Fragmented Solidarities: Trade Unionism, Ideological Rivalry & Labor Militancy in Pre-Liberalization Baroda

Pravin J. Patel

This article examines the historical roots of trade union fragmentation in India through a micro-level study of Baroda's labor movement from the late 1920s to the mid-1980s. It argues that the diminished capacity of Indian trade unions to resist neoliberal reforms post-1991 stems not only from external economic and policy shifts but from long-standing structural and ideological fissures within the labor movement itself. Using archival and interview data, the study traces how competing national federations—Gandhian, Marxist, Socialist, and culturally nationalist—engaged in tactical rivalry and plant-level organizing, undermining sectoral solidarity and collective bargaining strength. Baroda's case reflects broader national patterns of union pluralism, organizational rigidity, and ideological polarization.

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Introduction

The post-1991 liberalization of the Indian economy marked a pivotal structural shift in industrial relations, weakening the institutional and political standing of organized labor. As economic growth and foreign investment became central policy objectives, trade unions in India experienced a steady decline in organizational vitality and bargaining power. According to the Labor Bureau, (2002), the number of registered trade unions filing annual returns fell from approximately 17,800 in 1980 (representing around 10.7 million workers) to just 9,900 by 1999, with membership dropping to 7.4 million. Despite a nominal rise in registered unions in subsequent decades, many remained inactive or under-resourced. Union density, defined as the proportion of wage and salary earners who are union members, fell precipitously—by the early 2000s, only about 7% of India's workforce was unionized, with more than 90% employed in the

unorganized or informal sector, beyond the effective reach of trade unions (Papola & Pais, 2007). The number of industrial disputes has also dropped significantly—from 1,825 disputes in 1991 to just 143 in 2015 (Ministry of Labor & Employment, 2016)—indicating a reduced capacity for collective action. This decline was further exacerbated by the proliferation of contract and casual labor and employers' growing aversion to engaging with unionized employees. While informal employment accounts for over 90% of the labor force, trade unions have largely failed to organize this vast segment effectively (Ramaswamy, 2010).Even within the formal sector, traditional tools of industrial resistance lost traction: the number of strikes dropped from an average of 250 per year in the 1970s and 1980s to fewer than 50 per year by the 2010s, while lockouts increasingly outnumbered strikes—signaling greater employer dominance in industrial relations (ILO, 2018). Person-days lost due to industrial disputes declined from around 20 million in the 1980s to under 2 million in recent years (Labor Bureau, various years), underscoring a broader erosion of collective bargaining and worker agency in the liberalized era. The disempowerment of unions is particularly stark in the new economic zones and among precarious workers in services and manufacturing, where union presence is virtually absent.

Moreover, the erosion of workers' rights has been a central feature of India's post-liberalization political economy. Labor reforms introduced in recent years—including the four new Labor Codes enacted between 2019 and 2020—have streamlined regulatory mechanisms largely in favor of employers, diluting longstanding protections related to job security, working conditions, and collective bargaining (Kannan & Raveendran, 2021). Restrictions on the right to strike, the expansion of fixed-term employment, and relaxed thresholds for lay-offs and retrenchment have further undermined workers' bargaining power (Shyam Sundar, 2022; Sinha, 2021). The 2020 repeal of over 40 labor laws, including the Industrial Disputes Act and Trade Unions Act, has also narrowed the legal avenues available for workers to contest unfair practices. The combined effect has been a heightened sense of precarity and a systematic weakening of labor rights, particularly among contract workers, women, and informal sector employees (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019).

This article offers a micro-level case study of the trade union movement in the industrial city of Baroda during the pre-liberalization period—from the late 1920s through the mid-1980s—with the aim of locating the historical roots of the structural weaknesses that have beset Indian trade unionism in the liberalized economy. Why is it that Indian trade unions—which were once militant, combative, and central to shaping India's industrial relations system—have failed to mount a meaningful resistance against this onslaught in the post-liberalization era?

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changes, but from the deep-seated structural flaws internal to the trade union movement itself. These flaws—particularly evident in the post-1991 period—have their roots in the formative stages of union development and inter-federation politics. Baroda's labr history offers a compelling empirical lens to explore these enduring weaknesses. From the late 1920s to the 1980s, the city witnessed vigorous trade union activity, marked by inter-federation rivalries, intermittent labor militancy, and a broad spectrum of ideological orientations. National trade union federations—ranging from Gandhian and Marxist to Socialist and culturally nationalist—competed for influence over Baroda's industrial workforce. Although ideological pluralism enabled mobilization and experimentation, it also fostered organizational atomization, strategic incoherence, and factionalism. Despite the presence of combative unions and politically engaged leadership, Baroda's union structure remained fragmented and primarily plant-level, lacking the capacity for sectoral or city-wide coordination. This study of trade unionism in Baroda, covering the period between late 1920s and mid-1980s, provides a historically grounded, regionally specific account of how labor organizing unfolded in a mid-sized industrial city of western India. While much of the existing literature focuses on industrial centers like Bombay, Calcutta, and Kanpur, Baroda offers a distinct case. It was a princely state[1] that industrialized relatively late, yet saw the proliferation of rival union federations—each aligned with different ideological, political, and organizational currents. In this sense the Baroda case, far from being a local anomaly, mirrors national patterns of ideological rivalry and institutional weakness. It thus provides critical insights into why Indian trade unions have struggled to maintain relevance, coherence, and collective strength in the face of neoliberal reforms.

