

## Unit 14

# The Working Class

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### Contents

- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Defining Working Class
- 14.3 A Brief History of the Working Class
- 14.4 Working Class : The Indian Scenario
- 14.5 Growth of Working Class in India
- 14.6 Social Background of Indian Working Class
- 14.7 Conclusion
- 14.8 Further Reading

### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- ≈ define what is meant by the term ‘working class’;
- ≈ provide a brief history of working class generally;
- ≈ describe the working class in the Indian scenario;
- ≈ discuss the growth of working class in India; and
- ≈ explain the social background of the Indian working class.

## 14.1 Introduction

Some level of inequality has existed in all societies since time immemorial. All societies have been stratified, in the sense that all valued resources such as wealth, income and power have been unequally distributed. But inequalities were neither similar in all societies nor in all epochs. In medieval Europe societies were divided into order or estates resulting in groups of people known as aristocracy, peasantry, burghers and church. Each group had prescribed roles and associated legal rights and duties. At other places slavery was widely practised wherein slaves virtually had no social rights. In our own country, as you have learnt earlier, society was traditionally stratified into castes. The castes groups enjoyed different degrees of religious purity and pollution. The remnants of stratification based on caste are still visible, though in a modified form.

The Industrial Revolution took place in the middle of the 18th century in England. This led to wide ranging changes in society. It introduced new concepts such as industry, secularisation and community. New forms of stratification based on ‘class’ became prominent during this period. Though the term ‘class’ itself was not new, it acquired new meaning with other emerging concepts. This system of inequality was clearly different from older and known forms of stratification. First, classes were open whereas estates or castes were closed systems. There was no legal or religious barrier, which prevented the mobility of the individual in class hierarchy. In other words, class position could be achieved rather than being ascribed. Second, members of all classes have the same legal rights and duties. In effect all were judged by same laws and courts. Finally, unlike older forms of inequality, economic success was the sole criteria for determining class position.

In older systems of inequality individuals were grouped together in categories, which were polar opposites. Hence there were lords and serfs, master and slave and in our own society we had pure and impure castes. Similarly, in class-based stratification also there were bourgeoisie and proletariat (Marxian terms). A careful analysis reveals that membership in all such groups were essentially determined by economic relations. In Marxian terminology, relations of production determined the class position i.e. those who own the 'means of production' and those who sell their labour for wages. This brings us to the focus of this unit i.e. to discuss 'those who sell their labour' in class-based societies. Such people have been labelled as 'Working Class'. However, Marx himself never used this term to denote them.

## 14.2 Defining Working Class

The question 'who and what is working class' is not an easy one to answer. There are several reasons for this. The working class is not a cohesive entity and it has numerous differences and contradictions. There is a problem of where to draw the line. Who belongs to the working class and who does not? The difference further extends in terms of skill, sex, age, income and caste. Hence the working class is a complex, contradictory and constantly changing entity. But it is an entity – in other words, there is a group of people denoted as 'working class', who are not just a sum of people. Even though there are differences and contradictions within the working class, they need to be recognised and analysed. So then, can we have a single definition of working class? The answer is that one cannot have a single definition which will be all inclusive. This is because of the blurring of boundaries between classes and the different working class. For example, a worker in 1970 is not the same as a worker in 2005. That is, the composition, the size and the character of a class changes over a period of time. Therefore the requirement is of a series of definitions, which have to change in accordance with the changes in social structure.

### Reflection and Action 14.01

Observe the labourers working in various capacities - road construction; house construction; digging wells; cleaning drains, etc. Take note of workers in factories, offices, dhabas and shops who are at the lower rung of the socio-economic scale.

Recall your experience of workers in other sectors of the economy, as well, and give a definition of the 'working class' which you think is suitable to define the wide range of diverse types of workers. Compare your definition with those of other students at your Study Centre.

In the Marxian scheme, the capitalist society is characterised by two principal classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Bourgeoisie owns the means of production and proletariat sell their labour for wages in order to live. The Marxist meanings of these terms have been specified clearly by Engels in a footnote to the 'Communist Manifesto'. By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, and by proletariat the class of modern wage-labourers. Hence, bourgeoisie is synonymous with the capitalist and proletariat with the working class.

In recent years, the Marxist view on the working class has been countered essentially by two views giving contradictory analysis. The first view is that

working class is literally disappearing. With the automation of industry and apparent displacement of blue-collar jobs, the working class is fast shrinking in size. However, the fact is that it is not the working class as a whole that is disappearing, but blue-collar workers are disappearing. The second view states the opposite. In this view all society is becoming working class. That is, students, teachers, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers and salaried employees of various kind are all workers. The working class is not disappearing by elimination, but is in fact expanding with everybody joining it except a few capitalists at the top. This view emphasizes the so-called blurring of class boundaries but overlooks the important social distinctions between classes. Moreover those distinctions are still very much prevalent in society.

