
LABOUR ACTIVISM, SOCIAL STRUGGLE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS- ITS RELEVANCE IN ORGANISING UNORGANIZED WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

Labour Activism, Social Struggles and Social Movements had always played a significant role in protecting the rights and dignity of worker specially for those who works in unorganized sectors. In India, a large number of workers are engaged in informal sector where workers often face low wages, unsafe working conditions, lack of job security, lack of social security and limited legal protection. In these kinds of situations, labour activism and collective social struggles become important weapon for raising awareness, demanding justice and ensuring the implementation of labour rights. These movements not only provide a platform for workers to raise their voice but it also helps the workers in building collective bargaining power among the marginalized labourers.

The relevancy of labour activism, social struggles movements has increased in organising unorganized workers due to rapid expansion of gig economy, migration, privatization and industrialization, etc. Unorganized workers such as domestic workers, agricultural labourers, street vendors, construction workers and platform-based workers, they often remain outside the ambits of formal labour laws protection. These social movements become essentials in mobilizing these workers and in demanding recognition, fair wages, social security benefits and safer working conditions. These struggles have also contributed to the enactment of welfare legislations and other reforms which at improving the lives of vulnerable workers.

Furthermore, labour movements are not only the economic struggles but are deeply connected with the issues of social justice, equality and human rights. They challenge the exploitative structure of the society and seeks to ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect. In Indian context, movements such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) and various other nationwide labour protest shows that how collective action can empower unorganised workers and strengthen democratic participation.

Therefore, labour activism, social struggles and social movements are continue to remain a highly relevant in addressing the challenges faced by unorganized workers and in promoting inclusive and equitable labour governance in modern society.

INTRODUCTION

Labour activism, social struggle, and social movements are all relevant in organizing unorganized workers¹. These concepts involve collective actions and efforts to challenge the status quo, demand better working conditions, and advocate for workers' rights. Labour activism means the actions taken by workers or labour unions to improve their working conditions and wages. It involves various activities like- organizing strikes, protests and other forms of collective actions for creating pressure over the employers and the government to make changes as per their requirements². Whereas, Social struggle refers to the ongoing conflict between different social groups, including workers and employers, on various issues like- over resources, power, and influence. Social struggle is a broader concept that includes not only labour issues but also other social justice issues such as gender, race, and class inequality. Social movements are collective efforts to bring about social change³. They are often led by grassroots organizations and activists who seek to challenge dominant power structures and promote social justice. Social movements can be focused on a range of issues, including labour rights, environmental justice, and civil rights. This section deals with two movements which helps the unorganized to organize.

IMPRESSION OF LABOUR ACTIVISM

The impact of Labour Activism in terms of organizing the unorganized workers has been well referenced. It can be seen as a double-edged sword⁴: it pursues change in the system so that the condition of workers can be improved and other is security of employment and a basis for unionization. Labour activism can help unorganized workers to organize work in several ways such as Raising awareness, Building solidarity, Advocacy, etc. One illustration is cited here.

¹ Ratna Sen, Organizing the Unorganized Workers: The Indian Scene, 48 Indian Journal of Industrial Relations 415, 425 (2013). <last visited on 21st May, 2026>.

² *Id.*

³ Understanding public responses to counter-protests disrupting social change movements, <https://advances.in/psychology/10.56296/aip00049/>, <last visited on 21st may, 2026>.

⁴ Supriya Roy Chowdhury, Labour Activism and Women in the Unorganised Sector: Garment Export Industry in Bangalore, 40 Economic and Political Weekly 2250, 2250 (2005).

One is an organization of artisanal fish workers⁵ in Trivandrum, Kerala. This community was being exploited by cunning members of the community. To get out of this situation and the myth that it could not be ever changed, they broke it. The first step was taken to gain control of the fruits of their labour that were exploited by moneylenders and merchants. A co-operative of fishers was created and the organization of this cooperative helped fishers to get their fruits directly⁶. Further, this cooperative developed data used to stake a claim for the small-scale fisheries in the state. Further, after the 1970s a trade union “National Fish Worker Forum” was constituted and started to represent the cause and demand of small-scale labour and got several legislations like “The Marine Fisheries Regulation Act, 1978” that accepted the customary rights of the communities like this⁷.