The analysis draws conceptually on the scholarship that views trade union fragmentation as both a structural and ideological phenomenon. Scholars such as Richard Hyman (2001) have argued that union strategies are shaped by competing logics—market, class, and society—each influencing organizational form and political orientation. In the Indian context, union pluralism has often reflected not just ideological diversity but institutional weakness, where federations compete for legitimacy rather than consolidate worker power (Ramas-

1. The princely state of Baroda was one of the most prominent and progressive princely states in colonial India. Ruled by the Gaekwad dynasty of the Marathas, Baroda was established in the 18th century and became a princely state under British paramountcy in the early 19th century. Its capital was Baroda (now Vadodara) in present-day Gujarat. After India's independence in 1947, Baroda acceded to the Indian Union in 1949 and was merged into the newly formed Bombay State, later becoming part of Gujarat in 1960.

wamy, 2010; Shyam Sundar, 2020). This study situates Baroda's labor history within this framework, arguing that the city's militant yet divided union landscape exemplifies how ideological rivalry and plant-level organizing can undermine sectoral solidarity and long-term institution-building. The case thus contributes to broader debates on union fragmentation, political patronage, and the limits of collective action in postcolonial industrial relations.

The article draws on a range of sources, including archival reports, published data, trade union pamphlets, fieldwork observations, and interviews with union leaders. These materials are used to analyze the organizational structures, ideological alignments, patterns of mobilization, and episodes of labor militancy that characterized Baroda's union scene.

Baroda: Industrial Growth in a Regional Urban Centre

Baroda, now known as Vadodara, emerged in the post-independence period as a key industrial center in western India. Strategically located at the intersection of the Bombay–Delhi and Bombay–Ahmedabad railway lines, the city hosted a large marshalling yard, a major railway workshop, a civil aerodrome, and military installations, including an E.M.E. cantonment and an air force station. These infrastructural features positioned Baroda as a vital node in Gujarat's industrial geography.

Historically, Baroda had served as the capital of a princely state, and its pre-industrial economy was anchored in commerce and administrative employment. Although the city experienced early industrial stirrings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sustained large-scale industrialization gathered pace only after the formation of Gujarat as a separate state in 1960 (Jasol,1985; Patel, 2011). Census data from 1971 revealed Baroda's distinctly industrial profile: 35.5 per cent of the working population was employed in industry, 17.5 per cent in commerce, 9.7 per cent in transport, 2.7 per cent in agriculture, and 34.6 per cent in other economic activities (Jasol, 1985). These figures underscore the city's transformation from a princely administrative center into a regional industrial hub in the postcolonial period—a transformation that laid the structural foundations for its dynamic, fragmented, and highly politicized trade union landscape in the decades that followed.

By the early 1980s, Baroda had developed into a significant site of industrial production. Its core sectors included textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and engineering (Jasol, 1985). In its periphery, large-scale public-sector undertakings were established: an oil refinery, a petrochemical complex, a heavy water plant, and what was then the country's largest fertilizer unit. This industrial expansion spurred the growth of commerce, construction, and transport, accelerating the city's urban transformation.

The Trade Union Landscape

Trade unions in Baroda may be broadly classified into two categories: (i)

those affiliated with national federations, and (ii) unaffiliated or independent unions, typically led by individual insiders. While the affiliated unions benefit from the political and material support of their parent federations, the independent unions function autonomously, often constrained by limited resources. A defining distinction between the two lies in the former's formal allegiance to a national political ideology, shaped by the orientation of the respective federation. As this study focuses on the political context of trade unionism in Baroda, primary attention is directed toward the affiliated unions.

Origin & Development of the Trade Union Movement

The trade union movement in Baroda has historically been shaped by local affiliates of national-level federations, thereby aligning grassroots struggles with the broader currents of Indian labor politics. By the late 1980s, six major national trade union federations had established active affiliates in the city: the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), and the National Labor Organization (NLO).