However, the question still remains – who are the working class? As M. Holmstorm (1991) puts it ‘people commonly refer to industrial workers, and sometimes other kind of wage-earners and self-employed workers, as the ‘working class’. Usually this means a group who share similar economic situation, which distinguishes them from others, like property owners, employers and managers. It suggests a common interest and shared consciousness of these interests’. This implies that like other classes the defining feature of working class is their understanding of ‘a common interest’ and ‘shared consciousness’. However, in recent times these two concepts have become difficult to actualise for the working class due to their own internal divisions and diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

It is worthwhile to ask that given multiple divisions and subdivisions among the working class, such as organised formal or unorganised informal industrial workers, casual general labourers, the self employed and small peasants, does any type of ‘common interest’ exist? Or are various types of workers different classes with different and conflicting interest? Or do these classes think or act as if they were classes with distinct interests either in their everyday life, at work or at home?

It is difficult to find answers to these questions. The reason is that ‘consciousness’ per se becomes a tricky word, when used for working class consciousness. One of the problems in dealing with the working class is that one is dealing with people who do not have vocal or written expressions of their ideas or beliefs. Even in labour movements or in trade union movements, it is the non-worker labour leaders who make speeches not the worker. The other element is that the working class is a totality that goes far beyond the ordinary intellectual view of consciousness. It is an objective category. The usual way of viewing consciousness is in terms of formal statement of belief. However, in terms of working class and its living reality, this simply does not work. The problem is compounded by the fact that studies of consciousness tend to assume that consciousness is overwhelmingly a matter of mind, of verbalizations. A worker, however, does not have a public platform or press. Hence, verbal responses to formal questions, given the limited range of alternatives allowed to workers in such situations, inevitably give a picture of working class consciousness that is much more conservative than the underlying reality.

### 14.3 A Brief History of The Working Class

The history of the working class can be divided in several eras for simplicity of presentation. Though one tends to see the working class as an offshoot of capitalism, the early roots could be found in pre-capitalism also.

- a) **Pre-Capitalism:** There has been a very small working class since the time of the Roman, Greek and Chinese empires. That is, there have been people who were wage labourers rather than artisans from these times. Industries such as iron and coal mining for instance were modelled on capitalistic styles of production long before capitalism itself. As these types of workers were few and far between, they could not be seen as a class.
- b) **Early Capitalism:** The growth of capitalism witnessed a huge mushrooming of cities and necessitated the creation of a huge working class. Exorbitant cost of machinery and power meant that small-scale production was neither competitive nor possible. Peasants were driven from the land to cities through enclosure acts etc. So, for the first time, there were huge numbers of people who shared a common life experience of living and working close to each other.
- c) **Capitalism:** In capitalism this new group of people started to define themselves. The process which allowed such emergence of the new class consciousness was the concentration of people who worked together into same geographical areas in situations of grinding poverty. It was clear to the workers that their neighbours and work partners were starving and owners of the means of production were taking the entire surplus. In this regard it is important to mention that capitalism maintained itself through brute force best exemplified by the crushing of the 'Paris commune' and attacks on the 'Chartists' in Britain.
- d) **During world war:** Despite a widespread denunciation of the forthcoming war as late as 1912 by the left parties worldwide and pledges by the millions of workers not to fight, in the end, all left parties rallied behind their ruling class. Those that opposed the war outright were a small section of the working class, most notably Bolshevicks in Russia and the bulk of anarchist movement. The mass socialist parties which had developed out of struggles around Europe meekly led their members off to the slaughter. The war saw huge mutinies and revolution in Russia and indeed was to end with a workers' rising in Germany. This was the first time that throughout Europe socialist parties chose to work with the ruling class.

#### **Box 14.01: Stalinism**

Under Stalinism, the new method of social control had developed in USSR. This method relied on placing power in the hands of the 'state' instead of individual bosses. This had important effects on the working class. First, the working class was assured that they were living under socialism. Secondly, the fact that the factor that determined standard of living was access to resources rather than wealth per se tended to lead to individual solutions rather than collective ones. Moreover, wherever collective actions occurred, it was ruthlessly stamped on preventing the development of a tradition of successful collective action. The initial euphoria of the working class soon turned to despair as the Communist Party along with the state bureaucracy made itself the representative of the working class.

- e) **Post war to 70's:** In this period there was a boom of industrialisation and bosses all around the world. The standard of living of the working class rose drastically. Since the late 60's onwards the idea that class struggle politics was over became popular. A cure for the periodic recession that capitalism had gone through, had been found and the picture for everyone was rosy. It was also a period where the working

class was fragmented by the introduction of cheap mass transport, cheap housing and the reduction of societies to a body composed of individual families. Now the workers no longer lived near their work partners, but lived in huge housing colonies with few social resources.

