

Communication

The Proletariat Cyborg

Mrinmoy Majumder

Collective identity politics in the labor relations have been the predominant form of worker agency representation. Since the industrial revolution time, trade unionism has been considered to be a vital intermediary in securing betterment of work and living conditions of the workers. Trade unions played an active role in representing workers and the collective actions have been instrumental in achieving the present day labor regulations both at local and international levels (Tripathi & Parmatam, 1988; Mamkootam, 2006; Neilson & Bill 2009; Sinha et al., 2013). While the prominence of workers' collective identity is considered vital, the contemporary work relations have been putting forth challenges towards this traditional form of collective identity (trade union). Contrarily, the new form of service industry such as the information and communication technology/information technology enabled services (ICT-ITES), specifically those involving high-end knowledge workers, the formal collectivization is becoming obsolete and redundant. Hence, in such a context, what could be the new form of collectivization? An upcoming phenomenon

Mrinmoy Majumder is Faculty Member, International Management Institute, New Delhi 110016. E-mail: mrinmoy_fpm11@micamail.in

of technology-mediated collectivization is coming up, where one can see agitation and activism through online platforms and social networking sites. Some of the trade unions have also picked up this mode of collectivism, however it poses great challenge in terms of getting people on equal footing and conduct meaningful campaign or tangible outcomes.

Less knowledge is available on the collective identity politics through the perspective of technology mediation and contemporary workspaces (ICT-ITES, manufacturing R&D, retail and banking). The lesser willingness of the knowledge worker to follow the traditional unionization path appeals for an extensive research that can analyze how the knowledge workers see the 'value' of their work and why they shy away from the collective actions.

One of the key incentives for IT investors in India has been the absence of a strong union in this sector. Although, there has been no direct mention of a restriction of unions at the workplace, Nasscom (National Association of Software and Services Companies) constantly tries to monitor the sector and discourages formal collectivization. In an interview (Business Line, 2005), former president of Nasscom, said, "Em-

employees in IT and ITES sector do not need any external intervention as they are looked after very well". It reflects the investors' take on the entire debate of unionization, as IT professionals are not like industrial workers. IT professionals like to be at the forefront of managing their work-related issues individually without an external intervention. Rightfully so, as IT organizations are supposedly less bureaucratic and flat in structure.

Initially, the argument of non-unionization may have been projected as a restriction, but over a period, this narrative of restriction is lost in time and space with the reinforcement of American-centered individualistic culture. For instance, the recent incidences of layoff at major IT companies ¹in India again shifted our attention towards collectivization which is mostly up-scaled through technology such as smartphones and social media. Interestingly in such cases, the up-scaling is not led by formal trade unions by individuals empowered by technological tools. Perhaps, here is how the proletariat cyborg has emerged.

Who is a Cyborg?

That created a new culture primarily driven/mediated by new technologies. In

¹ Recently, companies such as Tech Mahindra and Cognizant were in news for laying off its employees. In one case, an existing Tech Mahindra employee recorded the exit interview on his smart phone, which spread on social media, forcing the group executive chairman to tweet an apology. Retrieved on August 8, 2017 from <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/ites/anand-mahindras-apology-brings-it-layoffs-in-spotlight/articleshow/59497311.cms>

a way, an IT professional is never imagined and caricatured without technological jing-bang such as computers, headsets, wearable gadgets and smartphones. These features of human beings imagined with their technological devices are what constitute a 'cyborg'. Donna Haraway (1991) in her seminal piece 'A Cyborg Manifesto Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' talks about cyborg and its mores. She mentions that cyborg emerges out of an 'ironic political myth' when she says, "At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg" (Haraway, 1991: 2) which is directly linked to the evolution of the world in the bible, 'blasphemy' being a place from where the cyborg emerges. She reflects upon the political exclusion through the lens of 'the other', suggesting a separate identity, which is crucial and distinct. It is necessary to analyze 'the other' as crucial and distinct, because it reflects on what is excluded from not being 'the other'. A comprehensive understanding of it can be obtained by highlighting the characteristics and features ascribed to a certain kind of person in order to be distinct, perhaps hinting us to the caricature of an IT professional (techno-human). In the traditions of 'western' science and politics - the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other - the relation between organism and machine has been a border war Haraway(1991: 5). According to Haraway, this framework acts as a strong foundation, which supports various

layers of such relationship between organism and machine. The existing norm of production is naturalized through the process of scientific and political progression. That is how culture has been reproduced, the way dominant forces of capitalism and patriarchy have presented it to be. To delineate it further is evidently an admission to not having answers to the current state of order, even if there are attempts to return to history and nature.

The 'techno-human' amalgamation is an impetus for change, especially in the postmodern times. Such an infusion of human-machine can be called as a cyborg. Haraway says cyborg is a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Reality is constructed through 'lived' social relation and experience. This experience comes from fiction as well as from the fact, as fiction depicts the changing nature of the current situation. Therefore, social reality is nothing but fiction because reality exists in the imagination; fiction depicts the 'real' as imagination.

There are significant shifts within the realm of technology studies. Technology studies are pointing towards tools, instruments and arte-facts and/or concerned with the meaning, representation, human-technology infusion and free association of technology. Therefore, applying these theoretical frameworks to delineate the notion of technology would enrich its philosophical discourses.

Despite that there are now unions geared with technologies to maximize its activities, unions are yet to find their ap-

propriate place in ICT-ITES sector in India. Perhaps, they may not have any presence at all in the future, but new forms of collectivization led by individuals would be seen in this sector. Hence, the traditional discourse of seeking association through social dialogue has no concrete possibility in the light of new technologies. There is hardly a need for human intervention to address individual grievances as these are bridged through a mechanized system of technology.

Technologies (such as smartphones and social media) are facilitating and mediating among IT professionals and their work, thereby enhancing an individual's capacity to associate with other professionals. The union-less work environment has shaped the collective perception of IT workers. This has made the IT professionals, vehemently oppose requests coming from external unions to unionize. In such a context, only individuals embracing technology may withstand the challenges of large scale lay-off. Echoing this further, Aneesh (2006) in his book 'Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization', articulated the power centers of future to be with both computers and IT professionals who operate in their own universe, thereby shunning the traditional human-controlled environment. And, this may as well be, the emergence of the proletariat cyborg.

References

- Aneesh, A (2006), *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Business Line (2005), Employees in IT, ITES Sector Taken Good Care of' — Nasscom Sees No Need for Trade Unions. Retrieved on August 8, 2017 from <http://www.thehindubusinessline.in/bline/2005/10/05/stories/2005100503040400.htm>
- Haraway, Donna (1991): "A Cyborg Manifesto Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge.
- Mamkoottam, Kuriakose (2006) "Emerging Trends in the Trade Union Movement", *Indian Journal of Labor Economics*, 49 (4):893-901.
- Neilson, Jeff & Bill, Pritchard (2009), *Value Chain Struggles: Institutions and Governance in the Plantation Districts of South India*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Sinha, P.R.N, Sinha, InduBala & Shekhar, Seema Priyadarshini (2013), *Industrial Relations, Trade Unions, and Labor Legislation* New Delhi: Pearson.
- Tripathi, S.D. & Arya P.P (1988), *Trade Union-Management Relations in India*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications.