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An analysis of labour conditions and contribution towards national movement under British Era

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Abstract
During British colonial rule, India's labouring population endured widespread exploitation rooted in an economic model designed to serve imperial interests. Workers in industries such as textiles, mining, railways, and plantations faced grueling conditions, long hours, minimal wages, and no legal safeguards particularly affecting women and children. Early legislative interventions, such as the Factories Act of 1881, offered little relief and were largely symbolic. However, increasing urban exposure, the rise of print media, and reformist ideologies catalyzed labour consciousness. The formation of the Madras Labour Union and the All-India Trade Union Congress marked a turning point, as organized labour began to assert both economic rights and political agency. Labour movements gradually aligned with the national freedom struggle, amplifying demands for both industrial justice and political autonomy. Strikes and protests became tools to challenge colonial authority and assert collective identity. Labour leaders often collaborated with nationalist figures, bridging class-based agitation with anti-colonial movements. The shared vision of Swaraj helped unite diverse working communities under a common cause. In this way, Indian labour history reflects not only the oppression of colonial rule but also the resilience and rising political consciousness of the working class. The growth of trade unionism also led to the development of class solidarity across regions and industries. Labour newspapers and pamphlets played a critical role in shaping workers' awareness and unity. The participation of workers in national movements disrupted colonial economic networks and demonstrated the power of organized resistance. Women workers, despite facing double marginalization, emerged as significant participants in strikes and protests. Ultimately, labour activism became an indispensable part of the broader freedom movement, contributing to both industrial reform and national awakening.

Keywords: Labour, colonial rule, British Era, colonial exploitation, industrial labour

Introduction
The British colonial period in India, spanning from the mid-18th century to 1947, brought profound changes to the Indian economy, society, and especially the conditions of labour. The British colonial administration implemented industrial policies primarily designed to serve the economic interests of the Empire, rather than to develop India's indigenous industries or protect its workers. This led to the establishment of large-scale colonial industries such as textiles, mining, plantations, railways, and manufacturing units, which depended heavily on Indian labourers. However, the working conditions under these enterprises were harsh and exploitative [1]. Labourers were subjected to long working hours, often ranging from 12 to 16 hours daily, with meagre wages that barely sustained their families. The lack of legal protections meant there was no job security, no health or accident benefits, and little to no safety regulations in place. Women and children, driven by poverty, were also forced into this oppressive system, often facing even greater exploitation [2]. Additionally, the commercialization of agriculture displaced many peasants from their lands, pushing them into tenant farming or wage labour under oppressive landlords, further worsening rural poverty. The cumulative effect of these policies created a vast working class burdened by economic hardships and social injustice, setting the stage for growing unrest and the eventual involvement of labour in India's national movement [3].
During the British colonial period, Indian labourers were subjected to extremely harsh and degrading working conditions. In key sectors like textile mills in Bombay, jute factories in Calcutta, tea plantations in Assam, coal mines in Jharkhand, and railway construction

projects across India, workers toiled in physically demanding environments for 12 to 16 hours daily [4]. Factory floors were overcrowded, poorly lit, lacked ventilation, and often had dangerous, unguarded machinery. Accidents, injuries, and even fatalities were common, and medical aid was either absent or inadequate. These workers were paid subsistence-level wages that barely met their basic needs. There was no concept of paid leave, compensation for injury, or security against arbitrary dismissal. Labourers were treated as disposable resources in a profit-driven system controlled by British capitalists and Indian intermediaries loyal to colonial interests [5].

Poverty-stricken families, unable to survive on a single income, often sent women and children into the workforce. Child labour was particularly rampant in textile factories, matchstick and fireworks units, and mining operations. These children were forced to undertake physically exhausting work that was detrimental to their physical and mental development. They worked long hours in suffocating environments, handling dangerous tools and substances with no safety gear [6]. Women, too, faced severe exploitation. They were employed in plantations, domestic work, and factories, where they were routinely paid much less than their male counterparts despite performing equal or more demanding labour. There was no provision for maternity benefits or workplace safety for women. Moreover, both women and children were vulnerable to sexual harassment, physical abuse, and verbal humiliation at the hands of supervisors and contractors, with little legal recourse [7].

In the early years of British rule, there was a complete absence of laws to protect workers' rights. The colonial administration prioritized profit over people and did not recognize the need for labour regulation. The first Factory Act came only in 1881, and even that was minimal and poorly enforced. It was largely introduced in response to criticism from social reformers in Britain, not due to concern for Indian labourers. The act applied only to a small number of factories, and its provisions—such as restricting child labour to a limited extent—were weak. There were no inspections, no penalties for violations, and no rights for workers to form unions or demand fair treatment. In effect, workers had no access to medical care, accident compensation, or retirement benefits. This legal vacuum allowed employers to exploit workers without fear of accountability or intervention [8].

