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Working-Class Movement in Uttar Pradesh with Specific Reference to Kanpur(1915–1947)

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Abstract:

This paper examines how the working-class movement developed in Uttar Pradesh and how workers participated in the Indian National Movement between 1915 and 1947. During the colonial period, the region was not officially known as Uttar Pradesh. It included the former province of Oudh or Awadh and the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, which were reorganised as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh in 1902. During the period covered by this study, the region was generally referred to as the United Provinces. It was renamed Uttar Pradesh only in 1950.

Although the region was largely agrarian, industrial growth in Kanpur and the expansion of railway, government and municipal employment created important centres of working-class activity. Kanpur's textile, leather, woollen and engineering industries provided the main base of organised labour, while railway and government workers in Allahabad, Lucknow, Mughalsarai and other towns contributed to the wider development of labour politics.

The discussion follows the movement from the strike wave after the First World War through the growth of trade unionism in the 1920s, the influence of nationalist, socialist and communist ideas, the labour radicalisation of the 1930s, the Kanpur strike of 1937–38, worker participation in the Quit India Movement and the post-war labour upsurge. It argues that workers in the United Provinces were not merely passive supporters of the Indian National Congress. They pursued demands relating to wages, employment, working conditions, union recognition and dignity at work, while also participating in anti-colonial protests.

The working-class movement became part of the national struggle in several ways: strikes interrupted colonial production, workers challenged administrative authority, and industrial towns developed new forms of political organisation. At the same time, its relationship with Congress remained complicated because nationalist leaders often attempted to balance workers' demands with the interests of Indian industrialists and the need to maintain production. The paper concludes that workers in the United Provinces expanded the meaning of swaraj by linking political independence with economic rights and social justice.

Keywords: Working class, Uttar Pradesh, United Provinces, Oudh, Awadh, Kanpur, trade unions, nationalism, labour movement

Introduction

Accounts of India's freedom struggle often centre on the major campaigns of the Indian National Congress and on leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. That political history is important, but it leaves out part of the wider experience of the movement. Nationalism was also shaped in factories, railway workshops and workers' neighbourhoods. For workers, the idea of freedom was connected with

the realities of everyday life: the price of food, the level of wages, the fear of dismissal and the treatment they received from managers and supervisors.[1]

A clarification of the historical terminology is necessary here. During the colonial period, the region discussed here was not officially known as Uttar Pradesh. It included the former province of Oudh or Awadh and the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, which were reorganised as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh in 1902. During the period covered by this study, the region was generally referred to as the United Provinces. It was renamed Uttar Pradesh only in 1950. The term "Uttar Pradesh" is used in the title and in the discussion for geographical convenience, while "United Provinces" is used when referring to the colonial administrative structure.

The United Provinces were mainly rural, but Kanpur developed into one of northern India's major industrial cities. Its cotton and woollen mills, leather factories, engineering establishments and railway connections attracted workers from eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other regions. Allahabad, Lucknow and Mughalsarai also became important centres of railway and government employment.[2]

The workers of these towns did not form a completely uniform social group. They differed in caste, religion, occupation, skill, region and political outlook. Some supported the Congress, some were influenced by socialist or communist ideas, and many participated in labour struggles without formally joining any political organisation. Yet they shared several experiences: low wages, long hours, insecurity, fines, arbitrary dismissal and strict workplace discipline.[3]

Between 1915 and 1947, workers gradually moved from isolated protests to organised trade union activity. The First World War and its aftermath created conditions for widespread unrest. During the 1920s, unions became more organised and workers began to connect their economic demands with nationalism. The economic crisis of the 1930s encouraged further militancy. The Kanpur strike of 1937–38 became the most important example of organised labour in the United Provinces challenging employers and compelling a Congress ministry to respond to its demands.[4]

This paper argues that the working-class movement in the United Provinces contributed to the Indian National Movement without becoming completely dependent upon it. Workers joined anti-colonial campaigns, but they also defended their own interests. Their strikes and demonstrations disrupted colonial industry and administration. They also expanded the meaning of swaraj. For workers, freedom meant not only the end of British rule but also the right to organise, earn a fair wage and live with dignity.[5]

