

Communications

Notes on Industrial Relations & Technology

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Introduction

Industrial relations in some sections of academia and industry is also termed as “Employee Relations, Labor-Management Relations and/or Labor Relations” (Kay, 1979; Freckel, 1986; Patil, 1992; Freckle & Harrods, 1995). Nonetheless, each of these terms consider ‘workplace relationships’, an important component of industrial relations. The industrial relations studies attempt to organize workplace relationships into a structured format among its stakeholders namely: workers/trade union, employer/management and the State. According to Patil (1992) out of all these terms ‘Industrial Relations’ is the most popular.

Venkata Ratnam (2006: 23) defines industrial relations as ‘relationships between employers/managers and workers and their unions in the production/service process’. The workers’ approach in industrial relations is to seek better working conditions, wages, to have fair grievance handling mechanisms and job security. The role of the union is to represent workers and put forward their de-

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mands to the management/employer and to mediate between workers and the management. The management/employer’s role is to optimize production in exchange of fair working conditions, providing fair wages and facilitating constructive and frequent dialogues with the union. Therefore, the industrial relations studies emerged to create harmonious workplace relationship in an organization. However, in an organization that manufactures products/generate services, the ‘embedded sense’ of establishing and managing relationship remains critical across various processes within the organization. Workplace relationships are shaped by goals and objectives decided among its stakeholders (worker, trade union and employer). From a broader perspective, goals and objectives are governed by economic transactions that further determine the prospect of manufacturing/generating services process. Regardless of whether an organization belongs to manufacturing or services sector, workplace relationship remains a critical aspect of organization. This article is an attempt to summarize significant industrial relations literature with an objective to delineate the role of technology within the industrial discourse in India.

Industrial Relations System

Dunlop (1958) was one of the first few scholars, who contributed in establishing the basic premise of industrial relations. Dunlop understood industrial relations in terms of a 'systems framework', which he called as 'industrial relations system'. There are four important elements in the industrial relations system - 'Actors', 'Context', 'Ideologies' and 'Rules'. These four elements are interrelated to each other and tie the industrial relations system together. The first element of the systems framework, 'Actors' is further divided into three categories - 'Employers/Management', 'Workers/Trade Unions' and the 'Government'. The relationship between the employers/management and workers is directly related, as they both co-exist in a similar organizational setup. Employers supervise the workers, who are compensated through wages and incentives. Employers are responsible for coordination and management of work and workplace relationships that collectively foster the organization towards harmonious work environment. Simultaneously, workers perform their task communicated to them through protocols and guidelines and they are represented by trade unions acting as a mediator between the workers and the management. Industrial relations strive on this basic premise of worker and management bonding. In the systems framework, the role of government as an actor is to regulate the labor market and to implement laws that can guide and support the workers as well as the management. The element of 'context' is an important characteristic of the organization. Other characteristics include technology,

market dynamics and types of society in which the organizations exist. The 'ideologies' of the actors, who have certain beliefs and ideas, require a commune to support the actors to integrate with each other into the systems framework which is simply referred to as 'solidarity'. One crucial element in the industrial relations system is the 'element of rules'. Rules are the culmination of procedures that are established and administrated by all the actors. Management establishes the organizational hierarchy, workplace policies, reward system and protocols. Workers are supposed to negotiate and perform within the confines of rules agreed upon (through collective bargaining). Government establishes various rules through regulations, legal orders and amendments. According to Dunlop (1958), these rules govern the relations of the actors that form the framework of industrial relations system.

Rogowski (2000: 98) draws an analysis of industrial relations system that Dunlop had borrowed from Talcott Parsons' 'sociological theory of social systems'. The theory of social systems provided an analysis of the society structure and traced the evolution of the society. Evolution is the process of modernization that creates differentiation in the social system. Therefore, evolution of the society leads to modernization by causing a radical shift from primitive to modern society. Primitive society, according to Parsons, had a low degree of differentiation, whereas modern societies have several differentiations based on economics, politics and culture (Rogowski, 2000). Similarly, Dunlop's industrial relations system focuses on the differen-

tiation in the society that led to the creation of industrial societies. Industrial societies are the outcome of the modernization processes where workers and supervisors are formally related to each other, essentially outside the realm of family and friends. This systems framework extended the concept of the social systems in the industrial society, laying emphasis on workplace relationships.