While industrialization brought about the emergence of modern industry and urban growth, it also had deeply disruptive effects on the Indian workforce. A new urban proletariat class emerged, working in large-scale industries under exploitative conditions. However, they lacked collective bargaining rights, political representation, or organizational structures to voice their demands. Simultaneously, traditional Indian crafts and cottage industries collapsed under the pressure of mass-produced British goods. Local artisans, including weavers, metalworkers, and potters, who had enjoyed centuries of stable livelihoods, were pushed into destitution. The British policy of deindustrialization led to unemployment, underemployment, and mass migration from villages to cities in search of work. Yet urban centres were unprepared to absorb these workers, resulting in slums, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and social dislocation. Industrialization under colonialism, rather than uplifting labourers, deepened economic disparity and social alienation [9].

Rural labourers under colonial rule suffered a different but equally devastating form of exploitation. The British introduced revenue systems like the Zamindari**,** Ryotwari**,** and Mahalwari**,** which placed heavy land taxes on cultivators. Failure to pay taxes led to land confiscation and the rise of absentee landlords. As a result, many peasants lost ownership of their land and became tenants, sharecroppers, or bonded labourers. This created a class of landless agricultural workers dependent on exploitative landlords. Moreover, the British policy of commercializing agriculture promoted the cultivation of cash crops like cotton, indigo, opium, and jute over food grains. These crops were exported to feed British industries, while local populations were left without sufficient food, leading to recurring famines such as those in Bengal. Famine relief was minimal, and millions perished due to starvation and disease. Rural indebtedness soared as poor farmers borrowed from moneylenders at high interest rates, trapping them in cycles of poverty and forced labour. The rural poor had little access to education, medical care, or land reforms, leaving them vulnerable and voiceless [10].

In response to the harsh and exploitative labour conditions under British rule, Indian workers began to unite and organize themselves into trade unions and labour associations, marking the beginning of the formal labour movement in India. These early unions, such as the Bombay Mill Workers' Union founded in 1905, the Bengal Jute Workers' Union, and various railway workers' unions, became important platforms for workers to collectively demand better wages, shorter working hours, and improved working conditions. Influential leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal lent their support to the labour cause, linking the fight for workers' rights with the larger struggle for Indian independence. Socialist leaders such as M.N. Roy and Singaravelu Chettiar further politicized the movement by introducing radical ideas and mobilizing workers across regions [11]. Numerous strikes, including the notable Bombay textile strikes of 1918-19 and 1928, as well as the 1923 Madras railway strike, showcased the growing strength and determination of the labour force in challenging colonial exploitation. In response, the British government introduced labour legislation like the Factory Act of 1911, the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923, and the Trade Union Act of 1926. However, these laws were often weak, poorly enforced, and failed to provide comprehensive protection to most workers [12]. Over time, labour unions aligned themselves closely with the Indian nationalist movement, participating actively in major campaigns such as the Non-Cooperation Movement and Civil Disobedience Movement. The formation of the All-India Trade Union Congress in 1920 symbolized the increasing political role of organized labour, which became a critical force contributing both to workers' welfare and India's struggle for freedom. Formation of Trade Unions: The first trade unions emerged in the early 20th century, such as the Bombay Mill Workers' Union (1905), Bengal Jute Workers' Union, and railway unions. They fought for better wages, reduced hours, and safer conditions [13].

Several prominent leaders played a crucial role in advocating for workers' rights during the British colonial period. Early nationalist figures like Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal were not only vocal about India's independence but also deeply concerned with the plight of labourers, linking their struggles to the broader fight against

colonial oppression [14]. As the labour movement grew, new leaders with socialist and radical ideas emerged, such as M.N. Roy, who actively promoted workers' organization and political consciousness. Similarly, Singaravelu Chettiar was instrumental in mobilizing workers in South India, helping to establish some of the first trade unions and advocating for labour legislation. These leaders helped give direction to the labour movement, bridging the gap between the working class and the nationalist political agenda, and inspiring workers to see their exploitation as part of the larger struggle for social and economic justice [15].