Majoor Mahajan: From TLA to INTUC & NLO

While AITUC—founded on 31 October 1920—was the first national-level trade union federation in India, the Textile Labor Association (TLA), popularly known as Majoor Mahajan in Gujarat, was established earlier in Ahmedabad in 1918. Later, in late 1920s, it also established its units in other industrial centers of Gujarat, including Baroda (Patel, 2011).

Initiated by Anasuya Sarabhai with the support of Mahatma Gandhi, TLA embodied a distinct Gandhian approach to trade unionism, emphasizing non-violence, cooperation, trusteeship, and moral discipline (Parel, 2006). In addition to negotiating economic demands, it promoted comprehensive worker welfare through schools, health clinics, libraries, and housing cooperatives (Patel, 1984; 1987). This vision was institutionalized through the Hindustan Majoor Seva Sangh (HMSS), a training center to cultivate Gandhian values among union leaders (Karnik, 1978: 167–68). While originally active in Ahmedabad, TLA expanded into other textile hubs of Gujarat, including Baroda, by the late 1920s (Patel, 2011).

During its formative years, the AITUC enjoyed broad nationalist support across the political spectrum. However, from the late 1920s, it increasingly aligned with socialist and communist ideologies (Chandavarkar, 1994). In response, the Indian National Congress founded the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in May 1947 as a non-communist alternative, aligned with the developmental goals of the soon-to-be independent Indian state. TLA and HMSS played an instrumental role in INTUC's establishment, offering both leadership and infrastructure (Karnik, 1978: 168–69, 241).

Following the integration of Baroda State into the Indian Union in 1949, Majoor Mahajan in Baroda formally affiliated with INTUC, embedding itself within the Congress-aligned national labor network. However, the 1969–70 split within the Congress Party—between Indira Gandhi's Congress (R) and the Syndicate-led Congress (O)—had significant ripple effects. At its 1971 Nagpur convention, INTUC declared its support for Congress (R). In response, the Gujarat Majoor Mahajan, aligned with Congress (O), withdrew from INTUC in 1972 and helped form the National Labor Organization (NLO) as an independent federation (Karnik, 1978: 377–78). The Baroda unit mirrored this realignment by affiliating with NLO.

This shift transformed Baroda's labor landscape. As the local INTUC leadership and membership moved *en masse* to NLO, INTUC virtually disappeared from the city. INTUC's disappearance and later revival in Baroda during the 1970s—following the Congress split—illustrates how national political ruptures translated into local organizational discontinuities, weakening union continuity and coherence.

The trajectory of Majoor Mahajan in Baroda thus reflects the close interweaving of trade union structures with shifting political affiliations. Initially guided by Gandhian ideals under the TLA, it transitioned to INTUC after independence and later to NLO post-1972. These affiliations underscore how broader political realignments profoundly shaped union identities and organizational continuity at the local level.

Communist Influence & the Rise of AITUC & CITU

The Communist presence in Baroda's labor movement began in the early 1930s, led by individuals influenced by Marxist ideology and supported by Communist leaders from Bombay (Anadkat, 1967: 138). A nucleus of the Communist Party was formed in the city by 1939, although Baroda State's trade union laws denied official registration of Communist-led unions (Anadkat, 1967: 167).

Despite legal barriers, Communist-led unions gained traction in the late 1940s through a series of militant struggles: a month-long strike by textile workers in 1945, a strike by postal workers in 1948, a railway workers' strike in 1947, and agitations at Dinesh Woollen Mills and New India Industries (Rana, 1950; Anadkat, 1967: 165–67). However, this momentum was short-lived. At its second Congress in Calcutta in 1948, the Communist Party of India (CPI) adopted the revolutionary "Ranadive Thesis," which, inspired by the Chinese Revolution, rejected parliamentary democracy and advocated armed insurrection to overthrow what it termed a bourgeois and imperialist Indian state. This strategic shift led to CPI backing for militant peasant and worker actions nationwide.

The Government of India responded with a major crackdown: CPI was banned in several states, thousands of members were imprisoned, and the lead-

ership went underground. In Baroda, key Communist leaders were arrested or forced into hiding, effectively removing their influence from the city's union landscape (Anadkat, 1967: 142).

In 1956, the Maha Gujarat movement demanded a separate state for Gujarati-speaking people, catalyzed by the States Reorganization Commission's proposal to retain Bombay as a bilingual state. Led by the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad, the agitation drew strong support from students, workers, and intellectuals. Strikes, protests, and police violence, including fatalities, culminated in the creation of Gujarat and Maharashtra on 1 May 1960. After statehood, the Janata Parishad launched Sangram Samitis to mobilize industrial workers—including in Baroda—under Communist leadership. These committees demanded revisions in dearness allowance (DA) policy and staged mass demonstrations, ultimately forcing concessions from the state. These successes reinvigorated Communist credibility and led to the formation of new unions in major firms such as Precision Bearings, Tensile Steel Ltd., and Sussan Textiles.