Industrial Development in the United Provinces

The United Provinces did not have an industrial base comparable to Bombay or Bengal. Agriculture remained the main occupation, and most people lived in villages. However, certain towns developed important industrial and transport centres. Kanpur was the most significant of these, while Allahabad, Lucknow, Mughalsarai, Agra and Varanasi also had sizeable urban working populations.[6]

Kanpur's industrial growth was connected with its location on the Ganges, its railway network and its proximity to the agricultural districts of the Gangetic plain. Cotton textiles, woollen production, leather manufacture and engineering developed steadily. The First World War gave further momentum to this growth. Factories received government orders for military supplies and other materials, and production increased.[7]

As industry expanded, more workers came to the city. Many came from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They did not completely break their connections with their villages. They sent money to their families, returned home

during agricultural seasons and depended on relatives and caste networks when looking for accommodation or employment.[8]

The growth of the railway system created another important body of workers. Allahabad and Mughalsarai were major railway centres, while Kanpur and Lucknow were connected to important routes. Railway workers occupied a strategic position because the railway carried troops, raw materials, food and manufactured goods. Any prolonged stoppage could affect the functioning of the colonial administration.[9]

Government workshops, municipal services, printing presses and other establishments also employed workers. These employees were directly linked to the colonial state. Their protests therefore had a political importance beyond the workplace, especially when they challenged government departments or disrupted essential services.

Industrial development in the United Provinces remained concentrated in a small number of towns. This encouraged strong local movements, particularly in Kanpur, but it also made it difficult to build a unified labour movement across the entire province.

Kanpur and the Formation of a Working Class

Kanpur's working class was socially diverse. Workers came from different districts and communities. Many maintained strong links with rural society. Their lives were shaped by both the factory and the village. This dual connection influenced their political behaviour.[10]

Caste, religion and regional identity remained important in workers' neighbourhoods. Industrial employment did not erase these older identities. Recruitment often took place through relatives, village connections and community networks. These relationships could sometimes weaken class unity.[11]

At the same time, working in the same factory created shared experiences. Workers faced similar problems of low wages, long hours, fines, wage deductions, arbitrary dismissal and strict supervision. These common experiences slowly created a sense of collective interest.[12]

Working-class life extended beyond the factory. Workers lived in crowded neighbourhoods where sanitation and healthcare were poor. When a strike continued for several weeks, the entire household suffered because the family depended on the worker's wages. Workers' wives and children therefore experienced the effects of industrial conflict directly. Neighbourhoods became places where news, rumours and political ideas circulated.[13]

Chitra Joshi's research shows that Kanpur's workers were not simply passive victims of industrial discipline. They developed their own ways of negotiating with employers and supervisors. They resisted unfair practices, challenged workplace rules and created ideas of justice and dignity.[14]

This existing solidarity later provided a base for the growth of trade unions. Unions did not create working-class consciousness from nothing. They gave an organised form to relationships and grievances that had already developed in factories and neighbourhoods.[15]

War, Inflation and Labour Militancy

The First World War brought major changes to the lives of industrial workers. Production increased, but the price of food and other necessities rose rapidly. Employers benefited from wartime demand, while workers often found that their wages could not meet the increased cost of living.[16]

Conditions became more difficult after the war. Some employers reduced wages, retrenched workers or tried to increase production without improving working conditions. Unemployment also grew. Across India, the years 1919 and 1920 saw a large number of strikes, and Kanpur became part of this wider movement.[17]

In November 1919, a strike that began in particular mills spread to about 20,000 workers. The workers secured wage increases, bonuses and improvements in working conditions. The importance of the strike lay not only in its result but also in the confidence it created. Workers realised that collective action could force employers to negotiate.[18]

The political climate also added to labour activism. The Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the Khilafat issue had created anger throughout northern India. Workers began to connect their experience of industrial injustice with the larger system of colonial rule.[19]