Strikes became a powerful tool for Indian workers to express their grievances and resist colonial exploitation. Industries such as textiles, railways, and plantations witnessed numerous organized protests as workers demanded better wages, shorter working hours, and safer working conditions. Among the most significant were the Bombay textile strikes of 1918-19 and 1928, where thousands of mill workers protested against low pay and poor factory conditions, attracting widespread attention and sympathy from the nationalist movement [16]. Another landmark event was the 1923 Madras railway strike, which involved railway workers demanding fair wages and improved labor rights. These strikes were often met with harsh repression by colonial authorities, yet they demonstrated the growing power and solidarity of the working class. Importantly, these industrial actions were not just about economic demands—they became intertwined with the larger political struggle for Indian independence, as labour leaders aligned their cause with the nationalist movement and contributed to the momentum for freedom [17].

During the early 20th century, the British colonial government introduced several labor laws aimed at regulating working conditions and addressing some of the grievances of Indian workers. The Factory Act of 1911 was one of the first attempts to limit working hours and improve safety standards in factories, particularly for women and children [18]. Following this, the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923 sought to provide some financial relief to workers injured on the job or suffering from occupational diseases. The Trade Union Act of 1926 legally recognized trade unions, granting them the right to organize and bargain collectively. However, despite these legislative measures, enforcement remained weak and inconsistent [19]. Many employers ignored the laws, and the colonial administration often sided with industrialists rather than workers. As a result, a large proportion of the labour force, especially in unorganized sectors, continued to work under exploitative conditions without legal protection or social security. Nonetheless, these laws marked the beginning of formal recognition of workers' rights and laid the groundwork for future labour reforms in independent India [20].

The labour movement in India played a vital role in the country's broader struggle for independence from British colonial rule. As Indian workers faced severe exploitation and injustice, their fight for rights naturally aligned with the nationalist movement's demand for political freedom. Labour unions and workers actively participated in major campaigns such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), and the Quit India Movement [21] During these movements, workers used strikes, protests, and boycotts to disrupt colonial economic and administrative functions, including halting railway operations, closing factories, and organizing mass demonstrations. These actions directly challenged British authority and amplified the pressure on the colonial government. The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), established in 1920, became a crucial platform where labour activism and nationalist aspirations merged, enabling workers to voice both economic demands and political goals [22]. Prominent labour leaders collaborated closely with nationalist figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose, strengthening the unity between the working class and the freedom struggle. This integration not only energized the independence movement but also highlighted the importance of social and economic justice alongside political liberation. Consequently, the labour movement was not just about improving working conditions but also became a dynamic force that contributed significantly to India's fight for freedom. Support to Non-Cooperation Movement Labour unions actively participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. They organized strikes and boycotts of British goods and institutions [23].

During the Civil Disobedience Movement between 1930 and 1934, labour groups played a significant and active role in challenging British colonial authority. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's call for nonviolent resistance, workers from various industries joined the movement by organizing strikes, boycotts, and protests aimed at disrupting the colonial economic machinery. Labour unions called for shutdowns of factories, mills, and railway services, directly impacting British trade and administration [24]. The Salt Satyagraha, which began as a protest against the British salt tax, became a rallying point that united workers with peasants and other sections of society in civil disobedience. Labour activists not only supported the movement morally but also contributed practically by halting work and demanding the end of exploitative policies [25]. This period marked a crucial moment where the labour struggle intertwined with India's nationalist aspirations, showcasing the workers' power to challenge colonial economic interests and strengthen the fight for independence. Despite facing repression and arrests, the participation of labour groups during the Civil Disobedience Movement underscored their vital role as a mass force in the freedom struggle [26].

Industrial workers, railway employees, and plantation labourers were key participants in India's freedom struggle, using their collective strength to challenge British colonial rule. Among them, railway workers held a particularly strategic position; their strikes often brought the colonial administration to a halt by disrupting communication and transportation networks essential for British military and administrative control [27]. These railway strikes not only demonstrated the critical role of workers in undermining colonial authority but also galvanized public support for the nationalist cause. Similarly, industrial workers in textile mills, jute factories, and other manufacturing units organized mass protests and strikes that highlighted both economic grievances and political demands. Plantation labourers, especially in tea and coffee estates, participated in boycotts and demonstrations, further contributing to the widespread resistance against British exploitation [28]. The active involvement of these workers helped transform the freedom movement into a mass-based struggle, integrating economic justice with political independence. Their sacrifices and collective actions underscored the working

class as a powerful force in India's journey towards liberation. Inclusion in Indian National Congress: The Congress increasingly recognized the importance of labor rights in its platform. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose supported labor causes and sought to mobilize workers for independence [29].

