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Q5(a)

Analyse the workers' movement in India in the pre-Independence period.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 1 · 10 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- **Answer the following in about 150 words:** Analyse the workers' movement in India in the pre-Independence period. (10 marks)

Revision summary

Indian workers organised first in textiles, railways, and jute.

AITUC (1920) nationalised the union map; communists and Girni Kamgar radicalised Bombay.

The 1926 Act recognised unions; Meerut and dispute laws showed colonial fear.

Gandhi's Ahmedabad TLA offered arbitration against class war.

Caste, migration, and the national movement limited a single class politics before Independence.

Introduction

The pre-Independence workers' movement grew with mills, railways, and plantations. It was at once a fight over wages and hours and a stream inside the national movement, with early unions, communist organisation, and colonial labour law.

Body

Beginnings and organisation

- Bombay and Ahmedabad textile strikes, railway unions, and jute labour in Bengal were the first mass sites, from the late nineteenth century into the 1920s.
- The All India Trade Union Congress was founded in 1920, with **Lala Lajpat Rai** as the first president, linking labour to the Congress political calendar.
- **M. N. Roy**, the Communist Party, and the Girni Kamgar Union under **S. A. Dange** and **A. A. Alwe** radicalised Bombay mill politics.
- The **Trade Unions Act, 1926**, gave legal recognition. The **Trade Disputes Act, 1929**, and later wartime rules tried to contain strikes.

Politics and split

- The **Meerut Conspiracy Case** (1929-33) prosecuted labour leaders and advertised communist influence to the colonial state.
- AITUC split in the 1930s between moderate nationalists and the left; the National Trade Union Federation and later the Indian Federation of Labour showed the fracture.

- **Gandhi's** Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association practised trusteeship and arbitration with **Ambalal Sarabhai** and **Anasuya Sarabhai**, a non-class-war path.
- ILO membership (1919) and **Royal Commission** on Labour (Whitley, 1931) put Indian labour on an international and inquiry map.

Analysis

- The movement won limited legal personality and public visibility. It did not become a nationwide class party before 1947.
- Caste, migrant labour, and communal riots repeatedly split the mill-gate.
- **Nationalism often set the horizon:** swaraj first, socialism later, which **Ambedkar** and communists both criticised from different sides.

Flow diagram

Pre-1947 workers -> AITUC 1920
Pre-1947 workers -> Communists Meerut Girni Kamgar
Pre-1947 workers -> Gandhi TLA Ahmedabad
Pre-1947 workers -> 1926 Act colonial limits

Conclusion

Pre-Independence labour was mill and rail unionism, AITUC politics, communist organising, and Gandhian arbitration, under colonial restriction. It was a real movement with a fragmented class and a national question it could not postpone.

Facts & figures

AITUC, 1920

First all-India trade union centre; Lajpat Rai was the inaugural president.

Trade Unions Act, 1926

Provided registration and limited civil immunity for registered unions.

Meerut Conspiracy Case

Colonial trial of labour and communist organisers, 1929-33.

Whitley Commission, 1931

Royal Commission on Labour in India; documented conditions and recommended reform.