Yet, the resurgence was again derailed. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 triggered arrests of CPI leaders across India, including Baroda. The CPI split in 1964, resulting in the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Most local leaders joined CPI(M), while only one remained with CPI. By the late 1960s, Communist trade unionism in Baroda was once again fragmented. While initially cooperating under the AITUC umbrella, the CPI(M) launched its own federation—the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—in 1970 (Karnik, 1978: 344). CITU advocated for class struggle and mass mobilization against capitalist policies.

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In Baroda, AITUC remained under CPI leadership, and CPI(M) leaders formed a local CITU affiliate. However, during the Emergency (1975–77), many CPI(M) leaders were detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), disrupting CITU's activities. In contrast, AITUC supported the Emergency and expanded its presence, especially in engineering firms and the Alembic group during the early 1970s.

The Socialist Legacy & the Fragmentation of HMS

The socialist trajectory in Baroda evolved in parallel with national political developments, particularly the split from the Indian National Congress in 1947, when the Congress Socialist Party formally established itself as the Socialist Party of India. The formation of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) by the Congress—viewed by the Socialists as a divisive move—initially led them to continue their engagement with the communist-led AITUC. However, in 1948, the Socialists estab-

lished their own national trade union federation, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), which sought to position itself as an independent, democratic socialist alternative, critical of both the Congress-aligned INTUC and the Communist-controlled AITUC. That same year, a local chapter of the Socialist Party was founded in Baroda along with the establishment of the HMS unit (Dhamdhere, 1960).

HMS quickly gained visibility in Baroda by leading a campaign on behalf of the personal staff of the Maharaja of the erstwhile princely state. This agitation culminated in a landmark settlement in 1950 that secured pensions and gratuity for the affected workers. Over the subsequent years, several unions affiliated with HMS. A major expansion came in 1954 with the formation of the Chemical Mazdoor Sabha among workers in the Sarabhai group of industries, which remained the federation's core base of support through the early 1970s.

By the 1970s, however, HMS began to experience internal fragmentation. A turning point came in 1971 when the majority of Baroda's Praja Socialist Party members joined Congress (R), while a smaller group of leaders refused to follow suit (Pantham, 1976:40–41). HMS's internal schism in the early 1970s, triggered by divergent responses to the Congress (R) alignment, fractured its union base in Baroda—exemplifying how ideological divisions undermined federation stability and diluted worker representation.

Rise of BMS: Ideological Roots & Local Consolidation

The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), a national federation of trade unions, was established under the aegis of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a political formation that later merged into the Janata Party in 1977 and subsequently reconstituted itself as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BMS espouses what it describes as an "apolitical" yet culturally nationalist approach to labor, positioning itself in opposition to both Marxist and Western capitalist models.

In Baroda, the organizational presence of the BMS began to take shape in the mid-1960s (Anadkat, 1967: 48–52). Its establishment was facilitated by a local RSS and Jana Sangh activist, who played a central role in founding its initial office. As a relatively new entrant in Baroda's labour landscape, the BMS initially had limited influence, with its activities restricted to a small number of industrial units. However, by the early 1970s, it had begun to consolidate its presence, particularly within the engineering sector, gradually expanding its organisational reach.

The emergence of BMS, alongside other national trade union federations in Baroda, illustrates how the city's labor movement was deeply shaped by national political affiliations. Each federation—whether aligned with Congress, the Communist parties, the Socialists, or the Sangh Parivar—brought distinct ideological orientations and organizational strategies, embedding Baroda's labor politics firmly

within the broader currents of national political contestation.

Their long-term ideological commitments diverged sharply.

All these local units of the national trade union federations were led by local leaders (Patel., 1998; 2016). While these trade union federations in Baroda frequently pursued similar immediate objectives—such as improved wages, better working conditions, and job security—their long-term ideological commitments diverged sharply. These underlying orientations not only defined their distinct organizational identities but also provided the rationale for their separate and often competing existence within the broader labor movement.

Labor Militancy Amid Fragmented Solidarities

The ideological fragmentation among Baroda's trade union federations did not remain confined to abstract doctrinal differences. Instead, it manifested concretely in fierce inter-union rivalrie, as various federations—grounded in competing ideological traditions—sought to expand their organizational presence by mobilizing workers within the same industrial units. The limited size of Baroda's organized workforce, coupled with the absence of a unified trade union platform, intensified the competition for membership and legitimacy. In this context, ideological contestation frequently translated into efforts to outbid rival unions in militant posturing or radical demands, often at the expense of coordinated bargaining. As a result, the labor movement in Baroda became a site of both ideological polarization and tactical overreach, contributing to a pattern of persistent and escalating industrial unrest.