#### **Box 14.02: Role of Mass Media**

A new method of social control was also found during the 70's which was owned by the capitalists. This method was the use of mass media such as television. This further helped in the fragmentation of the working class due to continuous hammering of capitalist ideologies and goodies. However, on the flip side, television also helped in fostering the development of newer forms of class struggle. In other words, the imperfection of capitalism was beamed into the living rooms of everyone. This helped in developing a new sense of consciousness among the working class, which was not only trans-regional in nature but also trans-national. Hence, the atrocities of capitalism in one part of the world sparked protests in another corner of the world.

- f) **The 80's:** The 70's ended in industrial discontent the world over, as the rate of increase in the standard of living slowed and began to move in the reverse direction. The post war boom ended and capitalism suddenly found itself unable to afford the concessions it had offered to the working class in return of peace. The increasingly multi-national character of capitalism started to have profound effects on the structure of the working class all over the world. The large scale, unskilled and semi-skilled heavy engineering, mining and assembly plants began to close in the first world or shifted to the cheaper third world countries. The rate of profit in manufacturing began to decline to the extent that money made through speculation was far greater than investment in the manufacturing unit. In the name of reducing overhead costs, the large-scale workforce was shacked. This was the best example of decimation of large-scale workplaces and communities which consequently led to further fragmentation of the working class. This era also witnessed creation of many more 'white collar' jobs which gave rise to the new middle class. The need to service the new growing middle class composed of speculators and dealers led to huge growth in the service sector. There was also greater reduction of permanent employment, hence a new sector of employment came up called the voluntary sector. Most of the jobs lost were full time and unionised, most of those created were part-time and anti-union. One final significant change was the huge increase in the numbers of women workers, in part due to the fact that many new jobs were part-time and generally badly paid.
- g) **The Working Class Today:** The nature of working class today is quite different from that a hundred years ago. In the late 80's a large section of left parties viewed this as meaning that socialism was no longer possible. Hence the best possible option is to form a rainbow alliance, which would attempt to limit the excesses of capitalism.

## 14.4 Working Class: The Indian Scenario

India has a multi-structural economy where a number of pre-capitalist relations of production co-exist with capitalist relations of production. Correspondingly, here a differentiated working class structure exists i.e. the numerous types of relations of production, consumption and accumulation of surplus combine to produce a variety of forms of the existence of the working class. This is

further compounded by the structural features of Pan-Indian society along with local conditions. So the composition of the working class is affected by the caste, tribe, ethnic origin and the gender based division of labour between male and female and associated patriarchy. This implies that despite internal structural differences and the relations of productions through which working people have been and continues to be, there exists a group of people denoted as 'working class'. Then, it becomes pertinent to analyse the growth of working class in India. This is particularly so, when one considers two facts. First, in India prior to 19<sup>th</sup> century there were vast numbers of working people not working class. Second, the growth of capitalist mode of production along with industrialization was imposed by the colonial masters.

## 14.5 Growth of Working Class in India

The modern working class came into being with the rise of capitalist mode of production. This mode of production brought with it the factory type of industry. In other words, rise of factory system of production and working class happened simultaneously. Conversely, without a factory industry there can be no working class but only working people.

### **Traditional Indian economy and encounter with colonialists**

In India, as mentioned above, till the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were working people but not the working class. In other words, Indian economy was characterized by what Marx termed as '....small and extremely ancient Indian communities... are based on the possession in common land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on the unadulterated division of labour, which serves, wherever a new community is started...'. The colonial rule and exploitation of British Imperialists completely ruined the system of production of these traditional and self-sufficient societies. Though the process started with victory in the battle of Plassey in 1757, the process was fastened with forced introduction of British capital, wherein the old economic system and division of labour was completely shattered. The surplus generated through the old system fell into the hands of the colonialists who then started direct plundering and exporting of the wealth of India to England. Simultaneously, the English capitalists felt the need of marketing in India the industrial products of England. Hence from 1813 onwards the door of free trade with India was opened not only for East India Company but for other British companies also. This was coupled with the imposition of heavy import duty ranging from 70 to 80 per cent on the cost of imported Indian textile and silk products in England. The combined result of these was that Indian economy suffered doubly – that is, not only was the textile industry ruined, but also the artisans were forced to starve. The same scenario existed in Indian metallurgical and other industries. Moreover, Indian raw material was an indispensable item for the development of British manufacturing industry. Hence, colonialists followed the trading policy whereby they not only flooded the Indian market with British industrial products but maintained the constant supply of Indian raw materials and agricultural products to England. In a word, as Sukomal Sen (1997) puts, India was transformed into an agrarian and raw material adjunct of capitalist Britain, simultaneously preserving feudal methods of exploitation. The result of this process was that 'Indian craftsmen were forced out from their age-long profession. The ancient integrating element of the unity of industrial and agricultural production unique in the traditional economy was shattered and the structure of Indian society disintegrated' (Sukomal Sen 1997).

