

## Communication

# Trade Unionism in Competitive Politics: The Story of an Arrangement Clerk

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### Introduction

The industrial trade unions and the staff unions in the government offices are both “association of employees”, meant to strengthen the bargaining powers, to protect and further the rights and interests of the members. Industrial unions, however, in India are normally affiliated with any of the central trade union organizations and their activities are governed by the Trade Unions Act (1926). All related details on the area are collected every year by the Ministry of Labor. The activities of the service unions in the Government of India on the other hand are guided by the Department of Personnel and Training and there is a well-oiled consultative machinery to resolve the disputes. In spite of such differences, there is remarkable parallelism between the evolution of the two.

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The trade union movement of India, since Independence, evolved in political lines. Though All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was founded by Lala Lajpat Rai in 1920, over time AITUC came to be dominated by the leaders of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Three months before Independence, Indian National Congress took the initiative to form Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). Congress preferred to let INTUC have an independent identity, while at the same time functioning as an arm of the party. The Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), was founded in 1948, by the Socialist leaders coming out of AITUC. The United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) was set up in 1949 by the dissident Socialists. Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), founded in 1955, was affiliated to the RSS. After the split of the Communist Party of India in the year 1964, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)

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was born under the patronage of the CPI (M). Thus, the central trade unions evolved as per the requirements of competitive politics, resulting in to fragmentation of the working-class movement. Though each union has its own constitution and are supposed to maintain their independence, in reality they turned out to be the labor wing of the political parties. The identities of the unions are revealed best at the time of the strikes or other movements of serious nature called by the parties. Whereas the multiplicity of unions in an organization acts as a safety valve to prevent extreme militancy usually associated with single all-powerful union. Plurality, on the other hand, generates inter-union rivalry on every possible issue of day-to-day existence leading to low productivity of the workers, bitter working environment and a state where management is not willing to take challenges. The concept of “one industry one union” remained a myth in our form of multi-party democracy.

### **Unionism in the Government Sector**

The Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM) is a platform set up by the Central Government for constructive dialogues with the staff side for peaceful resolution of all disputes. The Joint Councils are there at the national, departmental and at regional levels. The National Council, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, is the apex body. Departmental Councils are headed by the Secretaries of the respective Departments. Regional Councils are headed by the Circle or Zonal Heads depending on the structure of the Department.

Despite of having such a system of dispute resolution, we see a mirror image of the industrial trade union scenario in the government sector. The unions of erstwhile Post & Telegraph (P&T) Department played a key role in evolution of the service unions in the government sector. All India Post Office and RMS Union was formed in 1920. The strike of P&T employees in July 1946 is considered by the historians as an important milestone of freedom struggle, like the Royal Indian Naval Mutiny in the same year. AITUC, the only national Trade Union at that time gave a strike call on 29<sup>th</sup> July in support of the demands of P&T employees where almost 15 lakh workers participated. The strike was called off only when British-Indian Government conceded the demands. However, by 1940s, lots of new unions came into existence for various cadres of Post & Telegraph employees. Finally, in 1954 National Federation of Post & Telegraph Employees (NFPTE) was formed as an apex body with nine All India Unions of P&T employees affiliated to it. Two important characteristics of the unions affiliated to NFPTE were that the leadership had emerged from the organization itself and the Federation was not formally affiliated to any central Trade Union organization. In 1985 when P&T Department was bifurcated, the Federation also was bifurcated into National Federation of Postal Employees (NFPE) and National Federation of Telecommunication Employees (NFTE).

The leadership of erstwhile NFPTE since the beginning resorted to militant movements. Though not formally affili-

ated, their activities were backed by the Communist Parties. This brought division amongst the leadership and national unions for various cadres of P&T were formed in 1964, after the split of CPI following the Indo-China war (1962). Finally, in 1968 the second Federation of P&T employees, Federation of National P&T Organizations (FNPTO) came into existence with all the national unions affiliated to it. Though FNPTO professed to promote free and democratic trade union movement, the Federation got affiliated to INTUC. FNPTO also got bifurcated in March 1986: FNPO and FNTTO respectively for postal and telecom employees.

Bhartiya Postal Employees Federation (BPEF) was formed as the third Federation in November 1978 as an industrial unit affiliated with BMS. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Federation came into existence when Janata Govt. was in power, though the principle of “one union one industry” was outlined in the manifesto of the newly formed Janata Party at that time.