The formation of the All India Trade Union Congress in 1920 gave local labour struggles a national platform. It linked workers in different industrial centres and brought questions of labour rights into the wider political debate. In Kanpur, workers began to organise meetings, petitions, strike committees and associations.[20]

Even so, their immediate concerns remained economic. Nationalism attracted workers when it spoke to their everyday problems. The word swaraj meant more to them than a change of rulers. It also suggested freedom from arbitrary authority at the workplace.[21]

Trade Unionism and Nationalist Politics

During the 1920s, trade union activity spread in Kanpur and other urban centres of the United Provinces. Workers formed associations in textile mills, leather factories, railway establishments and government workplaces. These unions were not always stable. They often had limited funds and depended upon a small number of leaders. Employers could dismiss activists or use the police to weaken strikes.[22]

Even with these difficulties, trade unions introduced new forms of political action. Workers collected subscriptions, held meetings, formed negotiation committees and organised pickets. They began to think of themselves as members of a wider working class rather than as employees of separate factories.[23]

The Trade Unions Act of 1926 gave unions a legal framework for registration. It did not end employer hostility, but it gave trade unions a formal identity and some legal protection.[24]

The Congress supported labour organisation in principle. During the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements, Congress activists addressed workers and encouraged public mobilisation. Workers responded because the language of swaraj, rights and justice appeared relevant to their own experience.[25]

However, the Congress was a broad political organisation. It included industrialists, merchants, professionals, landlords, middle-class leaders and workers. These groups did not always share the same interests. Congress leaders therefore often tried to settle industrial disputes rather than encourage prolonged class conflict.[26]

This contradiction became increasingly clear to workers. They supported the national movement, but they also asked whether political independence would change their lives if Indian employers continued to exercise the same power as British employers.[27]

Political Ideas among Workers

Workers in the United Provinces developed their political outlook under several influences. Nationalism gave them a language of freedom, while socialism and communism offered explanations of poverty, exploitation and imperialism. Local experience remained equally important.[28]

The Russian Revolution of 1917 attracted the attention of Indian labour activists. It suggested that workers and peasants could become important political forces. Socialist ideas encouraged workers to see their problems as part of a wider conflict between capital and labour.[29]

Kumari and Singh describe the post-war period as one in which workers developed "a distinct ideology" through which they engaged with the national movement.[30]

The study by Kumari and Singh is useful for understanding the political development of workers between 1920 and 1939. It discusses the influence of nationalism, socialism, communism, international labour organisations and anti-imperialist networks. In the United Provinces, these ideas circulated through trade union meetings, pamphlets, political activists and newspapers.[31]

Communist influence became more visible in Kanpur during the 1920s and 1930s. Communist activists encouraged workers to organise independently and to use strikes as a political weapon. They criticised the idea that workers should remain under the leadership of middle-class nationalists or industrial groups.[32]

The colonial government responded through surveillance, arrests and conspiracy cases. The Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case and the Meerut Conspiracy Case were intended to weaken communist and militant labour activity. However, these cases also brought socialist ideas into public debate.[33]

It would be misleading to assume that all workers became communists. Many continued to support Congress. Others were attracted to socialist ideas without joining communist organisations. Some workers participated in particular strikes for practical reasons and did not identify with any ideology. Political consciousness was therefore varied and changing.[34]

Namboodiripad's analysis helps explain the tension between workers and Congress. He argued that the national movement was led mainly by the rising Indian bourgeoisie and allied landlord groups, who opposed colonial rule but remained cautious about radical social change. This interpretation is useful in the case of the United Provinces, where Congress leaders supported labour mobilisation at certain moments but also tried to restrain independent working-class action.[35]

Namboodiripad argued that "the national problem remains unsolved," a formulation that reflects his wider critique of the class character of nationalist politics.[36]

The Great Depression and Labour Radicalisation

The economic crisis of the early 1930s put considerable pressure on workers. Employers attempted to reduce wages, retrench labour and increase managerial control. Workers faced unemployment and declining purchasing power.[37]