### i) The formative period

The forced intrusion of British capital in India devastated the old economy but did not transplant it by forces of modern capital economy. So, traditional cottage industry and weavers famed for their skill through the centuries were robbed of their means of livelihood and were uprooted throughout India. This loss of the old world with no new gains led to extreme impoverishment of the people. The millions of ruined artisans and craftsmen, spinners, weavers, potters, smelters and smiths from the town and the village alike, had no alternative but to crowd into agriculture, leading to deadly pressure on the land. Subsequently, with the introduction of railways and sporadic growth of some industries, a section of these very people at the lowest rung of Indian society who had been plodding through immense sufferings and impoverishment in village life entered the modern industries as workers. The first generation of factory workers, it appears, came from this distressed and dispossessed section the village people. In the words of Buchanan... “the factory working group surely comes from the hungry half of the agricultural population, indeed almost wholly from the hungriest quarter or eighth of it”. The factory commission of 1890 reports that most of the factory workers in jute, cotton, bone and paper mills, sugar works, gun and shell factories belonged to the lower castes like *Bagdi*, *Teli*, *Mochi*, *Kaibarta*, *Bairagi* and *Sankara*. They also belonged to the caste of *Tanti* or Weavers. In coal mines the largest single group were *Bauris*, a caste of very low social rank, the majority of whom were under *royts* or landless labourers. The next largest group in coal mining were the *Santhals*, a tribe of crude agriculturists. The remaining section of miners were recruited from similar groups and also from displaced labourers and menials from villages. Among the immigrant labourers in the coalfields, such castes as *Pasis*, *Lodhs*, *Kurmis*, *Ahirs*, *Koeris*, *Chamars* and lower caste Muslims were also there.

However, other studies point out a different pattern of migration of workers from the village. The early working class was not the poorest of the poor. Buchanan's views were based on deduction. The studies of Monis and Chandavarkar show that the lowest castes did not join the industries. Kalpana Ram's study of mine workers also shows something similar. There were 2 reasons for this. The wages were very low and it was not possible for the poor to migrate to the city with their families and work in factories. It would be difficult to maintain a family on low wages. Hence both Monis and Ram note that initially middle castes – those with some land – migrated. Their families stayed behind and the worker would send small amounts of money to supplement the family earning/subsistence from land. Dalits/lower castes did not migrate, or they could not migrate, as they were required to do the unclean activities in the village. Secondly, being landless, they could not subsist on those meagre earnings. Migration of lower castes took place later (after 30-40 years) due to two reasons. The factories (jute and cotton) faced labour shortage, hence wages were increased. Secondly, there was pressure from the British Govt. on the village community to allow untouchables to migrate outside the village.

The view expressed earlier in this unit is Buchanan's and also Max Weber's who had written that industrialisation in India attracted the low castes and the dregs of society.

### ii) Emergence of working class

With the growth of modern factory industries, the factory workers gradually

shaped themselves into a distinct category. The concentration of the working class in the cities near the industrial enterprises was an extremely important factor in the formation of the workers as a class. Similar conditions in factories and common living conditions made the workers feel that they had similar experiences and shared interests and react in similar fashion. In other words, the principal factors underlying the growth and formation of the working mass as a class in India in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I bear similarities with the advanced countries of Europe. Hence, the consciousness of being exploited by the capitalists/ owners of factories was evident as early as 1888, when workers of Shyamnagar Jute Mill assaulted the manager Mr. Kiddie. That is, the reactions against the exploitation in early phases were marked by riots, affrays, assaults and physical violence.

Side by side with these forms of protest there were also other forms of struggle characteristic of the working class. Typical working class actions such as strike against long hours of work, against wage cuts, against supervisors extortion were increasing in number and the tendency to act collectively was also growing. As early as 1879/80 there was a threat of a strike in Champdani Jute Mill against an attempt by the authorities to introduce a new system of single shift which was unpopular with workers. Presumably because of this strike threat the proposed system was ultimately abandoned. However, the process of class formation among workers in India was marked by fundamental differences as opposed to their European counterparts. It had far reaching consequences on the growth of the Indian working class. These differences were –

- a) Though in Europe also the artisans and craftsmen were dispossessed of their profession, they were not forced out of towns to crowd the village economy. They found employment in the large industries as soon as they were dispossessed of their old professions. In India, after the destruction of traditional handicraft and cottage industry, modern industry did not grow up in its place. The dispossessed artisans and craftsmen were compelled to depend on the village economy and earn livelihood as landless peasants and agricultural labourers.
- b) The gap between destruction of traditional cottage industry and its partial replacement by modern industries was about two to three generations. The dispossessed artisans and craftsmen lost their age-old technical skill and when they entered the modern industries, they did so without any initial skills.
- c) When the workers, after long and close association with agricultural life, entered the modern industries and got transformed into modern workers, they did it in with the full inheritance of the legacy and various superstitions, habits and customs of agricultural life. There was no opportunity for these men to get out of casteism, racialism and religious superstition of Indian social life and harmful influence of medieval ideas. They were born as an Indian working class deeply imbued with obscurantist ideas and backward trends. However, this feature they shared with some of their European counterparts, as well, such as the British working class who too had suffered similar problems.