The inter-union rivalry on political considerations in various governmental bodies reached such a bitter height by 1980s, that the revised recognition rules were brought out by the Govt. of India in 1993. These rules provided that a service association to be recognized, needed to represent a minimum 35% of employees. Another association with second highest membership, will be recognized if it commands support of at least 15%. The new rule further provided that employees who are presently in service shall only be the office bearers of an associa-

tion. These rules along with check-off system in pay rolls for verification of membership of the unions brought two fundamental changes in last two decades:

- The management as well as the staff members came to know the exact strength of a particular association in a unit.
- Dominance of the charismatic leaders who controlled the unions even when they went to higher cadres on promotion or leaders who used to continue as office bearers of the union even long after their superannuation, fizzled out.

#### Political Bandhs: Acid Test

In the scenario of competitive politics, the activities of the unions at base level turn out to be: (a) observing the call of the political parties to whom they are affiliated to, either directly or indirectly, (b) ensuring best possible posting for own members, (c) persuading the local administration to deploy own members in convenient shifts or in offices of choice, (d) protecting own members from harsh punishment in the event of committing any mischief and exposing deficiencies of the members of the rival unions and (e) intimidating the management for liberal interpretation of the rules to facilitate the members in garnering maximum personal

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benefits. The unions of different colors compete to demonstrate how best they 'managed' to bring out benefits for their own members. Thus, enhancing the membership numbers turn out to be the most important priority for the unions, instead of promoting the interest of the employees in general.

West Bengal for about three and a half decades since mid-1970s, witnessed seven / eight State-wise '*Bandhs*' every year called by rival political parties on some issue or other. When '*Bandh*' was called by the ruling Front, the life was completely paralysed – flights and trains did not operate, bus, cab and other forms of transports were suspended. When there was no transport, people could not attend to their duties, schools and colleges remained closed, shops and other establishments didn't open. By all these, the party that called the *Bandh* wanted to demonstrate that the people overwhelmingly supported their issues.

In the scheme of things of the State, a *Bandh* is a highest form of disobedience to the authority of the government. Before every *Bandh* it was, therefore, customary for the authority to alert the employees that willful absence would lead to 'dies-non' (the day will not be treated as qualifying service for pay of the month, for time bound promotions or for pensionary benefits) and the principle of "no work no pay" would be affected. No leave (except on genuine medical ground) was granted on the day of *Bandh*. But such letters of caution were never implemented as the guidelines of the welfare government also stated that

if an employee was not able to attend office because of non-plying of public transport, the absence should not be treated as willful one and such absence might be regularized by granting special casual leave. For all practical purpose, *Bandh* called by ruling front of the State turned out to be paid holidays for the employees and many used to look forward for such *Bandhs* to unwind from regular routine. In private sector, however, management ensured employees attend duty on a holiday/Sunday in lieu of their absence on the day of *Bandh*.

When opposition political parties called *Bandhs* that was a bigger headache for the administration. State Govt. used to take all efforts to run transport on such days. But the transport unions affiliated to the party that called the *Bandh*, whatever little may be their strength, won't bring out the busses, cabs, auto-rickshaws on the road. Sympathizers of the service associations affiliated to the party that called the *Bandh*, refrained from attending office and would be asking for 'special casual leave' on the pretext that public transport was adversely affected in their locality. The claim of the employees may be a half-truth, but administration could not take a moral stand on the issue as they did not impose 'dies-non' when the other side had called the *Bandh*. A never-ending enquiry was then initiated to assess whether public transport was affected to that extent which made it impossible for a sizable chunk of employees to attend duty. Before administration could come to any conclusion, a fresh *Bandh* would come. Thus, there was no penalty even for half-truths. When neutral employees also

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came to know that one is not made to pay any cost for not attending to duty, they also started enjoying paid holidays and started looking eagerly for *Bandhs*, no matter who called it. The saga of ‘Bangla Bandh’ for about three and half decades since mid-1970s is indicative of helplessness of administration in a society where trade unions and Service associations evolved completely in political line.

