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Trade union practices in the recognized trade unions of north-east Frontier Railway, India

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A B S T R A C T

Indian Railway- a name with which daily lives of crores of middle-class and low-class Indians are deeply involved, an industry that has eased up the lives of many at affordable price, and a very important tangible part of Indian Economy that flows throughout the country touching almost every corner-always. This article is prepared on the basis of a dissertation entitled “Trade Unionism in Indian Railways: A study with special reference to the recognised trade unions of North-East Frontier Railway, Maligaon, Guwahati” prepared by me. This was a descriptive study conducted with the help of a sample of 120 railway employees of North-East Frontier Railway. The ultimate findings of this study are mainly based on primary data collected by me. The study was conducted with two objectives. Those are to know about the past and present trade union practices in N.F. Railway, Guwahati; and to know about the day-to-day problems being faced by the employees in N.F. Railway, Guwahati. Again, the present study was confined to the area of the field study i.e. the Head Quarter of N. F. Railway; the N. F. Railway Central Hospital; the workshop of Kamakhya Junction; the Kaithalkuchi Station of Nalbari district and the Kamakhya Junction of Kamrup district, India.

Introduction

Trade Union is a vital component of the present scenario of industrial environment. Since workers in an industry individually are less powerful in solving their problems, therefore they use to form some formal groups which are now identified as Trade Unions or Labour Unions, and try to get solution to their problems by using their collective strength. Trade unions are formed to protect and promote the interests of its

members. They are there basically to protect the interests of workers against discrimination; quirky actions and unfair labour practices. Trade Unions perform a number of important functions which are continuously helping in maintaining a good industrial relation between employees and employers, employees and employees, and employers and employers in an industry.

The industry of Indian Railways is not an exception to it. Indian Railway (abbreviated as IR) is an Indian state-owned enterprise with its head quarter in New Delhi, owned and operated by the Government of India through the Ministry of Railways. IR was founded in 16th April, 1853. IR is world's fourth largest railway networks after those of the United States, Russia and China. IR comprises of 1,15,000 km of track over a route of 65,436 km and 7,172 stations. In 2013-14, IR earned revenue of Rs. 1441.67 billion or US \$23 billion (1billion=100 crores) which consisted of Rs. 940 billion or US \$15 billion from freight and Rs. 375 billion or US \$6.1 billion from passengers' tickets.

Railways were first introduced to India in 1853 from Bombay to Thane. In 1951, the systems were nationalized as one unit- the Indian Railway, becoming one of the largest networks in the world. IR operates both long distance and suburban rail systems. It also owns locomotive and coach production facilities at several places in India and are assigned codes identifying their gauge, kind of power and type of operation. Its operations cover twenty nine states and seven union territories and also provide limited international services to Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Indian Railways is the world's seventh largest commercial or utility employer, by number of employees, with 1.307 million employees. The trains have a 5 digit numbering system as the Indian Railways runs about 12617 passenger trains and 7421 freight trains daily. As of 31st March 2013, 20,884 km (31.9%) of the total 65,436 km route length was electrified. Its key service areas are- passenger railway, freight services, parcel carrier, catering and tourism services, parking lot operations and allied

services. Presently IR has 17 railway zones and 68 divisions.

The 17 zones under Indian Railway are-

1. Central Railways (CR),
2. Eastern Railways (ER),
3. East Coast Railways (ECoR),
4. East Central Railways (ECR),
5. North Central Railways (NCR),
6. North Eastern Railways (NER),
7. North Western Railways (NWR),
8. Northeast Frontier Railways (NFR),
9. Northern Railways (NR),
10. South Central Railways (SCR),
11. South East Central Railways (SECR),
12. South Eastern Railways (SER),
13. South Western Railways (SWR),
14. Southern Railways (SR),
15. West Central Railways (WCR),
16. Western Railways (WR), and
17. Kolkata Metro.

Present Minister of Railways is Mr. Suresh Prabhakar Prabhu.