Labor Militancy & Industrial Conflict in Baroda, 1961–1981

Baroda's post-Independence industrial expansion was accompanied by a marked intensification of labor unrest. Drawing on official data from the *Gujarat Labor Gazette*, the evidence reveals that between 1961 and 1981, the city experienced a disproportionately high incidence of industrial disputes relative to the rest of Gujarat. A total of 285 industrial disputes were recorded in Baroda during this period, of which 94.7 percent were strikes—closely mirroring the statewide figure of 95.7 percent. This suggests a strong tendency for worker-initiated protests rather than employer-imposed lockouts, indicating a high level of labor militancy. A particularly turbulent phase emerged between 1976 and 1980, when Baroda alone accounted for 149 disputes—over 60 percent of the city's total for the entire two-decade period. This sharp escalation stands in stark contrast to the mere 7 percent share of disputes reported during the early 1961–65 period. While Gujarat as a whole exhibited a more gradual and cyclical pattern, peaking in the early 1970s, Baroda's trajectory revealed a dramatic and sustained surge in industrial conflict during the post-1970 era.

Although broader economic and political factors—such as inflation, stagnating real wages, and the authoritarian context of the Emergency (1975–77)—undoubtedly contributed to this unrest, the fragmented and ideologically polarized trade union landscape in Baroda played a critical role. As multiple national federations, each operating with distinct political affiliations and competing organizational strategies, vied for influence over a limited industrial workforce, the resulting rivalry fueled tactical radicalization. The overlapping and competitive claims of these unions not only intensified confrontational tactics but also undermined possibilities for coordinated negotiation, contributing to the frequency and protracted nature of industrial disputes in the city.Table 1 presents the distribution of industrial disputes in Baroda in comparison to the rest of Gujarat between 1961 and 1980:

Table 1 Distribution of Industrial Disputes in Baroda Compared to the Rest of Gujarat, (1961–1980)

Place of Disputes	Baroda		Rest of Gujarat		Total	
Period of Disputes	N	%	N	%	N	%
1961-65	18	7	203	10	221	10
1966-70	40	16	322	17	362	17
1971-75	42	17	565	29	607	28
1976-80	149	60	844	44	993	45
Total	249	100	1934	100	2183	100

Source: Government of Gujarat, Gujarat Labor Gazette (January 1961 to December 1980).

Baroda's conflict trajectory was more abrupt and sustained, highlighting its emergence as a uniquely militant industrial hub.

The data indicate a dramatic escalation of industrial conflict in Baroda, particularly during the 1976–1980 period, which alone accounted for 60 percent of the city's total disputes over the two decades. This sharp rise stands in contrast to Baroda's modest 7 percent share of disputes in the early 1960s. While the rest of Gujarat experienced a more distributed pattern of disputes—peaking gradually in the early 1970s—Baroda's conflict trajectory was more abrupt and sustained, highlighting its emergence as a uniquely militant industrial hub.

The composition of these disputes further underscores Baroda's distinctive labor profile. As shown in Table 2, a higher proportion of disputes in Baroda were both prolonged and involved larger numbers of workers compared to the rest of Gujarat:

These figures reveal that 58 percent of disputes in Baroda lasted more than five days, compared to 49 percent in the rest of the state. Moreover, 66 percent of Baroda's disputes involved more than 50 workers, as opposed to 55 percent elsewhere. This suggests a higher degree of union mobilization and the ability to

Table 2 Distribution of Industrial Disputes in Terms of Duration and Number of Workers Involved in Baroda as Compared to the Rest of Gujarat (1961–1981)

Place of Disputes	Baroda		Rest of Gujarat		Total	
Duration of Disputes	N	%	N	%	N	%
Short (5 days or less)	117	42	1056	51	1173	50
Long (6 days or more)	163	58	1022	49	1185	50
Total	280	100	2079	100	2358*	100
Number of Workers Directly Involved						
Small (50 or less)	97	34	952	45	1049	44
Large (51 or more)	188	66	1169	55	1357	56
Total	285	100	2121	100	2406	100

* Total number of disputes recorded during 1961–81 is 2406. But information about the duration of 48 disputes was not available.
Source: Government of Gujarat, Gujarat Labor Gazette (Jan. 1961 to Dec. 1981).

sustain prolonged collective action, likely fostered by intense inter-federation competition.

Notably, while strikes remained the predominant form of industrial action across Gujarat—with 95.7 percent of all disputes being strikes—Baroda closely mirrored this trend. However, the proportion of lockouts in Baroda (4.9 percent) was marginally higher than the state average (3.8 percent), suggesting that employers in the city increasingly resorted to pre-emptive or retaliatory lockouts in response to growing union assertiveness.