The labour movement in colonial India gained a new ideological depth with the rise of socialist and communist thought, which effectively linked the struggle against colonialism with the broader fight against class oppression. Influenced by global socialist currents and the Russian Revolution of 1917, Indian thinkers and activists began to view the exploitation of workers not merely as an outcome of imperialism, but also as a systemic class issue. This ideological shift was marked by the formation of the Communist Party of India in 1925, which brought organized Marxist principles into Indian labour politics. Leaders like M.N. Roy, S.A. Dange, and Muzaffar Ahmed played key roles in mobilizing workers under the banners of class solidarity and national liberation. They emphasized mass organization, worker education, and international solidarity, aligning labour movements with the anti-colonial cause. The CPI and other socialist groups were instrumental in radicalizing trade unions and advocating for structural economic reforms even within the nationalist discourse. Their efforts ensured that the labour question [30].

The Government of India Act of 1935 marked a turning point in colonial governance by expanding provincial autonomy and allowing Indian leaders limited power within elected legislatures. As a result, labour rights began to receive more formal recognition in political discourse. Provincial governments formed by Indian political parties—particularly the Indian National Congress—began to include labour welfare in their policy agendas [31]. These administrations initiated efforts to improve working conditions, regulate employment, and expand social services for workers, although their powers were still constrained by overarching British control. Importantly, labour leaders began to participate more actively in electoral politics, contesting provincial elections and gaining representation in legislative assemblies. Their entry into the political arena allowed them to directly influence the framing of labour laws and to push for reforms from within the system. This period also witnessed the strengthening of labour departments, the expansion of factory inspections, and the increased visibility of labour concerns in legislative debates. These developments helped bridge the gap between grassroots worker movements and institutional policymaking, preparing the ground for more comprehensive labour reforms after independence [32].

The labour movement in colonial India left a profound and lasting impact on both the Indian freedom struggle and the post-independence political and social framework. It not only challenged the exploitative policies of British colonial rule but also contributed significantly to the growth of political consciousness among workers and the broader Indian population. The collective organization of workers into trade unions and their participation in nationalist movements helped shape the discourse of independence around economic justice, social equity, and democratic participation [33]. One major impact was the politicization of the working class. Through their involvement in movements like the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India campaigns, Indian workers began to see their struggles not just as economic issues but as part of a larger national liberation effort. This integration helped bridge the gap between the working classes and nationalist leaders, and laid the foundation for the incorporation of labour rights into mainstream political agendas. Secondly, the labour movement played a key role in institutional reforms. The persistent demands of trade unions, strikes, and public agitation forced the colonial government to enact various labour laws, such as the Factory Act (1911), Trade Union Act (1926), and Workmen's Compensation Act (1923). Though imperfect and poorly enforced, these laws marked the beginning of formal labour rights in India and influenced post-independence labour legislation significantly [34].

Thirdly, the emergence of a politically aware and organized working class contributed to the rise of socialist and leftist ideologies in India. Many labour leaders, influenced by Marxist and socialist thought, became important figures in India's political landscape. The Communist Party of India and other socialist groups that emerged from the labour movement played active roles in shaping policy debates around labour rights, industrial development, and social welfare in independent India [35]. Finally, the legacy of the labour movement is evident in the continued existence and influence of trade unions in India. Organizations like the All India Trade Union Congress, founded in 1920, continue to function and advocate for workers' rights. The principles of collective bargaining, labour welfare, and social justice that were championed during the colonial period became key elements of India's democratic and constitutional framework after independence [36].

The labour movement under British colonial rule was instrumental in awakening the consciousness of the Indian working class, many of whom had long remained voiceless and invisible in the socio-political structure. Initially fragmented and isolated within specific industries such as textiles, railways, plantations, and mining, Indian workers gradually began to organize themselves into unions, participate in strikes, and form collective fronts to resist exploitation. This process of organization led to a greater awareness of their rights, both economic and political, and allowed them to demand better wages, working conditions, and social protections [37]. Labour unions not only gave workers a platform to negotiate with employers and colonial authorities but also educated them about broader issues like class struggle, economic justice, and political self-determination. The involvement of prominent nationalist and socialist leaders in labour causes further inspired confidence among workers, helping them realize their critical role in the anti-colonial movement. Labour activism fostered a sense of unity across linguistic, regional, and occupational divisions, promoting solidarity among diverse sections of the working population [38].