These peculiarities accompanying the birth of Indian workers acted as hindrances to the development of their modern outlook and class consciousness. In fact the Indian workers were not the only workers



characterised by these peculiarities, rather these were general characteristics of the working class of the colonies and sub-colonies.

### iii) Consolidation of the working class

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> was marked by the organised national movements and consolidation of the working class. The national movement, especially in Bengal and Maharashtra had already assumed a developed form which exerted a great impact on the later national awakening of the entire country. The partition of Bengal in the year 1905 aroused bitter public indignation and gave rise to mass national upsurge. This political development worked as a favorable condition for the Indian working class too for moving ahead with its economic struggles and raising them to a higher pitch. The period from the beginning of the century till the outbreak of the first world war was marked with widespread and dogged struggles of the workers which were not only economic struggles, but political struggles also. That is, these struggles led to the laying of the foundation of the first trade unions of the country. Moreover, the turn of the century was also marked by the advance in industrialization with concomitant swelling of the working class in numerical strength.

#### **Box 14.03: Trade Unions**

In order to defend themselves from the collective might of the employers and the state, the working class organised themselves into trade unions so that they could increase their bargaining power through unity. Therefore trade unions emerged from the spontaneous efforts of the working class. They were not organisations that were preplanned on the basis of some theoretical formulation. In India, the crystallisation of organisations of workers into trade unions took place after the First World War. (IGNOU 2004, BLD-102 Evolution of Workers Organisation 1, Unit 1&2)

On the eve of the First World War, the capitalist development in India got accelerated. There was increase in the number of joint stock company i.e. in 1900 the number of joint stock firms was 1360, which in 1907 rose to 2166. It marked the further increase at the beginning of the first world war when the number of registered firms stood at 2553. However, with the outbreak of war the colonial exploitation of India assumed horrible proportions. The government widely used the country's industrial potential for the needs of war. In all these Indian bourgeoisie got opportunities to prosper. The main advantage accruing to Indian bourgeoisie during war were less competition from major imperialist powers, a large market for country made goods inside and outside the country, war contracts, relatively cheaper raw agricultural materials, lower real wages and higher prices of manufactured goods. But for the working class it was a tough time. This was because the soaring up of prices reduced the living standards of working class. While rural areas were affected by the rise of prices of manufactured goods, the towns faced higher food prices. The expansion of industrialisation saw swelling of numbers of factory workers. In 1919, the large scale industries of the country employed 13,67,000 workers. Of this 306,300 were employed in 277 cotton spinning and weaving mills; 140,800 in 1940 cotton ginning factories and 276,100 in jute factories and presses. The railway shops employed 126,100 workers.

The October socialist revolution and subsequent sweeping mass and working class struggles formed the background under which the first organisation of

the Indian working class called All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was born. In other words, the end of World War I, the success of the October revolution and the first general crisis of capitalism added new strength to the anti-imperialist struggle of India.

The working class too did not fail to occupy its own place in the anti-imperialist struggle. In this regard it is important to note that the background of political struggle during 1905-8 is the unprecedented dimension of class struggle waged by the Indian working class in the national and international set-up of the post war period against capitalist exploitation bore more significance from the point of view of workers' class-consciousness. Then the birth of the central class organisation of Indian working class at the right moment when national political awakening was at its peak and they were conscious as class.

**Box 14.04: Formation of AITUC**

“The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the first national federation of trade unions in India was formed in 1920. It was a result of realisation by several people linked with labour that there was a need for a central organisation of labour to coordinate the work of trade unions all over India. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, N.M. Joshi, B.P. Wadia, Diwan Chamanlall, Lala Lajpat Rai, Joseph Baptista and many others were trying to achieve this goal. The formation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) acted as a catalyst for it..... .

