

Incremental to Revolutionary Change: Synthesizing Indian IR System Through the Lens of Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

Prashant Mehta & Sunil Budhiraja

This article examines Indian IR system in the post COVID-19 scenario through the lens of 'punctuated equilibrium' theory and suggests three possible approaches to cope with the forces and generate and sustain employment growth through increased industrial investment. Theory of punctuated equilibrium advocates that a stable IR structure evolves subtly over a period of time. A swift transformation leads the dismantling of the old system and establishment of a new one. The article provides insights into three themes: first, Indian IR system's present 'deep structure' of punctuated equilibrium; second, why this 'deep structure' is under threat and needs a revolutionary change; and third, the way forward to respond to the intrinsic and extrinsic forces.

Prashant Mehta is Associate Professor, SCMS, Symbiosis International University, Pune. **Sunil Budhiraja** is Assistant Professor, School of Management and Labor Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India, E-mail: sunil1budhiraja@gmail.com

Introduction

Industrial relations in India is a tripartite mechanism which includes three parties namely government, labor/employee and management/employer. Post Independence, India, as a nation, embraced socialism which led to the growth of public sector. Since, immediately post Independence, it was imperative that the country does not falter on production and productivity, any kind of industrial strife would have been an impediment to growth. Hence, government exerted enormous influence on the labor movement, guiding and controlling it with a paternalistic approach. The emphasis was on state controlled collective bargaining intended at avoiding productivity loss due to strikes and lockouts. The basic purpose driving these protective measures was to ensure that labor, being a weaker partner as compared to capital in the manufacturing process, is protected and safeguarded so as to promote social justice.

'The Trade Unions Act 1926', 'The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act 1946' and 'The Industrial Disputes Act 1947' are three important legislations instrumental in shaping the industrial relations (IR) system in India. Interestingly, The Trade Union Act 1926 though has a provision for registration of trade unions has no provision regarding recognition of trade unions and thus leaving little scope for collective bargaining. Also, The Industrial Disputes Act 1947 gives unfettered authority to the government to intervene in any dispute at any time, making it difficult for employees and employers to come together for dispute resolution. The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act 1946 which defines conditions of employment is just a ritual and does not prescribe any matter which empowers or educate the employees.

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Over a period of time, enactment of multiple laws has resulted in often bizarre and complex employment relationships. The employers, with the purpose of bypassing the law to avoid hiring permanent employees and to get away with any penal action, resorted to different strategies like outsourcing or 'third party hiring'. As per Annual Survey of Industries 2016-2017, the proportion of contract workers to total workers increased from 34% in 2012-13 to 36% in 2015-16. This increasing trend towards contractua-lization points towards uneasiness of the industry

to recruit full time salaried employees and to escape stringent labor laws. Srivastava (2016) in his study has also indicated towards increasing trend with regards to casualization and subcontracting of labor.

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

Erickson and Kuruvilla (1998) in their one of the most important papers on industrial relations system transformation have applied the 'punctuated equilibrium' theory to understand the evolution of industrial relations system. They believe that just like social system, an industrial relations system also undergoes periods of relative stability with only little or no or very subtle change punctuated by periods of swift transformations. During these times of swift transformation, the basic nature and fundamental philosophy of the system comes under scrutiny. Gersick (2020) tends to define the generic form of the 'punctuated equilibrium' theory as an alteration between long periods when stable infrastructures permit only incremental adaptations, interspersed with brief periods of revolutionary upheaval.

Gersick (1991) in her first study elaborated that the three pillars of punctuated equilibrium are: (a) deep structure (b) equilibrium periods (c) revolutionary periods. She further states that the first of these, deep structure, is the most critical for understanding the models and it is the hardest concept to define and communicate. However, she attempts to define it as "a network of fundamental, interdependent 'choices' of the basic configuration into which a system's units are organized, and

the activities that maintain both this configuration and system's resource exchange with the environment" (Gersick, 1991). This means for a change to be revolutionary, there has to be considerable change in the 'deep structure' of the system.