Moreover, as workers participated in major national movements such as the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements, they began to see themselves not just as economic actors but as vital contributors to India's liberation struggle. The rise of institutions like the All India Trade Union Congress and the growing presence of labour representatives in legislative bodies helped cement the place of workers in the democratic process. This long-term empowerment of the working class laid the ideological and institutional foundations for labour rights in independent India and ensured that the voices of workers would continue to shape public policy, labour

legislation, and political discourse in the decades to come. Let me know if you'd like me to expand on the social or legislative legacy of the labour movement as a follow-up [39].

The participation of the Indian working class in the freedom struggle significantly expanded the social base of the nationalist movement, transforming it from a predominantly elite-led agitation into a broad-based mass uprising. Until the early 20th century, the Indian National Congress and other nationalist bodies were largely composed of urban professionals, landlords, and members of the educated middle class. Although these groups played a vital role in articulating the goals of independence, their reach among the broader population was limited. The involvement of industrial workers, railway employees, and plantation labourers brought new energy and numerical strength to the national movement. Workers joined strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience campaigns in large numbers, disrupting the economic operations of the British Empire and lending direct pressure to colonial rule. For example, massive strikes in textile mills, jute factories, and railway workshops not only demanded labour reforms but also voiced political slogans aligned with nationalist goals [40].

Through their participation, workers helped national leaders understand the lived realities of exploitation and poverty, enriching the ideological framework of the freedom struggle with the language of economic justice, class solidarity, and social equity. This broadened the appeal of the independence movement, especially in urban industrial centers and among the lower classes. The labour movement's integration into the nationalist agenda helped forge a united front that included peasants, workers, students, women, and the middle class — making it one of the most inclusive and widespread anti-colonial movements in the world [41].

The prolonged experience of exploitation under colonial rule and the organized resistance by Indian workers laid a strong foundation for post-independence labour legislation and welfare policies. During British rule, workers had faced harsh conditions with minimal legal protection, prompting the formation of trade unions and widespread strikes that exposed the need for a robust framework to safeguard labour rights. These early struggles generated political awareness among both the working class and nationalist leaders, establishing labour welfare as a key priority in the nation-building agenda after 1947. Following independence, the Indian Constitution recognized labour as a concurrent subject, allowing both the central and state governments to legislate on labour matters. Drawing from the demands and experiences of pre-independence labour movements, the new government introduced several progressive labour laws, such as the Industrial Disputes Act (1947), the Minimum Wages Act (1948), and the Employees' State Insurance Act (1948). These laws aimed to ensure fair wages, job security, health coverage, and improved working conditions [42].

Additionally, the post-independence state envisioned itself as a welfare state, deeply influenced by the socialistic ideas that had taken root in the freedom struggle. Labour unions gained formal recognition, and institutions like the Indian Labour Conference and tripartite consultative bodies were established to promote dialogue between employers, employees, and the state. The legacy of colonial-era labour movements thus became a cornerstone of India's democratic and developmental trajectory, ensuring that labour rights remained central to the republic's policy framework.

During the British colonial era, the labour conditions in India were characterized by severe exploitation, poverty, and social hardships. Indian workers, whether in factories, plantations, railways, or mines, endured long hours, meagre wages, unsafe working environments, and lacked any formal legal protections or social security. Women and children were especially vulnerable, often forced into labour under oppressive conditions to support their families. The exploitative economic policies of the British not only marginalized the working class but also disrupted traditional livelihoods, pushing many into poverty and indebtedness. However, these adverse conditions also served as a catalyst for awakening political and social consciousness among the working class. Indian labourers began to organize themselves into trade unions and labour associations, demanding better wages, improved working conditions, and recognition of their rights. The early 20th century witnessed the rise of significant labour movements and strikes, such as the Bombay textile strikes and the Madras railway strike, which challenged colonial economic interests and garnered public and nationalist support.

The labour movement became closely linked with India's independence struggle as workers participated actively in major political campaigns like the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements. Key sectors, especially railways, used collective action to disrupt British rule, demonstrating organized labour's power. Leaders from nationalist and socialist backgrounds united workers' rights with political liberation, broadening the movement's scope. Although British labour laws such as the Factory Act (1911) and Trade Union Act (1926) existed, enforcement was weak, offering limited protection. After 1935, labour issues gained political recognition, with provincial governments addressing worker welfare and labour leaders entering legislatures. Organizations like the All-India Trade Union Congress reflected labour's growing political influence. The colonial labour movement's legacy lies in raising workers' rights awareness, fostering solidarity, and integrating labour into the nationalist struggle, ultimately laying the foundation for post-independence labour laws and social welfare policies.

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