#### **The Story of an Arrangement Clerk – A Case Study**

In June 1990, a young officer was posted as in-charge of the RMS Division having its Headquarter at Howrah in the midst of an agitation.<sup>1</sup> Since trains, flights,

<sup>1</sup> RMS stands for Railway Mail Service. Department of Posts has two wings: the Post Offices and the Sorting Offices. The job of the Postal wing is to collect / book letters and parcels at one end and to deliver them at the other end. The intermediate jobs of sorting at different stages, their stage-by-stage bagging depending on next destination, routing of mails is all done by the RMS wing comprising the Sorting and Transit Mail Offices. Since many Mail Offices are historically located on the Railway Platforms and on the running Trains, employees of Sorting wing of Postal Department are referred as RMS staff. Postal Department reimburses expenses to Railways for providing accommodation in the Platform and in the mail carrying trains. Whereas Post Office is the face of the Postal Department to public, RMS wing carries out the vital back-office work.

road transports all run round the clock, so are the postal sorting and transit mail offices coming under RMS Divisions. Postal mail offices usually run in three shifts for all days in a year. Here comes the question of convenient or inconvenient duty hours in staff deployment. The Record Office attached to each Mail Office maintains the roster of staff deployment. Practically, it is the ‘Arrangement Clerk’ working under the Record Officer, who maintains the duty roster and who proposes deployment of employees in different shifts. Different unions always wanted the Arrangement Clerk to belong to them though the demand of the bigger union usually prevailed. This poor govt. functionary was then used by his union to distribute favor of convenient duty hours to own members and harass the members of the rival union.

The then Head of the Bengal Postal Circle, briefed the young Divisional Head about the acute state of inter union rivalry between NFPE and FNPO groups of unions in the Division. The rivalry reached such a height that a piece of mail posted at Howrah city, which in all likelihood supposed to be delivered at Calcutta, right across the Hooghly River, by next day, were taking months for delivery. People were not getting in time their interview letters, admit cards for competitive examinations, utility bills, leading to large scale resentment and adverse criticism in press. Incidentally in those days, before advent of e-Mail, postal channel was the primary means of communication.

The new Divisional Head on assuming charge found that the Headquarter Mail Office at Howrah looked more like a warehouse of accumulated letters and parcels, rather than a functional Sorting Office. The mails received in a Set are supposed to be segregated, arranged, sorted, bundled, bagged, and dispatched by the same Set, following the principle of 'first in, first out'. If any 'due mail bag' is received by the Set unusually late because of late arrival of the flight / train, then only there may be a possibility of a Set transferring unprocessed mail to the next. It's a matter of 'exception' than a 'rule'. The new Head found that lakhs and lakhs of unprocessed mails were lying in the office. The accumulation was so high, as compared to the accommodation in the seven storied building, that the floor managers could not keep the unprocessed bags properly segregated, as per chronological order of receipt. The bags were all mixed-up: some received a month back were lying below the heap whereas those received on the day were on top. One at the bottom continued to remain at bottom, whereas the mails received last were processed first and disposed of. This made certain letters to get delivered in time where others delayed inadvertently – no consistency, no predictivity in mail transmission time.

The Divisional Head soon had meetings with his officers and came to know that unprecedented accumulation was the result of the undeclared 'work to rule' agitation by the major union whose members were not giving the requisite output for about a month. He asked, why the Supervisors were not reporting, who

all were giving less output and why the erring staff were not being alerted? That the Supervisors were also belonging to the same union, came in the reply. The young Divisional Head soon realized that if one employee was not giving the minimum required output, action could be taken against him but if all were giving less output hardly any action could be taken against them. The new Head wanted to know what about the in-charge of the Set, did they also belong to the same union? Eventually he came to know that in-charge of the Sets were mostly belonging to the same union. At the personal level, they all were sincere but turned out to be completely helpless in the prevailing scenario. To justify transfer of unprocessed mails, they were showing higher figures of receipt by the Sets and higher turnovers, instead of reporting lower productivity of the officials.

The young officer had never faced such a tricky situation earlier. During two-year long probation he heard experts speaking on leadership and team-building but no one briefed them about union agitations viz. pen down / tool down / work to rule / go slow etc. If the average output of a Sorter is 7,000 in a Set and average mail receipt in a Set is 3,50,000 then a group of 50 Sorters is good enough to sort all the receipt. But if each Sorter is giving an output of 3,000 then at the end of the Set there will be a leftover of 2,00,000 unprocessed mails. To justify such transfers, the in-charge reported inflow of mail as 5,50,000. He did not report that staff was giving less output to avoid facing

inconvenient questions by the officers. Such an indiscipline needed just few days for the entire system to go out of gear. Out of frustration and anger, the new Head wanted to know what all the employees belonging to the rival union were doing? Eventually he discovered that when the members of the rival union found nothing was happening to their colleagues giving less output, they on their own started giving less output. The new young officer was spellbound!