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The theory clearly emphasizes that a stable structure that has evolved over a period of time and continues to change in a very subtle manner, this stable state is interrupted by a state of swift transformation, which leads to complete dismantling of the old system and establishment of a new system. These relatively stable periods of IR are interspersed with periods of rapid transformations named as "revolutionary periods" wherein the old structure is exposed to completely different parameters. It is during these revolutionary periods that 'deep structure' of a system dismantles and leads to the establishment of a new system.

The fundamental question is to determine the factors that are causing such abrupt transformations in the Indian IR. Historically it is known that periods of revolutionary changes are brought about by the factors intrinsic as well as extrinsic to the system (DeFronzo, 2018; Piore & Sabel, 1984). In the case of industrial system, intrinsic factors include employees and employers and government, while extrinsic factors include external environment, labor market conditions and eco-

logical factors (Kinderman, 2019). As Indian IR system is characterized by extensive state intervention and as it is based upon the premise of protecting the interests of the labor, the period since independence has remained largely stable. This stability in IR system, though has not evolved through interaction between employees and employers, has been imposed by the state through legislation and intervention. This stable system or system in equilibrium with its different components - employees, employers and government - is characterized by a 'deep structure' with its own peculiar features. In order to understand Indian Industrial Relations (IIR) system through the lens of punctuated equilibrium, we will have to examine the constituents to its deep structure.

Deep Structure of Indian IR System

It can be seen from the exhibit (Exhibit 1) that 'deep structure' of IIR is characterized by five fundamental, interdependent 'factors' that have configured to contribute towards industrial democracy.

- *Tripartism and role of government* - As stated earlier, India after Independence adopted socialism with the objective of achieving social equity for everyone through economic growth. As such, state-led the process of industrialization through the establishment of heavy industry and following the economic policy of import substitution. Given the circumstances, with nation at such a crucial juncture, states focused on prevention of strikes and

lockouts. Most of the labor laws were therefore inherited as such or with minor modifications from the British colonial administration. Britishers in turn had framed these laws to ensure uninterrupted production and speedy dispute resolution in view of World War II. In fact, Industrial Disputes Act 1947 is nearly a copy of Section 81A of Defence of India Rules, which were framed by the British Government to have complete control over industrial relations. The state control post-independence was sought to be justified on the ground of maintaining industrial peace and harmony to ensure quicker economic development. State intervention was further justified on account of the fact that stated goal of social equity could only be met through economic development. States, in order to ensure speedy disposal of disputes, frequently resorted to compulsory adjudication rather than mediation or conciliation. Also, since trade unions had not reached the level of maturity to conduct bipartite negotiations, state intervention was considered as a necessity. This close proximity of trade unions and political interference led to politicalization of trade unions (Venkatanarayanan, 2020). Also, the Trade Union Act 1926, although providing for registration of trade unions, has no provision regarding recognition of trade unions (representative) for bipartite discussions with the employers (Chibber, 2004).

- *Dominance of Unorganized Labor Force in India* - India is the second

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most populous country, having a total workforce of 465 million. According to National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) in 2009–10, around 28 million workers were employed in the organized sector and the remaining 437 million workers are in the unorganized sector. Subsequently, the economic surveys of last 10 years (2010 onwards) also confirm that the proportion of unorganized labor is static, approximately at 93%. The workers in the unorganized sector have no secured tenure of employment and no protection in the case of job loss and little access to any social security benefits. The government had enacted The Unorganized Workers Social Security Act 2008 to provide for the social security and welfare of unorganized workers and for other matters connected therewith or incidental. The Act on account of its inherent lacunas and implementation bottlenecks has hardly benefitted the unorganized workers and the status-quo with regard to the percentage of unorganized workers in workforce is still maintained (Mishra, 2017). Government on its part made certain efforts like initiating Jan-Dhan Yojana to increase banking penetration and mandating Aadhar card (UID) to avail

certain benefits. However, it did not have the intended impact on the increase in number of workers the organized sector. It will therefore, not be improper to say that available social security measures under the Indian labor laws are enjoyed by only 8 to 9 percent of the workforce. A very small section of the work force which is protected by legislation and the remaining 90+ percent of the workforce is exposed to deplorable working conditions. This definitely goes against the concept of social justice. Further, these highly inflexible and over protective labor laws have led to the establishment of capital-intensive methods in the organized sector, thereby negatively impacting long range labor demand (Economic Survey, 2005-06).