Trade unionism in Indian railways

Trade union history of Indian Railways is as old as the labour movement in India. The trade union movement in India had been the child of industrial development.

The first employees' organization in IR was formed in 1897 under the name of "Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of India and Burma" in the backdrop of a strike conducted by Guards.

Many Railway Trade union movements sprang up in India during 1918–21. Important among them were:

- The Madras and Southern Maratha Railway Employees' Union.

- The Great Indian Peninsular Railway men's Union.
- North Western Railway Employees' Union.
- The Kanchrapara Railway Workers' Union.
- The Bombay-Baroda and Central Indian Railway Company Workers' union.
- The East Indian Railway Union
- Bengal and North Western Railwaymen's Association.

Employees of the Railway companies joined these Unions. But these Unions were not successful in getting their demands fulfilled by the companies.

Presently, there are two federations in the Indian Railways. Those are-

- ❖ All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF), and
- ❖ National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NFIR).

During the last part of the 19th Century, railwaymen were inspired by the ongoing freedom struggle. After the formation of All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the trade union leaders who were leading the freedom struggle and were active in the railway trade union movement, in 1924, formed the All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) with the affiliation of the unions at the company level, which consisted of the railwaymen's unions working on the different railways. AIRF is affiliated to HMS (Hind Mazdoor Sabha). The federation was recognised by the Railway Board in 1930. The federation claimed a membership of 2,00,000 at the time of its establishment.

Consequent to the formation of Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in May 3, 1947, the Government of India

created a new federation of IR workers, named as Indian National Railway Workers' Federation (INRWF) which was a rival union of AIRF. The rival unions were set up in all Zonal Railways affiliated to INRWF. INRWF was recognized instantly by the Railway Board in 1948 itself.

In 1953, AIRF and INRWF were amalgamated and as a result, National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NFIR) was formed. But due to severe inter-union conflict, AIRF separated from NFIR- the amalgamated Federation and started functioning independently since 1956. Since then, two independent Federations viz., National Federation of Indian Railwaymen and All India Railwaymen's Federation are functioning as the two recognised Federations of Indian Railways. NFIR is affiliated to INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress), ITF (International Transport workers' Federation), and ILO (International Labour Organisation).

Both AIRF and NFIR are actively engaged in many labour welfare and social security measures, including women corner.

There are a large number of unrecognised Unions and Associations functioning in Indian Railways. However it is the policy of the administration neither to enter into correspondence nor negotiate with these unions.

Impact of trade unions in Indian railways

- a) With the formation and recognition of employees' organisation, the Administration cannot make unilateral decisions that affect employer-employee relationships.

Decisions relating to policies on employment, transfer, promotion,

training, adoption of latest technology, wages, lay off, etc. are no longer can be determined unilaterally by the management and employees' unions has to be consulted for these.

- b) The railway federations are being consulted through the meetings of Permanent Negotiating Machinery (PNM) and Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM) before a final decision is taken by the management on staff matters.
- c) The Railway federations have also conducted in the past a few strikes to press their demands, of which the most important was the Indian Railways Strike of 1974.
- d) At present two recognized Federations- AIRF and NFIR function at all India basis with their affiliated unions at the Zonal Railways and Workshops.
- e) History of Railway Trade unions doesn't end with the 'Recognized Unions'. So many unrecognized unions also function parallel to the federations like that of running staff (AILRSA - All India Loco Running Staff Association), station master association (AISMA - All India Station Masters' Association), etc.. These associations have also contributed largely to shape the trade union movement in Indian Railways.

The existing negotiating machineries in Indian Railways are-

- 1) Permanent Negotiating Machinery (PNM)
- 2) Fort-Nightly Meetings (FNM)
- 3) Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM) & Compulsory Arbitration (CA)

Introduction to n.f. railway, Maligaon

The Northeast Frontier Railway abbreviated as N.F. Railway is one of the 17 railway

zones in India. Headquartered in Maligaon, Guwahati in Assam, it is responsible for rail operations in the entire Northeast and parts of West Bengal and Bihar.