According to Bean (1994), Dunlop's industrial relations system has been one of the most influential industrial relations approaches in the world. Despite its popularity, this framework has been critiqued from numerous quarters on the ground that it does not cover the political ideologies that shape the context that has a strong influence on society (Shalev, 1981). Largely, the element of actors does not remain constant and over a period. Besides, some of the actors may have more power at their disposal. Due to the economic transition, many new forms of work have evolved where the industrial relations system framework cannot be accounted for. New forms of work do not necessarily have all the actors to determine industrial relations. Furthermore, Dunlop's system framework does not account for the post-industrial society that is the by-product of economic liberalization.

Workplace Conflicts

Economic organizations exist in an industrial setup with an intention to generate profitability to keep them stable in the market economy. Hence, workplace relationships between various stakeholders/players are critical to its smooth op-

eration. Workplace conflicts among the stakeholders either disrupt or create imbalance in generating organizational output and these have a prolonged repercussion on the stakeholders. Industrial relations thus provide a space for dialogue among its stakeholders to facilitate stakeholder engagement to shape the collective image of the organization. Furthermore, industrial relations provide a forum for workers to voice their demands to their employer/management, who in turn can openly discuss their demands and consequently aim for increased productivity. Therefore, the crux of industrial relations is the 'relationship' among its stakeholders/players within the industrial structure/framework.

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Salamon (1987), on the contrary, evaluates industrial relations to be individual perceptions of 'fairness, power and authority' with respect to the organization. An individual worker expects fair treatment at work and hopes to gain ample authority over one's work. A workers' perception of fair work comes from the perspective of 'collegiality' among co-workers and the management alike. Along with that, trade union's approach with the workers and employer/management plays an active role in industrial relations. In an industrial society, the benevolent nature of industrial relations is to create a fair individual perception on issues related to wage fixation, decent

work practices and improved productivity.

Richardson (1961:26) provides a philosophical dimension to industrial relations by stating that industrial relations is the “art of living together for purposes of production and services”. This understanding of industrial relations makes it an interdisciplinary field of study. The model of ‘art of living’ together is derived from sociology, anthropology and psychology. Relationship involves human beings at an individual level, and as a collective, hence it is necessary to acknowledge an individual as a singular unit as well as part of a larger collective. In this context, trade union plays a crucial role in understanding the ambiguity of roles (individual-versus-collective), therefore, the collective voice of the workers is represented by the trade union.

These combined efforts of the stakeholders within the framework of industrial relations are to have a visible outcome by achieving industrial growth and profitability. Though it may look like the industrial relations framework provides a perfect picture of establishing and managing relationships, it is not an easy task to maintain a harmonious work-environment. The discontentment among the stakeholders brings out larger issues embedded in the social and cultural systems. Industrial discord arises from differences in culture, society structure, social institutions and political forms (Hare, 1965). These differences have been unconsciously subsumed in the construction of the industrial relations frame-

work. Nevertheless, these differences of social, cultural and political forms are not universal or immutable (Venkata Ratnam, 2006). The social structure comprises several castes and classes further embodied into specific sets of knowledge (industrial relations), with individuals within the social structure have their own values and norms different from each others’. Furthermore, the industrial workforce come from various age groups, the younger workforce may have different expectations as compared to the older age groups. Along with that, the social structure evolves over a period and the existing framework of industrial relations developed on traditional premise may not work in such a context.

Politics cannot be detached from industrial relations; for instance, a trade union within an organization seeks external affiliation of political parties for visible support and solidarity, in turn political parties invariably try to promote their own interest in the organizational settings. To avoid such political affiliations, employers tend to be more ‘caring and sharing’ (Venkata Ratnam, 2006). The overarching discourses of politics and culture play a crucial role in creating an imbalance in the organization. In such scenarios, the existing industrial relations framework needs to be questioned and critiqued.

Industrial Relations & Neoliberalism

According to Patil (1992) industrial relations revolve around workplace relationships that collectively consider a va-

riety of issues rising among the workers, management and the state. Traditionally, industrial relations' primary objectives were related to efficiency and productivity. Both efficiency and productivity can be achieved through collective participation among the workers/trade union and the management. Therefore, it is important to have a common interest/understanding among the workers/trade union and management to achieve desired efficiency and productivity.