Labor activism has also helped to create a more equitable society by advocating for policies and laws that benefit workers. This includes legislation such as minimum wage laws, anti-discrimination laws, and labour protection laws. In addition, labour activism has empowered workers by giving them a voice in the workplace and enabling them to collectively bargain for better wages and working conditions. This has helped to create a more equal distribution of power between workers and employers⁸.

Shaping Unorganized Labour through Social struggles, as this social struggles play an important role in helping the unorganized sector in becoming organize and improve the working conditions of their workers. Social struggles refer to collective actions taken by groups of people who share common grievances and seek to bring about social change⁹. These struggles can take various forms, including protests, strikes, and civil disobedience. One example of how social struggle has helped the unorganized sector to organize in India is the struggle of the Safai Karamchari Andolan, also known as SKA, for the rights of sanitation workers. It was founded in 1993 to advocate for the rights of manual scavengers and other sanitation workers who are often excluded from legal protection and social welfare benefits¹⁰. The SKA's struggle has helped unorganized labour to organize work such as it has organized

⁵ Artisanal fishing is a kind of traditional fishing by fishing arrows and others that is undertaken by individuals with small scaled and low technology. These individuals are coastal or island ethnic groups.

⁶ Infra notes 7.

⁷ Nalini Nayak, Organizing the Unorganized Workers: Lessons from SEWA Experiences, 48 Indian Journal of Industrial Relations 402, 405 (2013). <last visited on 21st May, 2026>.

⁸ INDUSTRIAL RELATION AND LABOUR LAW PGDHR-20, Block-2, Chapter-1, Page No.-23, https://baou.edu.in/assets/pdf/PGDHR_201_slm.pdf, <last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.

⁹ The Role of Labour Law in Promoting Social Justice and Equality in India, Dr. Manisha Jain

¹⁰ Newsclick Team, A Battle for Freedom: Wilson and the Safai Karamchari Andolan, NEWS CLICK (Mar. 29, 2023, 08:10 PM), <https://www.newsclick.in/battle-freedom-wilson-and-safai-karamchari-andolan>.

sanitation workers and mobilizing them to demand their rights and improve their working conditions. It has built solidarity among sanitation workers by organizing rallies, demonstrations, and protests as well as advocating for policy changes that benefit sanitation workers¹¹.

Fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 17 (right against untouchability) and Articles 14, 19, and 21, which guarantee equality, freedom, and protection of life and personal liberty respectively is itself came from social struggle that goes against the manual scavengers. Also, the government in 1992 launched a national scheme for identifying, training, and rehabilitating safari Karamchhari and allotted substantial funds for this purpose¹². However, the scheme of government is looking like short-sighted with a lack of sensitivity¹³.

Further, the struggle is running from passage of time, in 2022 Safai Karamchhari Andolan was launched with the campaign of “Stop Killing Us” to eliminate the scourge of manual scavenging in Delhi¹⁴. Overall, the SKA's struggle is an example of how social struggle can help unorganized labour to organize work by building solidarity, advocating for policy changes, and providing resources and support. By empowering sanitation workers in Delhi, the SKA has helped to create a more just and equitable society¹⁵.

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

As it is known that society is not static but always in flux or in constant where social movements play a vital role in giving the right direction to society to escalate it. The term social movement often relates to the labour movement and others as a collective action that gives strength to the needy one¹⁶. Also, it is an alternative to the expectancy of the people from the political class and social institution to do a radical change. Social movements play an important role in helping unorganized labour to organize work by providing a platform for workers to voice their

¹¹ Dhamma Darshan Nigam, Safai Karamchhari Andolan and 150 Days of ‘Stop Killing Us’ Campaign NEWS CLICK (Mar. 29, 2023, 09:18 PM), <https://www.newsclick.in/Safai-Karmachari-Andolan-150-Days-Stop-Killing-Us-Campaign>, <last visited on 21st May, 2026>.

