

INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT IN INDIA –Is the sleeping giant waking up? by K.R.Shyam Sundar, Bookwell, New Delhi, 2010.

After the New Economic Policy and globalization, industrial conflict in India declined steadily although the trade unions protested vociferously for the first two or three years. But a general redefining of industrial relations also took place. According to the author the old 'industrial trench warfare' in India appeared to have given way to cooperation and peace and employer-employee conflicts were apparently replaced by human resource management practices. But recent events, especially post-2000, appear to indicate otherwise. This book suggests that industrial conflict is re-emerging in India. The study is very useful, since it draws attention to the recent agitations and conflicts in well-known business organizations, especially in the fast growing industries like automobiles, mobile phones etc. It also draws attention to workers of all hues and to movements by contract workers. In fact contract workers' unions have been growing of late, as part of a deliberate strategy of CTUOs to organize the unorganized.

The author refers to several factors which favour his main argument. The most important of these is the relation between the features of globalization and industrial conflict, primarily the issue of labour flexibility. He points out that globalization stoked conflict by aggravating unemployment, creating job insecurity and income inequality, as well as reducing the quality of jobs. Students and prac-

titioners of industrial relations know that the new economic policy in India did trigger a large number of conflicts in the early 1990s, primarily due to the changes that management sought to bring about. In fact, it was the very small choice that workers and their unions had between the devil (management pressure) and the deep sea (competitive failure) that compelled a reduction in conflicts and a rethinking on strategies. Further, in many cases conflict simmered rather than erupted.

The author also presents considerable supportive data on industrial conflicts. For instance, the number of registered trade unions grew steadily during the economic reforms period, although the rate of growth slowed. While incidence of work stoppages declined, workers' mobilization showed 'a definite upward trend', despite declines in one or two years. The number of workdays lost also showed an upward trend, despite fluctuations in certain years. The duration of work stoppages too became longer. In addition, workers involved in strikes started outnumbering those involved in lockouts. Data on the causes of work stoppages also favour this view. Indiscipline and violence as a cause of disputes, increased from 36.4 % of total disputes in 1995-98 to 55.7% in 2003-04 and to 73.5% during 2006-07. The author also points out that the bulk of the workdays lost occurred in five states.

While Maharashtra was one of five states during 1994-96, it was replaced by Rajasthan during 2005-07. West Bengal led in both the periods. Andhra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu were the three other common states.

The other data adduced by the author is the case studies, relating to conflicts in the automobile industry and its ancillaries (Maruti, Bajaj, Bosch, Mahindra & Mahindra, Pricol, Honda Motorcycles and Scooters, Rico, Hyundai, etc) as well as the other industries like Jute, Airlines (Jet and Air India), Steel, Tyres, Mobile Phones and Dairy Products. He also looks at several conflicts in the public sector like banks and insurance, oil sector, ports & docks, defence, telecom, coal and among contract workers and unorganized workers. This fairly large body of conflicts in various industries, certainly favours his thesis of revival of industrial conflicts in India. The period dealt with also indicates that these conflicts were not just a result of the pressures of recession during 2007-09 but have been occurring from time to time even in the years of economic growth. The author however, does indicate that several strikes were politically motivated, called by the left CTUOs after they parted company with the Congress.

However, there are some weaknesses in the arguments provided. Growth in the number of workers involved, can be a result of conflicts occurring in larger industries rather than greater militancy on the part of workers. It has always been the case in India that whenever strikes

occurred across an industry (cotton textiles, jute, banks) or in a large organization [railways, oil corporations], both the number of workers involved as also the workdays lost have jumped. The other possibility is that new issues have cropped up leading more workers to militate. But the jute industry, which has been on periodic strikes for many years and especially had lockouts for long periods at a time, still agitates on the same issues.

Another factor accounting for the larger number of workdays lost could be the relatively better ability of employees to sustain strikes due to better pay. In fact many of the conflicts referred to are among MNCs and white collar employees, paid reasonably good salaries/wages (e.g. jet pilots, auto-employees). Conflict appears not to have increased suddenly but became more visible because the companies involved are well known.

The data on 'violence and indiscipline' does not indicate causes. They are an expression of adamant attitudes on both sides. At the same time, there is little evidence that cooperative and negotiation strategies of the unions were exhausted. These have in fact served many unions fairly well in many instances and organizations in the post-reform period.

Large number of PSUs has been shown to have gone on strike. But public sector employees have been known to demand parity after every government pay hike (1996, 2008). Also delayed reforms or second phase reforms (e.g. bank mergers) would trigger protest in the PSUs. They could also indicate more tol-

erance for strikes among PSU management. In Bokaro Steel Plant, the author writes that CTUOs discouraged workers from going on strike.

It is true that globalization worldwide has led to industrial conflict, as inequalities grow among different groups of employees. This has in fact led to the new concept and demand for inclusive growth. The linkages with international phenomena, such as growing industrial unrest in Korea, China, Japan, France, Italy etc could have provided a stronger argument in favour of the thesis, but has not been included.

The fact remains that the total number of strikes has actually declined steadily. Hence, several questions remain. Is it the author's case that strikes are erupting in organizations and sectors where there were very few or no strikes earlier? Have the traditionally conflict-prone industries like textiles quietened down? Are there conflicts in new locations? For example, WB continues to lead in total workdays lost. But Rajasthan is an addition. Are the issues related primarily to globalization or are there other issues as well? For instance labour flexibility is a major issue post-globalisation, but union recognition is an old issue. It is known that in BSNL there was deliberate delay in wage negotiations, which led to several strikes. The author refers to managerial ineptitude /inadequacy, but does it play a significant role? Many of the strikes cited are post 2007-08, which could be related to the recession and its effects. The references to Nandigram (chemical hub), Singur (Tata Motors), Paradeep (Posco) cases do not make labour history since they

are part of the wider national or even global debate between development and human rights.

There is also a tendency to make sweeping statements such as:

- Industrial conflict has been the defining feature of industrial relations in recent years.
- The regular workers' unions, by embracing the interests and causes of non-regular workers are becoming an all-encompassing labour movement.
- The state has always adopted an intolerant and severe attitude reminiscent of a colonial state towards strikes in the government sector.
- Workers have become casualties in the showdown between managerial prerogative and union power.
- Workers and trade unions have lost their faith in the so-called constitutional path of going by laws and institutions and rule-books.

These require qualification and moderation. It is found, on the contrary, that litigation by unions has increased and many have been successful. Many printing and spelling mistakes occur. The treatment of cases is uneven in terms of length and aspects, nor are they all of the same significance (M&M and Bosche).

Ratna Sen
Professor (Retd)
Indian Institute of Social Welfare &
Management
Kolkata