- *Inflexible and multiplicity of labor laws* - Labor laws in India derive their origin, authority and strength from the Constitution of India. The focus and importance of protecting the dignity and the need for protecting and safeguarding the interests of labor as human beings has been elaborately mentioned in Chapter III (Article 16, 19, 23 & 24) and Chapter IV (Article 39, 41, 42, 43, 43A & 54) of Constitution of India in synchronization with Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy. Labor, as such, falls under the concurrent list. It is the responsibility of both the Central as well as State Governments that the interests of labor are protected through appropriate legislations. This however, has led to multiplicity of laws (44 Central and about 100 state)

to protect the rights of workers. Studies indicate that protective labor laws can prove counterproductive and are also termed as market distorting agents (Sharma, 2006). Fallon and Lucas (1993) in their study concluded that there exists a negative relationship between worker-protective labor laws and labor demand (employment). In a study carried out in India by Besley and Burgess (2004) reported a negative impact upon employment and investment on account of worker-protective labor laws. Further, they found that there exists a strong positive relationship between urban poverty and rigid labor laws. Dougherty, Robles and Krishna (2011) conducted a thorough investigation of majority of the Indian labor laws to understand the impact of worker-protective labor laws on growth and productivity. Their study also confirmed the results obtained by Besley and Burgess (2004).

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- *Political intervention in employees' trade unions* - With the advent of British in India, our economy shifted towards institutionalized manufacturing and trade unions. The first trade Union 'All India Trade Union Congress' was formed in the year 1920 by the prominent political party named 'Indian National Congress'. Other central level trade

unions including Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) affiliated to CPI (M) too came into existence. All major central level trade unions that exist in India are introduced and funded by dominant political parties. The obvious reason to affiliate with a political party is lack of funds and level of awareness amongst employees. Political party affiliated unions often confront and end up making strong rivalry with each other, and businesses and political parties usually take undue advantage of it.

- *No legal provision of collective bargaining* - Collective bargaining is one of the most important aspects of any industrial relation system. It is a process of negotiation between employers and a group of employees aimed to achieve industrial democracy. In India, the right to collective bargaining is not provided to all trade unions that exist, but is confined to those trade unions which are recognized by the employer. And in most cases employers do not recognize any trade union or recognize a union based upon their comfort and ease without considering the fact that the recognized trade union may not be a representative of majority of the employees. For example, the labor unrest in Maruti Suzuki in 2011 was caused due to non-recognition of a trade union. Some states of India including Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, for example, have separate legislations

relating to recognition and certain voluntary codes (Budhiraja & Pathak, 2018), but these states are still not able to enforce collective bargaining.

The government has tabled The Industrial Relations Bill, 2015 in the parliament which integrates Trade Unions Act 1926, Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act 1946 and Industrial Disputes Act 1947. The 2015 bill although provides for enhanced compensation on account of retrenchment, however, stands to dilute the idea of collective bargaining and reduce the powers of trade unions (Mathew & Jain, 2018).

Factors Responsible for Dismantling Deep Structure

Theory of punctuated equilibrium (Gersick, 2020) suggests that relatively stable periods of IR are interspersed with periods of rapid transformations termed as ‘revolutionary periods’ wherein the old structure is exposed to completely different parameters. It is during these revolutionary periods that ‘deep structure’ of a system dismantles and leads to the establishment of a new system. We in the current study suggest four major factors which are responsible for dismantling ‘deep structure’ of IIR.