Next day onwards the Divisional Officer initiated discussions with the group of unions who were agitating, to ascertain their grievances. Discussions continued for five six hours. The leaders were polite, but in the very beginning they had put forward a condition that the officer should be there alone to discuss with them whereas they may be in any number. Perhaps union leaders thought it was easier to deal with the new officer alone and to extract a commitment from him or that might be just a strategy to intimidate the morale of the Divisional Head. Officially, however, they stated that they knew that the new Head was fair and unbiased, but his junior officers in the division were all against the agitating union and collaborating with the rival union with their vested interests. The leaders stated that they wanted to explain their stand to the new officer, so that the Divisional Head could form an independent opinion of them. The new officer found it fair enough and agreed. At the same time, he decided not to make any commitment to them without verifying the facts from his officers.

Once the marathon discussion ended, the rival union, opposing the agitation, sought an urgent appointment with the Divisional Head. They gave the counterpoints of all that the officer had heard from the agitating union. The Divisional Head realized that this was the standard procedure of collective bargaining by two rival unions. This routine continued for couple of days and then the agitating group of unions submitted a memorandum of twenty points to settle within ten days or otherwise they would be intensifying the agitation.

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When the officer went through the memorandum, he found most of the items contained issues which could be replied only at the level of the Ministry. He had no answer as to why RMS employees were getting less bonus as compared to their counterpart in Railways. Employees of different organizations were paid bonus as per the formula of the “productivity linked bonus”. If postal union considered that their productivity was higher, the issue was to be taken up with the Joint Consultative Machinery at the national level. Postal staff might be getting less bonus as compared to their counterparts in the Railways but getting more as compared to the similarly placed employees in forty other departments. Agitating unions were fully aware of all that. Yet to camouflage their real issue of agita-

tion, such serious items were included in their charter of demands at the local level.

The new Head found that out of twenty points, only three were of some relevance at the Divisional level. One was delay in release of payments of Overtime Allowance. Here, perhaps, he could do something and decided to give his all-out efforts on that. One item was relating to “unhealthy working condition”. Working condition might not have deteriorated in particular in recent years, yet when that was taken up, with all sincerity he thought he should try to improve the arrangements of the Sorting Hall, the Toilet, the Canteen etc. In the governmental system, all these needed some time, there is a process to follow and nothing worthwhile could be done in ten days. When he explained that to the unions, they showed magnanimity in appreciating his position. The union leaders stated that they were fully aware of his limitations. If the Divisional Head had settled just one issue which was completely in his hand, they would be withdrawing the agitation. The unions assured that they would be working extra hours without a pie of overtime to clear-up all the mails accumulated over months in three days. That made the officer to realize that the last point in the charter of demands which looked most inconsequential, was most important to the agitators. That talks about “correcting the biased posting order” issued by the previous Divisional Head.

From the file and after threadbare discussion with the officers concerned,

the new Head could not discover any “bias” in issuing the orders of tenure posting by his predecessor. Rather, the previous Head did the job with complete due diligence. The new Head, therefore, decided not to interfere on the issue, though that was the easiest thing for him to do to restore the normalcy. He, instead, actively took up with the higher authority the issue of releasing fund to his division to settle Overtime dues and initiated such efforts which he thought would help in improving the working environment of the staff. However, there was no positive signal from the agitators. Accumulation of mails increased further, and letters were getting delayed further in transmission. There was a kind of uncomfortable lull in the offices and an undeclared “work to rule” was continuing.

The agitating group of unions was the major union having more than 85% of the staff on their fold at headquarter-station. By virtue of their dominance in number, this union always managed to get their own member posted as Arrangement Clerk and through him bargained with the members of the rival union to shift their loyalty. One may legitimately ask if this unfair practice was continuing so long and if the administration was so helpless, how the smaller union succeed in keeping hold on remaining 15% of the staff? It all happened because the smaller union also was organized politically, and committed sympathizers of the opposition political outfits supported the smaller union despite of personal inconveniences. The new Divisional Head was surprised to discover that entire staff of the Division was divided in either of the two opposing

unions and their affiliation mostly depended on their personal political inclination at that time. This sort of one-to-one mapping between the committed personal political inclination and the union affiliation gave a special character to the trade union movement in Bengal, not so evident in other States of India.