Key areas of industrial relations include workforce training, better working conditions, wage system, health and safety. Each of these areas is crucial to the smooth function of an organization. Industrial relations thus, cannot be established solely on the premise of profitability. Issues of workers cannot be overlooked, as they play an integral role in facilitating harmonious work environment that is interlinked with profitability. Therefore, industrial relations turn into a process of dialogues and negotiations among the stakeholders of the organization. Contrarily, workers' skillset and knowledge need to be at par with the growing demand of the market so that the organization can sustain competition. Under this system, both workers and the management mutually agree on providing training to the workers to improve their skills. However, at one level industrial relations is a 'bipartite process' that involves negotiation between two stakeholders (workers and management) and further, with the State's intervention in the process becomes a 'tripartite initiative'.

An important stakeholder of industrial relations is the trade unions who represent the workers in front of the management, because a usual production unit or factory has more than hundred/thousand workers who require a single window representation to reach the management. Therefore, the trade unions' role is to ensure the workers' issues, their feedbacks reach the management, and accordingly an agreement be reached under the clause of stakeholders' agreement. The formation of a trade union is linked to the practice of democracy where each one has a say in the collective process. However, there are no mandatory state compliances for workers to form a trade union¹, it is a choice given by the state in a democracy so that workers can have their own representation.

In the industrial relations discourse, it is presumed that a general form of equity is maintained at the workplace and there must not be any case related to discrimination based on caste, gender and class. Management needs to ensure that each worker is important to the organization to have a cordial workplace environment. Therefore, it becomes a complex mechanism to manage equity as each one of the stakeholders has their own level of comfort and discomfort. Apart from this, there are internal cultural and behavioral dynamics at play within the various formal and in-formal groups in the organization. Formation of groups (formal and in-formal) is an inevitable aspect of any organization; the

¹ Trade unions in India come under the purview of Trade Unions Act, 1926.

challenge is to manage the groups for the 'greater good' of the organization.

Considering these critical areas of workplace relationships, there have been numerous instances of conflict of interests among the stakeholders. In this regard, the state has put down labor laws to have clear guidelines to determine what constitutes to be a fair and decent work practice. Thus, labor laws serve as an umbrella framework to oversee workplace compliance. In India, most of the regulations and laws have been carried forward from the colonial rule, including the industrial laws (Mohammad Ali, 2005). Until 2019, the Government of India² has been seriously considering to drastically modify the labor laws to simplify and make them investor friendly. Thus, as many as forty-four central labor laws were consolidated into four labor codes and moved towards further labor reforms in India.

Under the umbrella of socialism, the State had to harbor the colonial labor regulations to build an industrial relations system in the country. Scholars like Kuruvilla and Christopher (2002) highlighted that the anti-colonial protests of the political parties had been extended further to labor movements in post-inde-

pendent India. It was indeed unimaginable not to have political involvements in labor movements. Immediately after Independence, India adopted a quasi-socialist (Chaze, 2007) governance model, that arguably led to ambiguity resulting out of State's compliances towards trade unions and industrial disputes, thus, further resulting in immense politicization of the trade unions. Venkata Ratnam (2006) has put forward the rationale behind the strong nexus between trade unions and political parties in India, since trade union leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi along with the support from political parties had been involved in protesting the colonial rule. Post-Independence, major political parties had a 'welfare' agenda in their manifesto, which was directly related to the working class of India. Further, the Constitution of India promotes democracy among its citizen and having a trade union is a symbol of democratic work-practices. Another reason of trade unions' affiliation to political parties is due to the State's initiative in privatization and disinvestment, which has led to the risk of job-loss and reduction of social welfare. Therefore, the working class associated themselves with the trade unions in solidarity with political parties to question the respective governments. Following this, several political parties approached different trade unions for affiliation that resulted in a multiplicity of trade unions resulting in internal political division, which will not sustain the labor movements in the long run.