The crisis also encouraged greater organisation. Workers began to question why they should bear the burden of economic difficulty while owners retained control over factories and profits. The demand for union recognition became as important as the demand for higher wages.[38]

By the middle of the 1930s, Kanpur had become a centre of militant labour politics. The Kanpur Mazdoor Sangh attracted workers influenced by nationalist, socialist and communist ideas. Meetings were held not only inside factories but also in workers' neighbourhoods.[39]

The movement's political language also became more direct and confrontational. Kanpur came to be described as "Lal Kanpur," or Red Kanpur. Some workers formed a group called the Lal Fauj, reflecting the influence of left-wing symbols.[40]

These developments showed that workers were thinking about more than wages. They were questioning the authority of mill owners, managers, police officials and government departments. Their actions were becoming part of a broader struggle over power and dignity.[41]

The Kanpur Strike of 1937–38

The Kanpur strike of 1937–38 was a major labour struggle in the United Provinces before independence. It grew out of long-standing complaints about wages, working conditions, dismissal and the refusal of employers to recognise trade unions.[42]

The formation of Congress ministries in 1937 raised workers' hopes. The Congress had presented itself as a party of ordinary people, and workers expected a Congress government to be sympathetic to their demands. The immediate dispute began at the Allen Cooper factory in late 1936 and gradually spread to other establishments.[43]

The strike lasted fifty-two days and involved tens of thousands of textile workers. Workers demanded better wages, union recognition, protection from arbitrary dismissal and an end to harsh managerial practices.[44]

The Kanpur Mazdoor Sangh played an important role in organising the strike. Workers held meetings, maintained pickets and coordinated action across several mills. Families and neighbourhood communities also became involved. The strike was therefore more than a workplace dispute. It became a city-wide movement.[45]

The Congress ministry was placed in a difficult position. Open support for the workers could alienate industrialists and disturb production. Suppression of the strike, however, could damage the Congress's popular reputation. Negotiations and official intervention eventually contributed to a settlement that included wage improvements, a mechanism for wage fixation and recognition of the union.[46]

The significance of the strike goes beyond the terms of its immediate settlement. Workers were asking what independence would mean in their own lives. They supported the national movement, but they did not want political freedom to leave workplace relations unchanged.[47]

The strike exposed the limits of nationalist unity. Congress could mobilise workers against colonial rule, but it was less comfortable with independent class mobilisation. The workers of Kanpur showed that national freedom and labour rights could not be completely separated.[48]

Chitra Joshi has shown how the strike was remembered as a period of "Red Kanpur" and militant working-class action. This memory is important because it indicates that the strike became part of the political identity of the city.[49]

Workers and the Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement of 1942 placed workers in a difficult political position. After the arrest of Congress leaders, protests spread throughout the country. Railways, telegraph offices, government buildings and industrial

establishments became important targets because they supported colonial administration and wartime production.[50]

Communist-led unions initially opposed the Quit India call. After the Soviet Union entered an alliance with Britain following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, communist leaders prioritised the anti-fascist war and the continuation of production. This position created tension between communist unions and other nationalist groups.[51]

Even so, many workers in the United Provinces participated in strikes, demonstrations, hartals and local acts of resistance. Kanpur remained an important centre of political activity. Some workers acted through unions, while others joined neighbourhood protests, student demonstrations and local resistance networks.[52]

In this situation, the line between economic and political protest became difficult to maintain. Wartime inflation, food shortages and increased pressure on production directly affected workers. Refusing to work could therefore express both economic dissatisfaction and opposition to colonial rule.[53]

The colonial government responded with arrests, surveillance, dismissal and restrictions on strikes. Yet workers' participation revealed the dependence of the colonial state on industrial labour. Factories, railways and communication systems could not function without workers.[54]

Post-War Labour Mobilisation

The end of the Second World War was followed by another wave of labour unrest. Inflation had reduced real wages, while workers demanded higher pay, shorter hours and improved service conditions. The release of political prisoners and the weakening of British authority encouraged more open mobilisation.[55]