So far number of divisions is concerned, N.F. Railway, Maligaon is divided into 6 divisions:

- 1) Alipurduar Railway Division
- 2) Katihar Railway Division
- 3) Lumding Railway Division
- 4) Rangiya Railway Division
- 5) Tinsukia Railway Division
- 6) Silchar Railway Division

There are 17 trade unions affiliated to AIRF, of which the union of the North-East Indian Railway is known as the 'North-East Frontier Railway Mazdoor Union' (NFRMU). And there are also 17 Unions affiliated to NFIR, of which the union of the North-East Indian Railway is known as the 'North-East Frontier Railway Employee's Union' (NFREU).

In 1881, Railway first entered in Assam when 'Assam Railway and Trading Company' set up meter gauge track. The 65 km long meter gauge line from Dibrugarh to Margherita was constructed by the British mainly for transportation of tea and coal.

This company later started first passenger train in Assam by the name 'Dibru Sadiya Railway'. The North Eastern Railway was formed on 14 April, 1952 by amalgamating two Railway systems: the Assam Railway and Oudh and Tirhut Railway. Later, on 15 January 1958, it was bifurcated into two railway zones- the North Eastern Railway and the Northeast Frontier Railway to serve the needs of the northeastern states in a better way.

(1) N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union (NFRMU)

The N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union is a recognized Trade Union of N.F. Railway, affiliated to the All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) and Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). NFRMU has been formed on January 15, 1958. Its Head Office is at Pandu in Guwahati. Comrade Hareswar Goswami was its first President and Comrade Priya Gupta was the first General Secretary.

(2) N.F. Railway Employees Union (NFREU)

The N.F. Railway Employees Union is an affiliate of National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NFIR), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and International Transport workers Federation (ITF). Late H. N. Shastri, a renowned trade union leader and Late Bimala Prasad Chaliha, ex-Chief Minister of Assam played a pivotal role to form this Union.

Statement of findings and recommendations

Findings

According to the data collected, in the sample of 120 employees in the N.F. Railway, Maligaon, approximately 89% of the employees are members of trade unions.

On the other hand, rest 11% of the employees does not have membership of any trade union.

Findings

- (i) Here, at first we see that very few employees of N.F. Railway are without membership of any trade union.

- (ii) Secondly, among the 77 male employees in the sample, 71 have membership of trade unions, which correspond to 92.21% of the total male employees in the sample.

- (iii) Among the 43 female employees in the sample, 36 are members of trade unions, which constitute 83.72% of the total female employees in the sample. That means, participation of female employees in trade unions is lower than that of males.

Findings

The data in this table is provided by Shri Rakhal Das Gupta, General Secretary of N. F. Railway Mazdoor Union and Shri Munin Saikia, General Secretary of N. F. Railway Employees' Union. Findings of the above data are:

- (i) 80% of the total members of N. F. Railway Mazdoor Union are males and 20% are females.
- (ii) 85.71% of the total members of N. F. Railway Employees' Union are males and 14.71% are females.
- (iii) Female membership is considerably lower than that of male in both the trade unions.

Findings

Among the 107 members of trade unions, **98%** members are satisfied with the working of their respective unions; on the other hand, **2%** are not satisfied.

Findings

Among the 107 members of trade unions in the sample, approximately 48% members accept that their interests and problems are given importance by their respective trade union leaders than the administration; while

only 17% consider that administration gives more importance to their problems and interests.

Again, 33% of the members in the sample consider that both administration and trade unions give equal importance to their problems and interests, while only 2% think that neither administration nor trade unions give any importance to what they are suffering and what they need and expect.

The descriptive implications and interpretations of all the quantitative data represented through the Tables, Charts and Pie diagrams above are as follows-

a) From investigation through schedules, we have got that the main problems that almost all the female members of trade unions in the sample reported to face are- inconvenient timing of union meetings and security problems arising from that.