Lala Lajpat Rai became the first president of the AITUC and Joseph Baptista its vice-president. Motilal Nehru and Vithallbhai Patel were also present. The AITUC received a lot of support from the Indian National Congress. There were about 107 unions which were affiliated or sympathetic to the AITUC. Out of these 64 unions had 140,854 members. One notable absence was the Gandhian trade union of Ahmedabad.’ The Textile Labour Union. It was a promising beginning and the AITUC continued to grow until it split in 1929. (Upadhyaya, S.B. 2004. ‘Evolution of Trade Unions in India’, IGNOU BLC-102, Organising the Unorganised. 1)

Recession in Indian industry and economy began already in the year 1922 and continued intensifying. In 1929 the impact of the world economic recession and general crisis of world capitalism veritably shook the Indian economy. Though the World War I provided a number of industries with some temporary advantages or opportunities to expand and saw limited growth of some industries, in a real sense India's industrialisation was absolutely of a sprawling character and without any basic consolidation. The mill owners attempted to reduce wages of the workers. It is the particular misfortune of the Indian working class that they ultimately had to fall victim to the intense rivalry between imperialists and native capitalists. The workers did not lie low before that onslaught, but resisted. So, in order to safeguard its position, the working class of India had to proceed through a path of bitter struggle. The economic offensive reduced the standard of living of the workers. The investigation conducted by the Bombay Labour Office into the working class budget of 1921-23 revealed that the quantity of daily food consumed by the Bombay workers was less than what was available to the prison inmates. An enquiry conducted by the Madras labour department also revealed a similarly shameful state of affairs.

The years 1926-29 constitute an eventful phase of the working class struggle. During this phase the Indian communist movement stood on a firm foundation poised for advance. Communist influence on the working class movement was felt to be very strong. Large scale strikes were conducted during these years. Although the government tried to dub these strikes as 'communist conspiracies', these struggles, led by the communists in many cases were in fact, a sharp manifestation of the simmering discontent of a working class afflicted with crushing problems. Sharpening of struggles, side by side, acted to further widen the outlook of the working class and this was borne out by the very nature of its activities at both national and international levels. The government in response tried to root out the militant section of the working class movement by unleashing draconian measures. With a view to keeping the speeding working-class movement under safe control, they on one hand introduced the 'Trade Union Act. 1926' and on the other passed 'The Trade Disputes Act' and 'Public Safety Act' for tightening up their suppressive designs. The government even tried to incite the public opinion against them.

The world economic crisis of 1931-36 was the most profound and destructive of all economic crises capitalism has ever known. It dealt a shattering blow to the economy, the political foundation and ideology of bourgeoisie and in total effect it further aggravated the general crisis of capitalism. In India the repercussion of this crisis was more fatal. India's economy, where 80 percent of the people were dependent on agriculture came to a breaking point due to a fall in agricultural prices. The plight of the peasantry was beyond all imagination, their purchasing power came down to an all time low. In all industries there was mass retrenchment and wages were slashed. In other words, workers of all categories were hit. It is during these times that building up stiff resistance against the world economic crisis and its effect upon the working class were drastic. In spite of organisational disunity prevailing at that time, the working class waged economic struggle. However, due to the large-scale involvement of the working class also in the anti-imperialist movement of the period, the political dimension of the struggle got precedence over the economic struggle.

World war II broke out on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939, the Viceroy of India proclaimed India to be belligerent. This had a devastating effect on the Indian economy and working class in particular. The colonial government reoriented the economy, whereby the industrial units introduced double to triple shifts of work and leave facilities were curtailed. This was done to cater to the war needs of England. As far as workers were concerned, their economic conditions were miserable in the pre-war period, and the new war made the situation much worse. This was because of the steady fall in the wage rates across the industry. Though there was a reversal in the trends of wage rate from 1936 onwards, the abnormal rise in prices had not only offset the rise in wages, the wages of the workers in real terms had gone down. In such a situation the working class of India had to wage a struggle for protecting the existing standard of living. The working class embarked on a series of strikes in Bombay, Kanpur, Calcutta, Bangalore, Jamshedpur, Dhanbad, Jharia, Nagpur, Madras, Digboi of Assam or in a word throughout the entire country. Moreover, the greatest working class action in India was the anti-war strike which was organised in Bombay on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1939 and was joined by 90,000 workers. This event along with other struggles indicates that during this period the outlook of the Indian working class did not remain confined solely to the economic demands. The working class rather fully kept pace with the

national and international political developments and played a key role in the political struggles. In such an event the imperialist government directed severe attacks to forestall the struggle of the working class.

The defeat of fascism and end of the World War II saw the emergence of the Indian working class as a highly organised, class conscious and uncompromising force against the colonialist. The upsurge of world democratic national liberation forces that followed had its impact in India too. An unprecedented and irresistible struggle for national liberation and democratic advance engulfed the country. Side-by-side the working class had to engage in sharp economic struggles. The reason was that after the war there was large-scale retrenchment of the wartime recruits and reduction of wages. Against all this, the working class resolutely started the struggle. The phenomenal rise in the number of strike actions (1629) in the year 1946 was an indication of the stiff resistance. All India Trade Union Congress raised the demand of stopping retrenchment, minimum wage, eight hours work, health insurance scheme, old age pension, unemployment allowance and several other social security measures. To suppress these, the government took recourse to extreme measures such as police firing and several other repressive measures. In this many workers had to lay down their lives while upholding their cause.

