engaging in open confrontation. Plantation workers in Assam frequently escaped from tea gardens despite restrictive labour laws, while factory workers often resorted to absenteeism as a means of protest (Guha, 2017).

A more visible form was the **strike or hartal**, which became the principal instrument of collective action. Industrial workers organised work stoppages demanding higher wages, reduced working hours, improved working conditions and recognition of their rights. Major strikes occurred in the Bombay textile mills, Bengal jute mills, railway workshops, coal mines and tea plantations. The Bombay textile strikes of 1919–20 and 1928 involved hundreds of thousands of workers and demonstrated the growing capacity of labour for collective mobilisation (Chandavarkar, 1994).

The development of trade unionism marked another important phase of worker resistance. The establishment of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920 institutionalised labour organisation at the national level. Trade unions coordinated strikes, negotiated with employers and advocated legislative reforms. The Trade Unions Act of 1926 further recognised the legal status of registered unions, encouraging workers to organise collectively (Chandra et al., 2016).

Workers also participated in political protests linked to the Indian nationalist movement. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement, industrial workers organised strikes and demonstrations against colonial rule. Labour organisations increasingly collaborated with nationalist leaders and left-wing political groups, thereby integrating class struggles with the broader struggle for independence (Sarkar, 2014).

Causes of Worker Resistance

Worker resistance in colonial India emerged from multiple economic, social and political factors.

The foremost cause was economic exploitation. Industrial workers received extremely low wages despite rising prices and increasing profits earned by industrialists. Wage reductions, irregular payment of wages and unemployment frequently triggered strikes. The withdrawal of the plague bonus in Bombay after the First World War, for example, became an immediate cause of the 1919–20 textile strike (Chandavarkar, 1994).

A second major factor was the poor working environment. Long working hours, hazardous factory conditions, overcrowded housing, lack of sanitation, child labour and occupational diseases created widespread dissatisfaction among workers. Although Factory Acts introduced limited regulations, employers often ignored legal provisions because inspection mechanisms remained weak (Roy, 2011).

The spread of trade unionism and political consciousness further stimulated worker resistance. The Russian Revolution of 1917, the growth of socialist ideas, and the activities of nationalist leaders encouraged workers to view their struggles as part of a

larger movement against colonial exploitation. According to A.R. Desai (1986), industrial workers increasingly developed class consciousness through collective experiences of exploitation and political mobilisation.

Another important cause was the failure of colonial labour policies. Labour legislation largely favoured industrial production rather than workers' welfare. Since legal reforms failed to improve working conditions substantially, strikes and organised protests became the primary means through which workers articulated their demands (Chandra et al., 2016).

Consequences of Worker Resistance

Worker resistance had significant consequences for both labour history and the Indian national movement.

One of its most important achievements was the growth of organised Trade Union. The establishment of AITUC and the emergence of regional labour organisations strengthened workers' bargaining power and promoted collective action across different industries. Trade unions became important institutions representing industrial labour in colonial India (Desai, 1986).

Persistent labour agitation also compelled the colonial government to introduce legislative reforms. Measures such as the Workmen's Compensation Act (1923), the Trade Unions Act (1926), the Trade Disputes Act (1929) and the Factories Act (1934) represented attempts to regulate industrial relations. Although these laws remained limited in scope and implementation, they reflected the growing political significance of organised labour (Roy, 2011).

Worker resistance also strengthened the Indian nationalist movement. Nationalist leaders increasingly recognised industrial workers as an important political constituency. Labour strikes exposed the exploitative character of colonial economic policies and reinforced nationalist criticism of British rule. Sumit Sarkar (2014) argues that labour movements broadened the social base of Indian nationalism by bringing urban industrial workers into anti-colonial politics.

Furthermore, labour struggles contributed to the spread of socialist and communist ideas in India. During the 1920s and 1930s, left-wing organisations became influential within trade unions, particularly in Bombay, Calcutta and Kanpur. This development introduced class-based politics into the broader nationalist discourse and influenced post-independence labour legislation (Chandra et al., 2016).

Finally, worker resistance helped shape the modern labour movement in independent India. It established important principles such as collective bargaining, trade union rights and state responsibility for labour welfare. Although colonial labour policies remained inadequate, workers' struggles laid the institutional and ideological foundations for labour reforms enacted after independence.