Besides, the female members of trade unions often face problems of maintaining balance between family responsibilities and responsibilities of a union member; non-cooperation from the family members in carrying out their responsibilities as a union member; misinterpretation of their image by the others just on the basis of their being union members, attending union meetings and carrying out union-related activities. However, all the female members do not face all the problems mentioned here.

b) From the survey through schedule, it is found that the main reasons that have led an employee for not having membership to any trade union are as follows-

- They do not trust trade unions;
- They hate the favouritism inside trade unions and interference by parties with

political motives in the trade union activities;

- They do not want to be involved in any trade union activities, including strikes;
- They do not want to be bound by norms/responsibilities of trade union members;
- Personal and family problems.

c) Very less number of union members are found to be not satisfied with the functioning of their trade unions, and as stated by the respondents, the main reasons of their lack of satisfaction are-

- Favouritism and corruption inside the unions;
- Political party's involvement in the union activities;
- They do not support some activities being carried out by the union;
- Lack of proper communication between union leaders and other members;
- Union leaders' lack of attention towards problems being faced by the members.

d) Maximum employees complained that they are facing major problem of shortage of staff and hence excess work load, lack of proper housing and transport accommodation and separate dress changing and rest room for female employees, lack of basic amenities for female workers in the track and grass root level. Majority of the workers have the problem of bad condition of the railway quarters they are living in.

e) Some female employees stated that they are also facing domination and mistreatment by male co-workers and male administrators.

f) The employees also stated about the unemployment of their educated children.

g) Almost all the root level workers complained of insufficient pay and

bonus they get and lack of proper uniform for performing duty.

- h) Some employees stated about the problem of lack of promotion for many years and hence losing their morale towards their jobs.
- i) Both the unions stated about administration's negative attitude towards the trade unions and lack of cooperation with the unions in solving problems.

- j) As complained by both the unions, Management sometimes exercises unfair labour practices upon them. The trade union members are often victimised and they are often forcefully transferred. Management often does not follow the approved yardstick.

These are some of the findings received from analysis of the primary data collected through schedules.

Table.1 Demographic representation of the n.f. railway employees in the trade unions

| Gender | Membership of trade unions | | Total |
|--------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| | Have membership | Do not have membership | |
| Male | 71 | 6 | 77 |
| Female | 36 | 7 | 43 |
| Total | 107 | 13 | 120 |

The data in the table can be represented with the help of a **Bar diagram** as Fig. 2

Table.2 Demographic representation of membership of the two recognised trade unions in n. f. railway, maligaon

| Name of the trade unions | Gender | | Total |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Male | Female | |
| NFRMU | 40,000 | 10,000 | 50,000 |
| NFREU | 36,000 | 6,000 | 42,000 |
| Total | 76,000 | 16,000 | 92,000 |

The data in the table can be represented with the help of a **Bar diagram** as Fig. 3

Fig.1 Pie diagram- 1

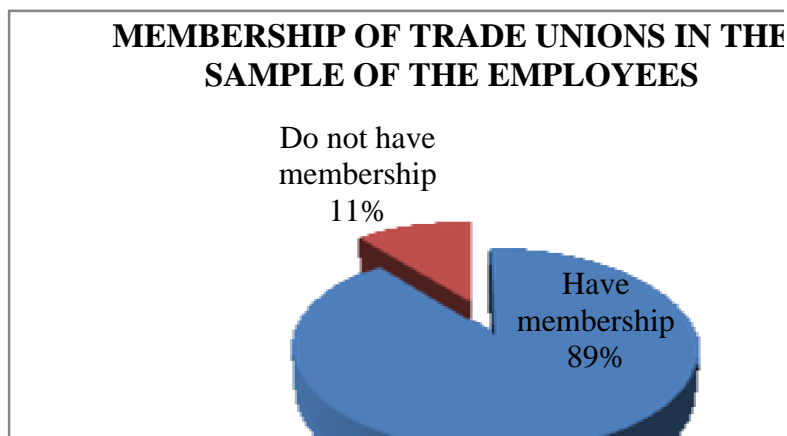


Fig.2 Demographic Representation of the N.F. Railway Employees in the Trade Unions