In sum, the data affirm that Baroda's labor conflicts were not only more frequent but also more intense in scale and duration (Patel, 1977). This militancy cannot be explained solely by structural economic factors or patterns of industrialization. Rather, it was amplified by the fragmented and ideologically polarized trade union landscape, which fostered tactical militancy and discouraged unified bargaining. The city's industrial relations during this period were thus shaped as much by political contestation within the labor movement as by employer-employee dynamics.

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Union Typologies & Sectoral Penetration in Baroda

The fragmented ideological terrain of Baroda's trade union movement was mirrored in the structural forms that unions assumed across sectors. While inter-federation rivalry was shaped by competing worldviews and political affiliations, it was also embedded in the very architecture of union organization—manifested in limited scope, weak institutional depth, and narrow jurisdiction. We examine the typological distribution of unions across

Baroda's industrial landscape, highlighting how most unions remained confined to single units or narrowly defined occupational clusters. Despite sporadic attempts at industry-level coordination, the dominant pattern was one of organizational atomization, which reinforced the centrifugal pressures already generated by ideological fragmentation. The structural limits of these unions significantly curtailed their capacity to act as unified agents of labor, even in the face of common grievances and widespread industrial unrest

Union Structures & Organizational Scope

The typological landscape of trade unions in Baroda during the early 1980s was overwhelmingly dominated by plant-level organizations, a structural feature that cut across ideological affiliations. Unions like *Jyoti Karmachari Sangh* (BMS) and *IPCL Employees' Union* (AITUC) illustrate this pattern, operating within the confines of individual establishments rather than pursuing industry-wide mobilization. This tendency toward atomized organizing was not merely a reflection of nomenclature but indicative of deeper structural constraints—limited federated support, employer resistance to cross-plant coordination, and the absence of sectoral bargaining frameworks. While the *Majoor Mahajan Mandal* (NLO) stood out as a rare industrial union in the textile sector, such consolidation was not replicated elsewhere. Even unions with broader-sounding titles, such as *Baroda Rubber Works Kamdar Mandal*, functioned as single-unit entities, reinforcing the fragmented nature of Baroda's labor movement.

While a few federations experimented with industry-cluster unions—drawing membership from multiple plants within sectors like chemicals and engineering—these efforts rarely translated into coordinated industrial action. Unions such as *Rasayanik Kamdar Sangh* (BMS) and *Engineering Kamdar Union* (CITU) exemplified this approach, yet during major disputes in the engineering sector in the late 1960s and early 1970s, no federation mounted a city-wide campaign. This absence of collective mobilization, despite the sector's density, underscored the organizational fragmentation and competitive inhibition that shaped Baroda's labor landscape.

In subsequent years, general or locality-based unions emerged, nominally spanning multiple plants or industries. Bodies like *Baroda Mazdoor Sabha* and *Makarpura GIDC Employees' Union* functioned more as loose federations of plant-level units, responding to grievances on a case-by-case basis rather than articulating sectoral or city-wide demands. Their operational logic remained reactive and fragmented, limiting their strategic capacity.

A handful of craft or occupational unions also surfaced, targeting specific worker groups such as municipal drivers or clerical staff. These remained small and relatively marginal, and notably, Marxist federations like AITUC and CITU refrained from forming such

unions, consistent with their ideological opposition to sectionalism.

In sum, Baroda's union typologies reflected a structurally atomized trade unionism, with the textile sector standing as a partial exception. The absence of industrial or city-wide solidarity curtailed the potential for sustained collective bargaining, leaving unions vulnerable to employer tactics and inter-union rivalries.The structural fragmentation of Baroda's trade unions—manifested in their typological narrowness and limited sectoral reach—was not merely an organizational constraint but also a political condition. The absence of industrial solidarity and federated coordination created fertile ground for ideological competition, with national federations vying for influence at the plant level. In this context, union strategies were shaped as much by political alignments and patronage networks as by workplace grievances, setting the stage for a complex interplay between labor representation and party politics.

Federation Penetration & Sectoral Strength

In the early 1980s, Baroda's organized sector workforce was estimated at around 100,000, with roughly 42,000 concentrated in key industries such as engineering, textiles, and chemicals. Sectoral strength varied sharply across federations. The *Majoor Mahajan Mandal* (NLO) held a near-monopoly in textiles, functioning as the sole recognized bargaining agent, while *AITUC* dominated engineering, claiming representation in over 100 units and nearly 10,000 members.

These two federations—NLO and AITUC—anchored the city's largest industrial sectors, whereas others like *INTUC*, *HMS*, *BMS*, and *CITU* struggled to gain traction in smaller, fragmented industries. Federation influence was shaped not only by institutional reach but also by ideological resonance: NLO's Gandhian legacy aligned with the historically entrenched textile workforce, while AITUC's class-struggle orientation appealed to workers in engineering and process industries.