The preamble of the industrial relations in India was evolved from the labor movements. These movements suffered

² The Economic Time (2019). With four labour codes, 2020 to be a 'year of reforms': Santosh Gangwar. Retrieved on June 10, 2020 from https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/with-four-labour-codes-2020-to-be-a-year-of-reforms-santosh-gangwar/articleshow73027335.cms?utm_source=content_of_interest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

from gaps that cried for State's intervention. The State addressed these gaps through the formation of laws and amending the existing colonial ones. The State addressed a range of issues in the laws such as social security, industrial disputes, dismissal, lay-offs, health and safety. All these dimensions came under the framework of organized labor in India. To tackle labor unrest and settlements, Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 was formulated with guidelines towards lay-offs and strikes. Apart from this, the State has decided and appointed conciliation officers to liaise between the managements and workers/trade unions. In case the dispute between workers and their management remains unresolved even after conciliation efforts, the matter is then taken to the Labor Court/Industrial Tribunal.

In the early years after Independence, most of the institutions were owned by the State in India (Bhattacharjee, 2001). The scenario was different from the Central Government-owned companies that had one major trade union representing the entire workforce. This scenario existed until India did not undergo any major industrialization. However, with the emergence of neo-liberalization, various internal unions came into being, especially in the private sector. These unions sometimes resorted to militant approaches in dealing with the managements. The private sector managements on their part started pushing their workforce into the un-organized sectors (through sub-contracting/labor contracting), which had less scope to form trade unions.

With the arrival of neo-liberalism, India's industrial landscape has changed drastically, making it necessary to reconsider the traditional industrial relations discourse. There has been a paradigm shift that the new industrial relations discourse needs to address. There is no choice but to adapt to new challenges to enlarge the scope of industrial relations. The concept of the market has become so prevalent since neo-liberalization that the organizations cannot but consider the market rules and dynamics. Therefore, industrial relations need to incorporate new structure, style and design to meet the challenges of the new work environment. The conflicts that took place prior to the arrival of neo-liberalization were different in nature and the economic changes affecting organizational culture post-neo-liberalization have come a long way. Old conflicts have been re-configured in the new environment that requires a different understanding/approach. Scholars like, Rath and Misra (1996) predict the future of industrial relations by stating that the new workplace environment would have to be more bipartite than tripartite initiative as the State may not remain one of the key actors. To talk about trade unions in the context of new work environment, as they (unions) would be "fighting against obsolescence of the industry's technological base, The fight against managerial mismanagement will be replaced by the fight against technological obsolescence" (Rath & Misra, 1996 :53). According to Sheth (1993), most trade unions would be concerned about the impending rise of unemployment due to privatization, technological advancement since the arrival of

new economic policy of the Indian state. Tulpule (1992) substantiates it further; the growth of technology would make trade unions uneasy from getting redundant along with the hope of higher wages for the ones who withstands technological advancement. This has been happening in the information technology (IT) sector, as for a long time there was no presence of formal trade unions. In 2017, Forum for IT Employees³ (FITE) in Pune became the first registered trade union in the IT sector. An article in Silicon India quotes Karthik Shekhar, General Secretary, Union for Information Technology Enabled Services (UNITES):

“Employers want power neutralization and strongly oppose unions. Agreed, they offer favorable working environment, but that’s not enough. Several issues, be it promotion or differential treatment by co-workers on caste and community basis can occur. Who will employees turn to when in need?”⁴

According to this news article, it can be argued that there was less scope for trade union representation as the management discouraged IT professionals who would want to form a collective as-

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sociation within the confines of the workplace. In the absence of trade union in IT, ‘technology’ seems to have bridged the gap between workers and the management. Adding to this argument, Macdonald (1997:7-8) profoundly remarks that technology has blurred the distinction between functional and hierarchical levels among workers and their management. The way the IT sector works, where information flows through new technological platforms across geographies has questioned the old and “eroding industrial relations arrangements”.

Technology & New Definition of Work

Gratton (2011) articulating the future of workplaces, traces possible changes that can frame the concept of the work. One of the key forces is ‘technology’, that would change not only the landscape of workplaces, but also have a key role in the economic growth. Technology would transform the old notion of work and influence the lives in a much deeper form. Technology’s role would be beyond its deterministic capabilities as its presence in human processes and interactions will have huge implications on economy, culture, and politics. In addition, the technological advancements do not locate ‘technology’ in isolation as it is influenced by economy, culture and politics.