1. *India's Demographic Dividend* – India, with a population of approximately 1.3 billion is the second most populated country in the world. As per Balasubramanian and Dhal (2017), it is also the youngest country in the world, with half of the population under the age of 26 and by 2025

approximately 20% of the working age population would be residing in India. However, current economic conditions index at 38.9 (as per Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, 2020) does not induce much confidence as far as economic growth is concerned. Besides, higher proportion of youngsters in the population, number of women in organized workforce is gradually increasing (Srivastava, 2012). Apart from agriculture, certain service industries like education, banking are already witnessing higher proportion of women (Balasubramanian & Dhal, 2017). This, in itself presents a challenge, as most of the labor laws owe their origin to male-dominant manufacturing sector since pre-Independence era and may not be adequate in the present scenario.

2. *Employment and Unemployment Situation* – There exists a lot of fluctuations and uncertainties in Indian employment and unemployment situation. For example, as a result of Covid-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate of the nation had shot up to 24% in the month of May 2020 in comparison to a moderate unemployment rate of 7.76% in February as per CMIE statistics (CMIE Report, 2020). This unemployment rate varies with respect to the demographic and socio-economic factors of each state. For example, states with higher population density such as Delhi and Bihar have seen a drastic increase in labor availability and have witnessed an unemployment rate of

44.9% and 46.2% respectively for the month of May 2020 and states like Assam, Odisha and Uttarakhand have recorded a single digit unemployment rate in the same month. Recently, a steep decline in the unemployment rate to 11.63% for the month of June has been reported. This suggests towards increase in casualization/contractualization of labor workforce. These statistics are purely based on projections and the nation has a history of debating the government data on employment and unemployment rates (Hirway, 2002).

3. *Reverse Migration of Workers from Urban to Rural Areas* – According to International Organization of Migration (2011), “Return migration is the act or process of going back to the point of departure, is the return of people to their origin or place of habitual residence, after spending some time at another place”. It has a significant impact upon the demography, society and economy of the rural areas (Singh, 2020). With nation under lockdown and industries closed down for more than 60 days, migrant labor has hit the roads and is on their way back to hinterland (Dandekar & Ghai, 2020). Most of these migrants (about 450 million) were marginal farmers, having left agriculture and migrated to urban areas for better income. Reverse migration will put agrarian economy under tremendous pressure. As per ILO “In India with a share almost of 90% of the people working in the informal economy (about 400 million

workers) are at risk of falling deeper into poverty during the crisis". The answer to this problem probably lies in the localization of industries. Taking into consideration the situation at the local level stakeholders will have to make efforts to ensure people are gainfully employed. This will not only reduce income inequalities but also alleviate pressure on the agriculture sector.

4. *Minimal role of employers' associations* - Although, some formidable employers' associations do exist in India like All India Organization of Employers, Employers' Federation of India, and Standing Conference for Public Enterprises under the umbrella of 'The Council of Indian Employers', yet search on most of the online academic resources regarding 'role of employers' associations in Indian IR' shows up negligible or throws up some literature in passing. ILO lists three challenges that are being faced by employers' associations in India (a) remaining sensitive and relevant to the needs of its members, in an increasingly competitive and constantly changing economic scenario, (b) promoting innovation and higher productivity, which are key determinants of enterprise sustainability, and (c) strengthening industrial relations and promoting bipartite and tripartite dialogues.