Organizational Fragility: Finances, Membership, & Survival Strategies

The financial fragility of Baroda's trade union federations in the early 1980s reflected their broader organiational weakness. Membership dues—the primary income source—were both minimal and irregular, typically ranging from Rs. 0.25 to Rs. 1.00 per month. Older federations like *NLO* and *HMS* resisted fee hikes, fearing attrition, while collection methods remained informal and often clandestine, especially in hostile industrial environments.

Union leaders identified two main categories of non-contributors: apathetic or fearful sympathizers, and active detractors. To navigate this uncertainty, federations adopted flexible membership practices, allowing retroactive enrolment and case-specific payments (Rs. .25–Rs. 2.50) for grievance redressal or legal representation. These strategies were de-

fensive as much as tactical—aimed at retaining members and deterring defections in a competitive union landscape.

Supplementary income was occasionally secured through voluntary donations after successful settlements, typically 5–10% of the financial gains. Some unions institutionaed arrear-based deductions or negotiated benefit disbursements in the presence of union leaders to enable on-the-spot collection. Yet such practices were inconsistently applied, and even the more successful federations struggled with financial sustainability. These expedient strategies had ambiguous implications for cultivating class consciousness among workers (Patel, 1994).

Resource Disparities & Institutional Capacity

Despite widespread financial challenges, a few federations in Baroda managed to accumulate modest but meaningful organizational assets, reflecting their relative administrative capacity and sectoral reach.

The *Majoor Mahajan Mandal* (NLO) stood out with the most substantial infrastructure. By 1982–83, it employed ten salaried staff, operated from its own two-storey *Mazdoor Bhavan*, and maintained a Rs. 2.25 lakh welfare trust supporting medical and educational services for workers. *AITUC*, though lacking a dedicated office, employed five full-time leaders and relied on affiliated units like *Alembic* and *ORG* for premises. Its assets included basic office equipment such as typewriters and an electronic calculator. *HMS*, at its peak, acquired a building (*Shram Sadhana*) partly funded by foreign aid. However, its decline by the 1980s was evident in the decision to rent out its USAID-donated printing press due to inadequate internal capacity. *BMS*, operating from rented premises, maintained modest assets and motor vehicles. Its co-location with the RSS office underscored ideological linkages, despite formal claims of administrative separation.

INTUC and *CITU* were the weakest materially, functioning from small rented offices and employing no more than three full-time staff—some unpaid. Their limited infrastructure constrained their ability to provide sustained member support or engage in long-term mobilization.

These disparities in institutional infrastructure and staff capacity reinforced asymmetries of power among federations and constrained the possibility of joint action. In a competitive environment shaped by ideological rivalries, unions expended considerable energy guarding turf and competing for influence rather than building sector-wide solidarity or investing in durable institution-building.

The typologies, sectoral reach, and resource dynamics of Baroda's trade unions in the early 1980s reveal a labor movement marked by ideological fragmentation, institutional fragility, and competitive isolation. The dominance of plant-level unions, the failure to construct cross-industry solidarities, and the financial pre-

cariousness of even the more established federations point to a structurally disarticulated union landscape.

In this context, political and ideological contestation among national federations translated into organizational volatility at the local level. While federations varied in orientation—Marxist, Gandhian, Socialist, or culturally nationalist—their shared inability to transcend rivalry and build coherent structures ultimately undermined the strength and credibility of Baroda's labor movement.

Communicating Without Cohesion: The Limits of Outreach in a Divided Movement

In Baroda's fragmented and ideologically polarized trade union landscape, communication practices were essential for maintaining organizational cohesion, mobilizing workers, and asserting ideological legitimacy. Yet structural weaknesses, financial constraints, and intense inter-federation competition severely limited the development of robust communication infrastructure. As a result, unions relied on low-cost, decentralized, and improvised out-reach methods, with considerable variation across federations.

Press Coverage & In-House Publications

Mainstream newspapers in Baroda offered limited and selective coverage of labor issues, often ignoring union activities unless disputes escalated into high-profile confrontations. In response, federations attempted to develop their own publications, though most efforts were sporadic and resource-constrained.

The *Majoor Mahajan Mandal* (NLO) was the only federation to sustain a consistent publication—*Majoor Patrika*, a fortnightly that ran for over three decades, offering news, political commentary, and organizational updates. Others struggled to maintain continuity: *HMS* discontinued *Mazdoor Samaj* amid internal divisions in the 1970s, while *INTUC* launched *Shram Satta* during the 1977 elections only to abandon it soon after. Marxist federations like *AITUC* and *CITU*, despite their emphasis on worker education, relied on central party organs due to local financial and logistical limitations.