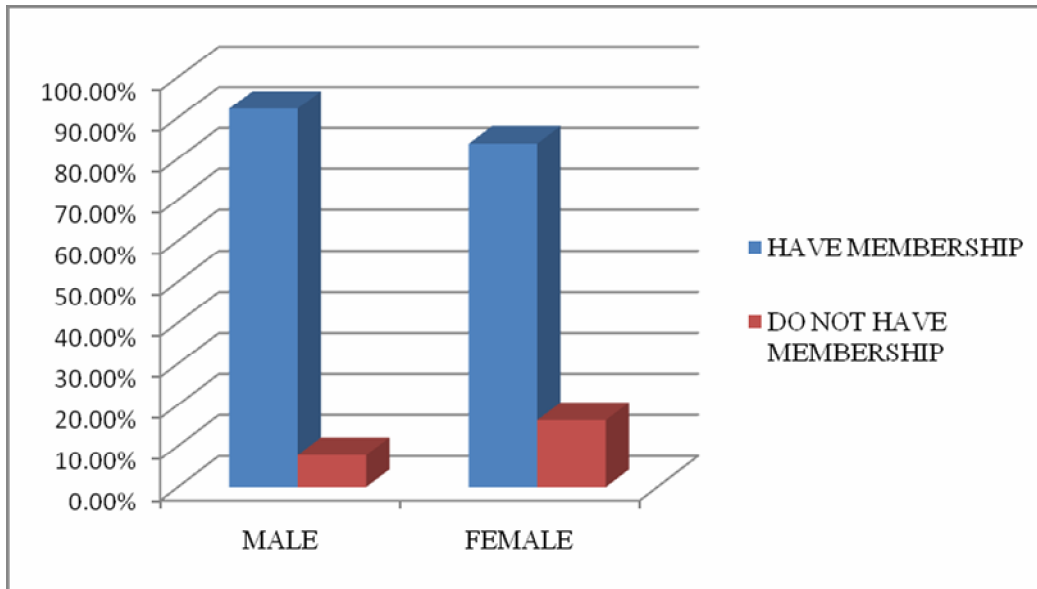


Fig.3 Demographic representation of membership to the two recognised trade unions in N. F. Railway, Maligaon