Way Forward for IIR System

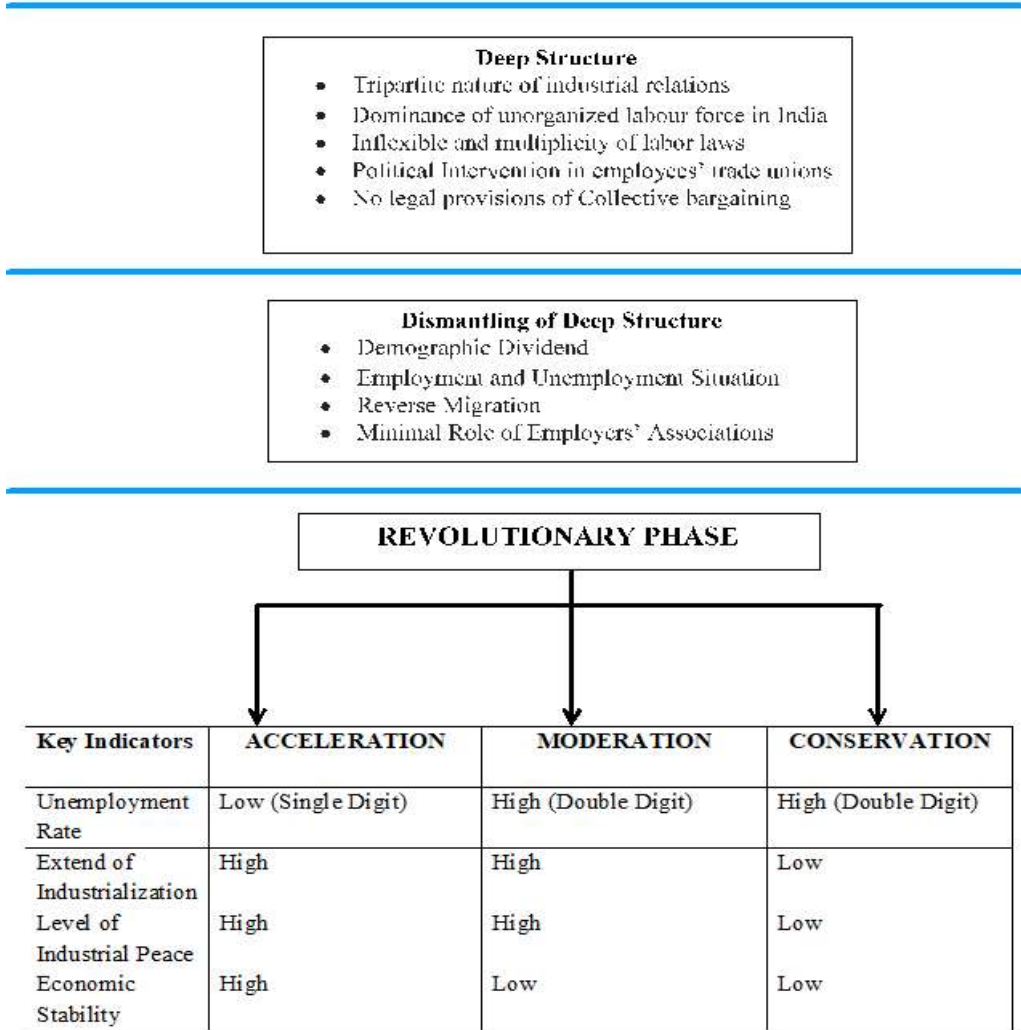
George Santayana famously said "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This state-

ment sums the significance of history. It is extremely important to understand that we do not create situations where labor is exploited in terms of long working hours, unhygienic work conditions, lack of health and safety measures, overcrowding and hiring and firing on whims and fancies of the employer. It has been established that basic parameters of the system during this time of flux and turbulence, are 'up for grabs' (Piore & Sabel, 1984). There is a high level of probability that the system during or post this transformation phase may move in numerous radically different directions, depending upon the characteristics and power structure of the players involved. It is time that we should learn from history and from other countries (Belanger et al., 2020) to frame a legal structure that can withstand this turbulence as also leads to the development of a sustainable and stable 'new deep structure'.

The Swedish industrial relations structure till late 1980s and early 1990s was characterized by government complemented centralized bargaining system (Swensen, 1989; Ryner, 1994). However, in the mid-1990s this system of centralized bargaining crumbled and evolved into a bipartite system. Under this bipartite system, both labor and employers' association enjoy considerable autonomy from the public authorities and have considerable flexibility in regulating the labor market with regards to wage formation and working conditions (Anxo, 2017).

Another case that demands attention is the transformation of industrial relations in New Zealand. Prior to 1991 com-

Exhibit 1 Indian Industrial Relations Framework



pulsory interest arbitration was hallmark of the industrial relations system in New Zealand (Bray & Hayworth, 1993, Anderson, 2017). However, Employment Contracts Act (ECA) enacted in 1991 completely knocked down this system which was stable for approximately 50 years (Bray & Hayworth, 1993). ECA

1991 allowed for private contracts, and removed compulsory unionism. It did not make bargaining compulsory for the employer and practically all legal safe guarding given to trade unions was repealed (Hince & Vranken, 1991). “This intervention was, indeed, New Zealand’s watershed” (Barry, 2018).