³ The Indian Express (2018). India’s first IT trade union registered in Pune, aims to fight ‘illegal layoffs’. Retrieved on June 10, 2020 from <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/indias-first-it-trade-union-registered-in-pune-aims-to-fight-illegal-layoffs-5023587/>

⁴ SiliconIndia (May 2010). Should IT companies allow trade unions?. Retrieved on May 3, 2013 from http://www.siliconindia.com/shownews/Should_IT_companies_allow_trade_unions-nid-67674-cid-1.html

Nevertheless, technology's position at work would be evident and would add different aspects of work (though there is an age-old notion of suspicion on the impact of technology on the labor market).

Another change is due to innovative 'cloud' technologies like the World Wide Web (Gratton, 2011). 'Cloud' would enable workers to access and store from any part of the world without having physical backup devices like servers and hard drives. Despite issues of security and access (some countries have strict norms in control and dissemination of information that Cloud can potentially overlook), the technology is bound to spill over to every possible domain and broaden its role.

Technology's impact⁵ is more than the functional aspect of it. New technologies have increased exponentially to reduce the cost of computing technology, further making it available to larger sections of users. Additionally, technology facilitates connectivity, which helps businesses (for example, outsourcing). New technologies reduce the cost of operations drastically and make it easier for people to participate socially without giving much thought to one's physical location. One can move or deep dive through technology interfaces from any place (for example social media websites). New emerging entrepreneurial ventures (gig-companies) are using technology as it provides a competitive edge. A critical area to investigate is whether technol-

ogy can really replace workers altogether. Advent of robotics and artificial intelligence can make one believe that workers may have a limited role to perform.

According to old industrial relations framework, technology was understood to facilitate work, as workers would use technological tools to enable them to work more efficiently. However, the changing nature of work synced with technology gives a new identity to the workers who are imagined to be with a computer/headset and a smartphone. This is true for information technology sector and gig-economy, which is enormously influenced by technology in work; it is rather impossible to detach work and technology. Regarding the intersection of work and technology, Gajjala (2013) suggests that the interplay of technology allows the user to engage in global culture where the user submerges itself to form a new identity. Similar effect has been felt in information technology, wherein professionals migrate from places of production through technological interfaces (Aneesh, 2006; Radhakrishnan, 2011).

Conclusion

Industrial relations as a process of interaction among stakeholders exist in the organized sector of work. The industrial relations process is rather a functional activity (Das, 1990) and it is beyond the mechanism of labor-management domain. Furthermore, industrial relations do not include diverse understanding of work, which has evolved beyond the confines of manufacturing and

⁵ Gratton (2011) presents a detailed outline of technology's impact on the workplaces.

production into the services sector (Das, 1990:81). Another lacuna that appears in industrial relations is the absence of domain specific personnel, in contrast to the existence of labor lawyers and administrative personnel involved in practicing and promoting industrial relations on the ground (Das, 1990). This ignores the demand for new knowledge emerging from the non-manufacturing sector where, in the absence of new knowledge, the traditional school of industrial relations has been followed.

Neo-liberalism constituted new forms of work that are autonomous and intellectual in nature. As Rose (1992:160) suggests, this kind of “work has been reconstrued upon, not as a constraint upon freedom and autonomy”. Such work leads to the environment of enterprising and self-reliant workforce shaped by the means of work. Information Technology is one such area where work is of an intellectual nature involving complex technical knowledge of algorithms and coding. In such a sector, technology appears to be more than the context (as stated by Dunlop, 1958), rather like an actor, as technology is omnipresent in the Information Technology sector. Another constraint of applying Dunlop’s systems framework in IT is the Government’s limited role to formulate regulations and labor laws. IT, being a product of neoliberalism, has lot many private investors, who were welcomed to invest with the promise of less bureaucratic interventions. In this scenario, the industrial relations discourse needs to move beyond its traditional trajectory of workplace relations and include ‘technology’ as one of

its core actors or concepts. However, technology’s presence in the industrial relations discourse is limited to its deterministic role of improving efficiency and reduction of labor cost (Krishnan, 2010). This understanding of technology is ‘not’ the only understanding of technology, as ‘technology studies have moved beyond confines of tools and instruments’. For the industrial relations discourse to enlarge its scope, it needs to include the multidimensional understanding of technology (such as tools, artefacts and activities) to address the evolution and existence of the new work environment primarily coming out of Information Technology organization.

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