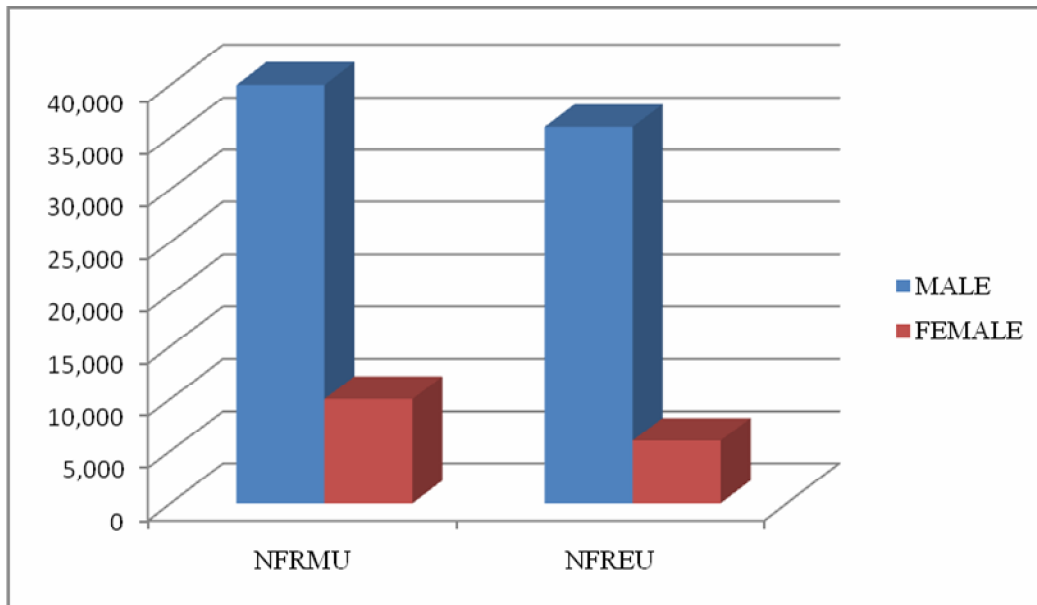
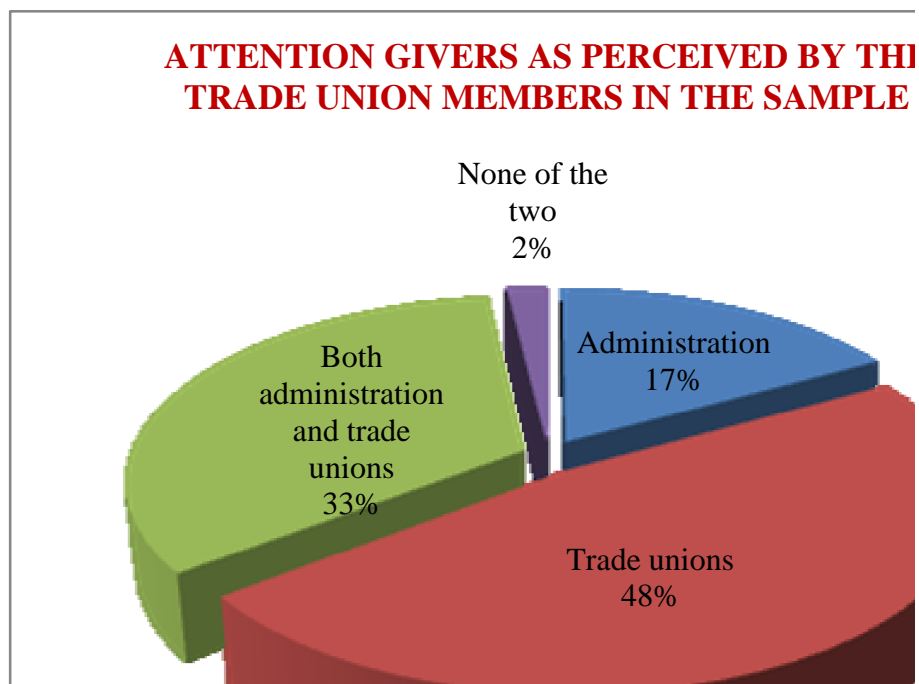


Fig.4 Pie diagram- 2



Fig.5 Pie diagram- 3



Summary and Suggestions

Trade unions are vital element in the scenario of Industrial Relations. We know that for the rapid growth and development of the industrial sector, a healthy industrial relation between employees and employers, employers and employees and between employees and employees is of utmost requirement. A trade union through its collective and intelligent actions, can contribute to a great extent in building excellent industrial relation, organisational health and a strong organisational culture. A healthy industrial climate has tremendous effect on the other aspects also of a nation.

At the present time, trade unions have been much more powerful than before. Therefore it is always expected that they would realise their power and capacity, make the best utilization of their power and support from society and will always go on working for the good of the organisation, the industry and hence, the nation as a whole.

We have seen that Indian Railways is suffering from a number of problems. Both the federations in Indian Railways are working for the betterment of the workers' conditions, taking in hand various welfare activities, providing people with social security measures and doing lots of good things. In the midst of all these, the two federations and their affiliates often come to the pages of newspapers through their continuous fights and blame game. It is a true fact that the unions in Indian Railways have strong inter-union rivalry. If they remain busy in fighting within themselves and blaming each other, then the general workers can expect nothing good from the unions and the Administration shall certainly exploit this chance. Therefore, it will be better for the trade unions to minimise conflicts within themselves and work sincerely and united for the over-all

development of the working class and hence, serve the whole nation.

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