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The new officer discovered that the Record Officer and other managers never interfered in the arbitrary deployment by the Arrangement Clerk on the fear of persecution by the major union on some pretext or other. They merely witnessed the injustices done to the members of the smaller unions. The middle level officers and the supervisors knew that the rival unions could create noise, shout slogans, and may *gherao* the Divisional Head till Police rescues him but had no strength to disrupt the work in a sustained manner to “teach administration a lesson”. The wildcat strike by the unions is something that is dreaded most by the managers of the operative departments. Thus, an unfair practice continued in perpetuity which was found to be unjust by the previous Divisional Head, who gathered the courage to change the tradition and posted a level-headed competent lady official, belonging to the smaller union as the Arrangement Clerk. This trivial issue led the major Union to undertake such an agitation that the Circle Administration had to transfer the Divisional Head

and the young officer was posted all of a sudden to take control of the situation.

The new Divisional Head was in a fix. If he had set aside the order of his predecessor by a simple stroke of pen, he could buy peace but would be losing the credibility in the long run. He would be losing credibility not only to the members of the smaller union, the big brother would now start thinking that they could extract anything from this young officer by twisting hands. The officer explained his stand to the superior authority in the Circle administration. This was endorsed by his seniors, but at the same time they were expecting some miracle from him so that the impasse ended and suffering of the people in the area stopped.

On 11<sup>th</sup> day, while still in his residence, Divisional Head got a phone call from the Deputy Superintendent that the major Service Union stopped working all over Howrah and were threatening to extend the agitation in the Sorting and Transit Mail Offices of Calcutta and in other parts of Bengal if their demands were not met. They were in *Dharna* and were preventing willing officials belonging to rival unions to discharge their duties. Everyone knew that in those days, there was no point of seeking police help to ensure that the willing officers could join duties. Whereas official stand of Police Department in Bengal at that time was not to interfere in the “*peaceful democratic demonstrations*”, the presence of police force in the office premise would have further complicated the situation. At that tender age, sudden stop of work by the employees,

appeared to the young Divisional Head as a bolt from the blue. He was immature enough to think that his sincerity in releasing the past dues of over-time cycles, his tireless efforts in improving the working environment would be appreciated by the agitating unions. But nothing of that sort happened. To the union leadership all important was to have hold of the Arrangement Clerk and rest all were to *show legitimacy of their agitation*.

That the RMS employees have gone on strike at Howrah came out in local newspapers in a big way. The Divisional Head started getting desperate calls from the Bank Managers who wanted to assess how long the Strike was likely to continue as in those days clearance of cheques depended upon timely delivery of the registered letters. Desperate Pensioners started asking whether their pension payment advises and money orders would be reaching them before end of the month. When no solution emerged to end the stalemate, Circle Administration intervened and called the Circle level leaders of the agitating group of unions for discussion to end the impasse. In that negotiation, the new officer and the Divisional Secretaries of the agitating unions were also invited.

Circle Union succeeded in extracting as much commitment as they could in many issues from the Administration but the highest officers of the Circle stuck to one point that they would not be interfering in the decision of the Divisional Head relating to posting of a clerk, which purely came under his authority.

This was a great face-saving for the new officer and finally, the Divisional Unions had to suspend the agitation by direction of the Circle Union.

Many in the Division considered this as a 'victory' for the Divisional Head. To him, however, this was a kind of life-lesson. He called the new Arrangement Clerk and directed her to be neutral to the core of her heart in discharging official duties and gave her the guidelines for ensuring fairness in deploying staff in offices round the clock for 365 days in the year.

### **Conclusion**

The above story of militant union agitation on the issue of tenure posting of a Clerk in a RMS office, little more than three decades back, indicated the bottom-line of the local Machiavellian leaders who in a competitive political world could go up to any level for aggrandizement of their organization or for their own leadership position. The incident was reflective of the overall industrial scenario in Bengal in the last quarter of the last century. However, the young officer who faced the militant agitation for no fault of him, subsequently gathered some silver lining from the episode: many in the agitating union as well as the top leadership of the Circle Union did not endorse the show of strength of

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the leaders of the Divisional Unions on a local issue. However, the internal dynamics of the union prevented them to take any pro-active stand to avert the wildcat strike. The lofty ideals of staff welfare, interest of public in general played a little role at the base level in competitive political environment. Central Civil Service

(Conduct) Rules was not of much use in tackling such situations as the unions were careful enough to lead the agitation in such a manner that administration never got a chance to declare their acts as unlawful. The *wildcat strikes* by the employees, therefore, never came under the purview of “*unbecoming of a government servant*”.