In the year 2000, Employment Contracts Act was replaced with Employment Relations Act. This Act recognized the fact that there exists imbalance in employment relationships, and therefore, workers need legal protection through collective bargaining. However, as per Blumenfeld and Donnelly (2017), the act even after 17 years of its enactment has made little difference to the scope or extent of collective agreement making. One of the main objectives of ERA was, to embed within parties to conduct their relations in good faith. Good faith bargaining is difficult to enforce in the absence of collective bargaining, and with very weak trade unions there has been minuscule success in making use of these provisions to formulate collective agreements. Thus, repeal of ECA and enactment of ERA has had little impact to make the workers' voice heard (Barry, 2018).

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It is therefore recommended that the nation or the states must consider and re-consider situation and circumstances surrounding their IR system before contemplating any modifications. We, however, recommend referring to the four key indicators (as depicted in exhibit 1) in case there is any intention towards reassessing the IR system. Further, we,

on the basis of four key indicators present the following conceptual framework for the consideration of stakeholders:

- a) *Acceleration Pathway* – Under this pathway, we recommend a drastic shift from tripartite system to bipartite system wherein the role of the government is almost negligible. Acceleration mode is recommended for the states for whom all four stated indicators are favorable i.e. single digit unemployment rate, high extent of industrialization, high level of industrial peace and economic stability. High level of industrialization means high levels of investment, as such, minimal government interference would be recommended to enable the business to operate smoothly. Governments can also think of substituting labor laws with labor guidelines and allowing the businesses to decide the future course of action in consultation with workers/ employees of the organizations. While, government in turn focuses on attracting more investment, ensuring adherence to labor guidelines and educating and empowering the trade unions.
- b) *Moderation Pathway* – This pathway is recommended to the states for whom the extent of industrialization and industrial peace are favorable indicators. Majority of the states are dealing with a double-digit unemployment rate and are struggling with economic instability. For such states, reverse migration may also add to the high unemployment rate putting these states under enormous pressure to

create employment opportunities by attracting industries and other establishments. This mode requires states to make key reforms in the existing labor laws and strengthen the powers of employers and employees while governments act as facilitators. The reforms would require educated labor and trade unions with specific provision for collective bargaining. Health, safety and welfare of employees would be the prime responsibility of businesses.

- c) *Conservation Pathway* – India, by virtue of its conservative labor laws, has always followed this pathway. This pathway is recommended for the states which do not have any of the four indicators as favorable and are completely dependent upon the government to rescue them for all their IR concerns and challenges. Dignity of labor is important for such states and giving a free hand to businesses may not be the correct way to handle the currently brewing economic crisis. This mode requires states to carry forward with the tripartite system and classify the labor laws into broad categories (may be termed as labor codes). We still urge the businesses to come out of an absolute dependence on the government for resolving industrial disputes.

Conclusion

Indian industrial relations system's 'deep structure' appears to be under stress owing to, in the first instance due to the circumstances arising out of Covid 19 - shutting down of industries, loss of

employment. Though, figures now suggest increase in employment trend, concerns remain and mass exodus of labor particularly from unorganized sector. Secondly, due to limitations of the existing labor laws to safeguard the interests of labor involved in the unorganized sector (including casualization of labor) and that of the women employees as well. Some other factors include, multiplicity of trade unions and labor laws, failure on the part of the government to promote or make collective bargaining mandatory, no legal framework for recognition of trade unions and finally large young population that needs and should be protected from exploitation.

Time has come to seriously think about reforming the entire industrial relations system and make a shift from the incremental change approach to a revolutionary change approach. Already, some of the states have initiated the process by holding in abeyance many of the laws to attract industry and to boost employment. However, considerable care and attention will be required to ensure that we do not end up the same way as New Zealand, but take Sweden as an example and proceed with caution and firmness.

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