As soon as India became independent, the political climate of the country changed. This was particularly so for the working class. That is, till Independence political and economic struggle of the working class was directed against the colonial masters. Moreover, it was a broad political front against imperialism where everybody from the national bourgeoisie to the working class rallied with one common objective. But with Independence began a new political dynamics, where power was in the hands of capitalists and landlords. Their economic interests were directly counter to those of the working class. With this, the objective of the struggle of the working class also saw a change i.e. to end the rule of the capitalist and establish socialism in the real sense of the term. This was thought to be the precondition for growing class-consciousness, which the majority of the working class of India had not yet realised.

Though the achievement of Independence, roused immense hopes and aspirations among all sections of the society, it was accompanied by a huge rise in prices and continuous fall in the real wages of the workers. Moreover, the ruling classes had embarked upon a path of building capitalism in the newly independent country. This brought in its wake immense hardships and suffering to the toiling masses which generated powerful resistance of the working classes all over the country.

### **Nature and Structure of the Working Class Today**

Given such an eventful history and evolution of the working class in India, it is worthwhile to examine the nature and structure of the working class in the present circumstances. As mentioned above, due to the existence of multi-structural economy and effects of primordial affiliations, a variety of forms of the working class exists in India. On top of all the differences, the differences in wage is also the basis of divisions among the working class. On the basis of wage, there are four types of workers. First, those workers who are permanent employees of the large factory sector and get family wage. (By 'family wage' it is meant that the wage of the worker should be sufficient to maintain not only the individual but also the worker's family.

For further details see Nathan, Dev, 1987'). They are mostly employed in the public sector enterprises and modern sectors of petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and engineering. Second, there is a large and preponderant section of the working class that does not get a family wage. This includes workers in the older industries like cotton and jute textiles, sugar and paper. Even the permanent workers in the tea plantation come in the same category because the owners refuse to accept the norm of family wage for an individual worker. Third, there is a section of the working class at the bottom of the wage scale – the mass of contract and sometimes casual labourers in industry, including construction, brick making and other casual workers. Fourth, below all these lie a reserve army of labour, who work in petty commodities production in petty trading, ranging from hawking to rag-picking. They are generally engaged in the informal sector and carry on for the want of sufficient survival wage. The existence of a majority of workers, who are not paid family wage means that either the worker gets some form of supplement from other non-capitalist sectors or the worker and his/her family cut down their consumption below the minimum standard. This also means that there is more than one wage earner per household. As Das Gupta (1986) mentions both men and women work in the plantation or Bidi manufacturing. At the same time they also supplement these earnings with various kinds of agricultural activities including not only cultivation as such but also poultry and milk production. Even in the plantation workers are given plots of land with which to carry on agricultural production. It is the supplementary agricultural activities that enable wages in these sectors to be kept low. In this sense, supplementary activities by the workers under pre-capitalist relations of production is a tribute to the capitalist sector.

Not only is there wage differential among the working class, there is also variation in the terms of working conditions. Hence, better paid labour has also much greater job security. However the workers on the lower end of the wage scale have not only job security but also considerable extra-economic coercion and personal bondage which leads to lack of civil rights. Similarly, working conditions for the low paid workers are uniformly worse than for high paid workers. So, in the same plant or site there is a clear difference in the safety measures for the two groups of workers. The situation worsens further with regard to women workers. For example, women are not allowed to work in the steel plants for safety reasons, but are not prohibited to be employed on the same site as contract labour.

#### **Reflection and Action 14.02**

Visit a local factory or cottage industry in your city/town or village. Find out about the type of workers in that factory.

Ask two workers at least, who belong to the organised sector, about their social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. Do they have links with their villages? Are they members of a Trade Union? If so, what are the benefits of belonging to the Trade Union?

Now select atleast two workers from the same factory who are from the unorganised sector. Ask the same questions to them which you asked the organised sector workers.

Based on these interviews, write a report of two pages on 'The Different Positions of Organised and Unorganised sector workers in an Indian Factory.' Compare your report with those of your peers at your Study Centre.