Meetings & Informal Channels

Most federations depended on meetings, handbills, notice boards, and oral communication. Mass meetings were rare and typically reserved for symbolic occasions like May Day or major agitations. Routine matters were addressed through general body, executive committee, and departmental meetings, though compliance with constitutional provisions for regular meetings was inconsistent. Gate meetings—brief, informal gatherings held during shift changes—were the most fre-

Gate meetings—brief, informal gatherings held during shift changes—were the most frequent outreach method, used widely by *BMS*, *CITU*, and *HMS*.

quent outreach method, used widely by *BMS*, *CITU*, and *HMS*. These allowed leaders to deliver emotive speeches, announce decisions, and respond to grievances, especially during mobilization drives or inter-union competition.

Notice Boards & Handbills

Notice boards and blackboards displayed updates on conciliation hearings, meeting schedules, and strike developments. Handbills, produced quickly and inexpensively, were vital during disputes, summarizing grievances, demands, and employer responses. Their effectiveness, however, depended on literacy levels, print quality, and the credibility of the issuing union.

The Mutardi Patrika (Toilet Bulletins)

A distinctive grassroots medium was the *Mutardi Patrika*—handwritten leaflets posted in factory toilets. Often anonymous, these "toilet bulletins" featured satirical cartoons and provocative language targeting management or rival union leaders. While they embarrassed employers and reflected worker creativity, their impact on inter-union rivalry was limited, as targeted unions frequently removed or defaced them.

Thus, trade union communication in Baroda was shaped by the structural and ideological fragmentation of the labor movement. In the absence of unified media platforms, federations relied on decentralized and improvised methods. Though individual unions devised creative responses to these constraints, the lack of collective communication infrastructure reinforced the centrifugal tendencies already embedded in Baroda's divided union landscape. Communication thus became not only a tool for mobilization but also a mirror of the movement's fractured solidarity and persistent rivalries.

The fragmented nature of trade union communication in Baroda was symptomatic of deeper organizational and ideological fissures.

The fragmented nature of trade union communication in Baroda was symptomatic of deeper organizational and ideological fissures. The reliance on decentralized outreach methods—however creative—reflected not only material constraints but also the absence of shared platforms for collective mobilization. In this context, political mobilization was often reactive, shaped by episodic grievances and competitive posturing rather than sustained class-based organizing. The inability to forge unified narratives or solidarities across federations further weakened the labor movement's capacity to engage with broader political currents, leaving it vulnerable to co-optation, fragmentation, and strategic drift.

Conclusion: Trade Unionism at the Crossroads of Ideology & Competition

The case of Baroda presents a compelling microcosm of the contradictions and complexities that defined Indian trade unionism in the decades preceding liber-

alization. While the city witnessed a substantial growth in industrial employment and an upsurge in union activity, its labor movement remained deeply fragmented—structurally, ideologically, and organizationally. The proliferation of national trade union federations, each aligned with distinct political ideologies—Marxist, Gandhian, Socialist, and culturally nationalist—engendered intense inter-union competition. Rather than fostering collective strength, this rivalry led to jurisdictional disputes, defensive organizing strategies, and a duplication of efforts that weakened the capacity for sustained worker mobilization. Organizationally, most unions remained plant-bound, financially precarious, and administratively limited, often relying on short-term tactics rather than long-term institution-building.

Baroda's labor militancy, particularly in the 1970s, was thus not solely a function of class conflict or industrial growth, but also a symptom of the competitive dynamics among federations seeking to expand or defend their influence within a constrained industrial workforce. While this environment produced periods of agitation and mobilization, it also undermined the potential for unified bargaining and systemic reform.

The Baroda case underscores the urgent need for rethinking trade union strategies in India's liberalized economy. As labor reforms increasingly favor employer flexibility over worker protections, the historical lessons of fragmented unionism point to the necessity of building cross-sectoral alliances, streamlining federation structures, and investing in long-term institution-building. Without addressing the legacy of ideological and organizational disunity, contemporary unions risk further marginalization—especially in the informal and contract-based workforce that dominates India's labor market today.

In retrospect, the Baroda experience underscores the paradox of Indian trade unionism in the pre-liberalization era: a movement simultaneously vibrant and divided, assertive yet fragile, ideologically ambitious but organizationally limited. These historical contradictions continue to resonate in the present, as unions confront a liberalized economy marked by informalization, weakened legal protections, and declining bargaining power. Addressing the legacy of fragmentation—through structural consolidation, ideological recalibration, and inclusive organizing—remains essential if trade unions are to reclaim relevance and agency in shaping India's industrial relations landscape.

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