¹² Rajeev Kumar Singh, Manual Scavenging as Social Exclusion: A Case Study 44 Economic and Political Weekly 521, 522 (2009), <last visited on 21st May, 2026>.

¹³ Deepa Joshi and Suzanne Ferron, Manual scavenging – a life of dignity? 26 Waterlines 24, 25 (2007), <last visited on 21st May, 2026>.

¹⁴ INDIANCULTURALFORUM, [¹⁵ *Id.*](https://indianculturalforum.in/2022/09/02/action-2022-stop-killing-us/v/#:~:text=Launched%20in%20Delhi%20by%20the,deaths%20in%20sewers%2C%20septic%20tanks,<last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

¹⁶ Ghanshyam Shah, Social Movements in India, 46 Economic & Political Weekly 33, 34 (2011).

concerns, mobilize collective action, and press for changes in labour laws and policies. For illustration, generally, people go to work for six days (five days under different circumstances) and have a day for rest, working hours should not exceed eight hours, man and woman workers should be paid equally, workers are entitled to social security, etc. These have been shaped by social movements.

One example of how social movements have helped unorganized labour to organize their work in India is the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union and social movement that was founded in 1972¹⁷. Its focus is on organizing women who work in the informal sector¹⁸, such as domestic workers, street vendors, and agricultural labourer¹⁹. These workers often face low wages, poor working conditions, and a lack of legal protections. It has successfully advocated for laws that recognized domestic workers as formal workers, which has helped to increase their wages and improve their working conditions.

Another such movement is the All-India Kisan Sabha (National Kisan Sabha prevailed in different states)²⁰, a farmers' organization that has been working to improve the lives of rural workers in the state. BKS has been involved in organizing labourers in the agricultural sector²¹, including those who work on small farms or as wage labourers. While the primary focus of the AIKS is on the agrarian sector, the organization has also played an important role in supporting the rights of workers in the unorganized sector²². The AIKS has been actively involved in organizing and mobilizing workers in the unorganized sector, including construction workers, street vendors, and domestic workers. One of the ways in which the AIKS has helped in organizing workers is by advocating for their rights and demanding better working conditions. The AIKS has also worked to build solidarity between different sectors of the labour force²³. For example, the organization has supported the demands of workers in the unorganized sector who have protested the exploitation of labour by large corporations. Overall, the AIKS has played an important role in helping workers in the unorganized sector to organize and improve

¹⁷ SEWA, <https://www.sewa.org/about-us/>, <last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.

¹⁸ WORLD BANK, https://web.worldbank.org/archive/website00819C/WEB/PDF/INDIA_SE.PDF, <last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.

¹⁹ WHO, <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/205960/B3810.pdf?sequence=1>, <last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.

²⁰ COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA (MARXIST), <https://cpim.org/content/peasant-movement-and-dalit-rights-east-thanjavur>, <last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.

²¹ AIKS, <https://kisansabha.org/>, <last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.

²² Kaushal K. Sharma, Rural Proletariat and The All-India Kisan Sabha, 60 Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 828, 834 (1999), <last visited on 22nd May, 2026>.

²³ *Id.*

their working conditions²⁴.

CONCLUSION

Labour activism, social struggles and collective movements continue to play a vital role in protecting and advancing the labour rights of the unorganized workers in India. Unorganized sector is one of the largest contributors to the India's economy, still this sector suffers from inadequate legal protection, poor working conditions, wages insecurity, and lack of social welfare measures. In this context, labour movements have emerged as an effective means of creating awareness regarding labour rights and demanding accountability from both the State and employers. These movements help the marginalized workers to gain recognition within legal and social framework of the country.

As the nature of employment changing continuously due to globalization, privatization, and technological advancement has created a new challenges for labour rights in unorganized sector. These increased challenges, increases the need of the social movements and labour activism. These movements act as a bridge between labour and policy maker as it ensures that the voice of the unorganised workers are heard in policy making and governance.

In conclusion, labour activism, social struggles and collective movements are not merely instruments of protest but it is essential democratic process that contribute towards inclusive growth and labour welfare.

²⁴ *Id.*