With such major divisions amongst the working classes of India on the basis of wage, one would expect that there would be large scale mobility among the workers. So a worker would start as casual or contract labour in a firm and then would move to permanent employment either in the same or other firms. A study by Deshpande (1979) of Bombay labour found the reverse to be true. That is, around 87 per cent of the regular employees, who had changed their jobs had started as regular employees and only 13 per cent had started as casual labour. In this regard Harriss (1982), who conducted a study in Coimbatore, reported that ‘ individuals do not move easily between sectors of the labour market. Among the 826 households surveyed there were only less than 20 cases of movement from unorganised into organised sector. Many in the unorganised sector had the requisite skills, experience and education for factory jobs. But they lack the right connections or to put it in another way, they do not belong to the right social network’. This means that mobility to a large extent is dependent upon the way recruitments are done. The above-mentioned study of Bombay labour, though dealing with private sector, found that recruitments are done mainly through friends and relatives. A study in Ahmedabad by Subramaniam and Papola (1973) found that 91 per cent of the jobs were secured through introduction by other workers. This in a way then denies the disadvantaged groups, access to the high wage employment. In public sector, though a substantial portion of the vacancies are filled through employment exchange, it does not in any way mean that the casual, contract or other disadvantaged groups have equal access.

## 14.6 Social Background of Indian Working Class

Indian working class, as mentioned earlier, came from diverse social backgrounds in which primordial identities such as caste, ethnicity, religion and language played very important roles. In recent years, the significance of these elements has been reduced but they do persist nonetheless. In this regard, the Ahmedabad study (1973), points out that where jobs are secured through introduction by other workers, the latter was a blood relation in 35 per cent of the cases, belonged to the same caste in another 44 percent and belonged to the same native place in another 12 per cent. Friends helped in 7 per cent of the cases. Several other studies have pointed out the role of kinship ties in getting employment (Gore 1970). Kinship ties not only play a significant role in securing employment, but also in the placement in the wage scale. Five studies of Pune, Kota, Bombay, Ahmedabad and Bangalore covering large number of industries found that 61 per cent of workers were upper caste Hindus (Sharma 1970). The dominant position of the workers from upper caste was also brought out in a study of Kerala. This study points out that in higher income jobs upper castes dominate whereas Dalits/advasis have preponderance in low wage jobs. The middle castes are concentrated in middle to bottom ranges. Even in public sector, the representation of backward castes, schedule castes and tribes is not up to their proportion in the population. Moreover, it seems that caste based division of labour is followed in the class III and IV jobs in government and public sector enterprises. So the jobs of sweepers are reserved for dalits and advasis. In coal mines, hard physical labour of loading and pushing the coaltubs is done by dalits and advasis. In steel plants the production work in the intense heat of coke oven and blast furnace is mainly done by advasis and dalits. This is because, as Deshpande (1979) points out, of ‘pre labour market characteristic’ such as education and land holding. So those who possessed more land and education ended up in a higher wage sector. But then if upper and lower

caste people own comparable levels of landholding and education, the upper caste worker will get into a higher segment of the wage than the lower caste worker. This is because of the continuing importance of caste ties in recruitment. Caste also serves the function of ensuring the supply of cheap labour for different jobs with the fact of not paying more than what is necessary. In other words, the depressed conditions of adivasis and dalits helps in ensuring a supply of labour, who can be made to work at the mere subsistence level (Nathan 1987). Hence, caste on one hand plays a role in keeping the lower sections of the society in the lower strata of the working class, on the other hand, the upper caste get a privilege in the labour market. Further, caste is not only a matter of marriage and to an extent residence, but more so a continuing pool of social relation for the supply of various kinds of labour for the capitalist mode of production (ibid.).

## 14.7 Conclusion

The working class, which is the product of capitalist relations of production, came into being with the industrial revolution and subsequent industrialisation in England in particular and Europe in general. In this relation of production, unlike other epochs, they did not own anything except the labour, which they sold for survival. At the other spectrum, there were capitalists who not only owned all the means of production but also appropriated all the surplus generated out of these relations of production.

The working class at the conceptual level seems to be fairly simple, but if one tries to define it, the problem magnifies. The reason is that this is not a homogeneous entity. Rather it is a complex, contradictory and constantly changing entity. Another reason is that the concept of 'class-consciousness', is very slippery with regard to the working class. The consequence of this is that it is often proclaimed that either the working class is shrinking in size or everybody except a few at the top are working class. However the fact is that working class is a distinct entity, with characteristics of its own. In India, the situation is much more complex because of several reasons like, (a) the forced intrusion of British capital in India; (b) simultaneous existence of multiple relations of production; and (c) never ending identification of working mass with primordial features such as caste, religion and other ethnic divisions of the society.

The coming into being and consolidation of the working class in the world as well as in India, has been affected by local and international events of both economic and political nature. So for carrying out further studies on the working class, these peculiarities have to be taken into account.

## 14.8 Further Reading

Holmstrom, M. 1991: 'Who Are the 'Working Class'?' in Dipanker Gupta edited *Social Stratification*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi

Sen, Sukomal 1997 : *Working Class of India-History of Emergence & Movement 1830-1996*. K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta

Ramaswamy, E.A & U. Ramaswamy 1987. *Industry and Labour*. Oxford University Press, Delhi