Worker resistance in colonial India was a complex historical process shaped by economic exploitation, industrial capitalism and anti-colonial nationalism. It evolved from everyday acts of defiance to organised trade union movements and political mobilisation. As Chandavarkar (1994) reminds us, labour history in colonial India cannot be understood solely through economic categories but must also consider the

interaction of class, community and political identities. Despite severe repression, worker resistance transformed industrial relations, contributed to labour legislation, strengthened the nationalist movement and left a lasting legacy for independent India's democratic and labour institutions.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.3. Name any two forms of worker resistance in colonial India.

……..

Q.4. Mention one major consequence of worker resistance in colonial India.

……...

12.6 LET US SUM UP

After the completion of the unit, you have learnt that-

- British industrial policies transformed India into a supplier of raw materials and a market for British manufactured goods, leading to deindustrialization, labour exploitation and the emergence of an industrial working class.
- colonial labour policies, including the Factory Acts, the Workmen's Compensation Act (1923), the Trade Unions Act (1926) and the Factories Act (1934), introduced limited labour protections but primarily served colonial economic interests.
- worker resistance evolved from everyday forms of protest, such as absenteeism and sabotage, to organised strikes, trade unionism and participation in nationalist movements as workers developed greater political and class consciousness.
- worker struggles contributed significantly to the growth of trade unions, labour legislation, the spread of socialist ideas and the strengthening of India's anti-colonial movement, leaving a lasting impact on post-independence labour rights.

12.7 FURTHER READING

1. Allen, R. C. (2011). *Global economic history: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
2. Bagchi, A. K. (1972). *Private investment in India, 1900–1939*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Bairoch, P. (1982). International industrialization levels from 1750 to 1980. *Journal of European Economic History, 11*(2), 269–333.
4. Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Rethinking working-class history: Bengal, 1890–1940*. Princeton University Press.
5. Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., Mukherjee, A., & Panikkar, K. N. (2016). *India's struggle for independence (1857–1947).* Penguin Random House India.

6. Chandavarkar, R. (1994). *The origins of industrial capitalism in India: Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Desai, A. R. (1986). *Social background of Indian nationalism* (5th ed.). Popular Prakashan.
8. Dutt, R. C. (2000). *The economic history of India under early British rule* (Original work published 1902). Routledge.
9. Guha, A. (2017). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam, 1826–1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. (Original work published 1977).
10. Naoroji, D. (1901). *Poverty and un-British rule in India*. Swan Sonnenschein & Co.
11. Roy, T. (2011). *The economic history of India, 1857–1947* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
12. Sarkar, S. (2014). *Modern India: 1885–1947*. Pearson Education India.
13. Thorner, D. (1950). The pattern of railway development in India. *The Far Eastern Quarterly, 9*(3), 201–216.

✓ 12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 1 Answer: The Factory Act of**1881.**

Q.2 Answer: The**Trade Unions Act, 1926.**

Q. 3 **Answer:** Strikes and trade union movements.

Q. 4 Answer: The growth of organized Trade Union and the enactment of labour legislations.

? 12.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question in about 50 words)

1. What is meant by deindustrialisation?
2. What was the objective of the Factory Act of 1881?
3. When was the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) established?
4. Name any two Factory Acts enacted during British rule.
5. What is meant by everyday resistance?
6. Mention any two forms of worker resistance in colonial India.
7. What was the purpose of the Trade Unions Act, 1926?
8. State one major cause of worker resistance.
9. Which industry witnessed major labour movements in Bombay?
10. Name one historian associated with the study of labour history in colonial India.

B) Short questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

1. Discuss the objectives of British labour policies in colonial India.
2. Explain the salient features of the Factory Act of 1881.
3. Describe the significance of the Trade Unions Act, 1926.

4. Explain the nature of worker resistance in colonial India.
5. Discuss the various forms of worker resistance with suitable examples.
6. Examine the economic causes of labour unrest in colonial India.
7. Explain the relationship between labour movements and Indian nationalism.
8. Discuss the role of the All India Trade Union Congress in the development of organised labour.
9. Write a short note on labour legislation under British rule.
10. Explain the impact of colonial industrialization on Indian workers.

C) Long questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

1. Discuss the British industrial policies and evaluate their impact on Indian workers.
2. Critically examine the colonial labour policies enacted in British India.
3. Analyse the nature, forms, causes and consequences of worker resistance in colonial India.
4. Examine the growth of trade unionism in colonial India and its contribution to the nationalist movement.
5. Discuss the role of labour movements in the development of political consciousness among Indian workers.
6. Evaluate the contribution of worker resistance to labour legislation during the colonial period.
7. Assess the significance of the Bombay textile strikes in the history of labour movements in India.
8. Critically analyse the historiography of labour movements in colonial India with reference to the works of Rajnarayan Chandavarkar and Dipesh Chakrabarty.

****