Railway workers held a particularly strategic position. The railway system carried troops, raw materials, food and industrial goods. Allahabad, Kanpur and Mughalsarai were connected to this wider network. Railway employees demanded better wages, reasonable working hours and greater employment security.[56]

In 1946, strikes and demonstrations spread across India. The United Provinces participated in this post-war upsurge. Kanpur witnessed large demonstrations involving workers and political groups. These events occurred alongside the INA trials, the Royal Indian Navy revolt and student protests.[57]

Together, these developments created a serious crisis for British rule. Workers did not simply demand the departure of the British. They also expected independent India to provide employment security, fair wages, social protection and a recognised role for labour organisations.[58]

Contribution and Limitations

The working-class movement in the United Provinces contributed to the national movement in a number of ways.

First, workers disrupted the economic functioning of colonialism. Strikes in textile mills, railway workshops and government establishments affected production and administration. Economic resistance therefore acquired political importance.[59]

Second, workers created new public spaces. Trade union meetings, processions and neighbourhood gatherings brought together workers, their families, students and political activists. These spaces allowed people to discuss nationalism, socialism and social justice.[60]

Third, workers widened the meaning of freedom. They argued that political independence would be incomplete without freedom from arbitrary dismissal, low wages, unsafe workplaces and managerial abuse.[61]

Fourth, workers placed pressure on the Congress. They forced nationalist leaders to address labour questions and exposed the difficulty of maintaining unity between workers and employers.[62]

At the same time, the movement had important limitations. Workers were divided by caste, religion, occupation, region and employment status. Unions often depended upon outside leaders and lacked stable finances. Employers used dismissal, police action and blacklisting to weaken labour organisations. Rivalries among Congress leaders, socialists, communists and independent unionists sometimes weakened collective action.[63]

Women's contribution was also often overlooked. Women supported strikes, maintained households during periods without wages and participated in demonstrations, but formal union leadership remained largely male-dominated.[64]

The working-class movement also failed to build a continuous alliance with the peasantry. Most workers retained links with villages, but industrial and rural struggles were not consistently coordinated. This restricted the possibility of a province-wide worker-peasant movement.[65]

Conclusion

The working-class movement in the United Provinces—the historical administrative region that broadly corresponds to present-day Uttar Pradesh—grew out of industrial expansion, migration, inflation and difficult conditions at the workplace. It was strongest in Kanpur, but railway and government employees in Allahabad, Lucknow, Mughalsarai and other towns also contributed to its growth.[66]

Workers organised strikes, formed trade unions, joined public demonstrations and challenged employers and colonial officials. Their struggles were often economic in origin, but they acquired a wider political meaning because factories, railways and government establishments were essential to colonial rule.[67]

Workers did not speak with a single political voice. Some supported Congress, others were influenced by socialism or communism, and many acted according to the practical demands of a particular struggle. Their politics was also shaped by caste, religion, migration, neighbourhood relations and family responsibilities.[68]

Even so, the working class broadened the meaning of nationalism. For workers, freedom meant more than the departure of the British. It meant freedom from arbitrary dismissal, low wages, unsafe work, managerial humiliation and the denial of collective rights.[69]

The Kanpur strike of 1937–38 showed the strength of organised labour and the limits of Congress politics. Workers supported the national movement, but they also demanded an independent voice. Their confrontation with employers and the Congress ministry revealed that political independence did not automatically resolve class conflict.[70]

The working-class movement in the United Provinces was not a unified or uninterrupted force. It faced repression, ideological divisions, social differences and organisational weaknesses. Yet its contribution to the national movement was significant. Workers disrupted colonial production, created new political spaces and compelled nationalist leaders to address questions of labour and social justice.[71]

The experience of workers in Uttar Pradesh therefore adds another important dimension to the history of Indian independence. It shows that the struggle for freedom was not fought only in legislative halls, public meetings or

mass marches. It was also fought in mills, workshops, railway yards and industrial neighbourhoods, where workers connected the demand for national independence with the demand for dignity at work.

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