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Title: UNIONIZING INDIAN AGRICULTURAL WORKERS:
PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Authors: Pramod Verma, Professor, IIMA
S. Mookherjee, Research Associate, IIMA

Abstract

The paper is concerned with the problems and prospects of organizing agricultural workers. The motivation to unionize is analysed in terms of low income, insecurity of employment and social disparity faced by landless labourers. Research evidence is summarised with a view to highlight the constraints in organizing the landless. Consequently, attention is drawn to some organizational problems such as objectives, structure and policies of a rural union. It has been emphasized in the paper that serious efforts should be made by the central trade unions to organize the agricultural workers.

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This paper attempts to discuss briefly the scope, limitations, and prospect of unionizing Indian agricultural workers. We do not intend to include peasants and their unionization, since peasants are a separate class of agriculturists having land of their own and enjoying a higher economic and social status than agricultural workers. The two do not have identical goals to fight for. More precisely, the former is an employer engaging the latter. An agriculture worker is simply a wage earner like a factory labourer. He does not have land of his own and cultivates others' land, earning wages for the work. Our discussion, therefore, is focussed on agricultural workers. In view of the limited research evidence, the views expressed in this paper are based on generalized experience. The conclusions drawn and suggestions made, therefore, are purely tentative and subject to modifications.

Although the Indian labour movement is more than half a century old, its growth has been lop-sided, concentrating on organizing urban industrial workers and not exploring the potentialities of the agricultural work force to strengthen the movement. There are a few instances of agrarian conflicts in some villages of Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, but these are mostly localized or sporadic and lack coherence.

It is often argued that urban industrial workers are more apt to be unionized than their rural counterpart. The industrial workers' exposure to urban life makes them more conscious about the prevalent economic inequality and social gap and arouses their sense of individual rights in social life.¹ The awareness of individual rights which was hitherto unexposed or unexpressed among agricultural workers is now increasing. With a proper exploitation of this increasing awareness these workers could also be successfully organised to add to the existing strength of the unions. The following sections will attempt to discuss the feasibility of unionizing agricultural workers in India.

¹S.Ghosh. Trade unionism in the underdeveloped countries. Bookrand Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1959, pp.21-22

Motivation for unionization

It is commonly argued that a union is the outcome of the desire of a group of workers to fulfil their felt needs through collective action. Workers organize themselves to attain their social and economic well being. Unions therefore exist to obtain benefits like higher wages, shorter working hours, greater job security, or better working conditions.² This is true of trade unions everywhere in the world and unions in India are no exception. For example, the first trade union in India, viz., the Madras Labour Union, was formed in 1918 with a view to resolve grievances like short midday recess, low wages, and ill-treatment by superiors.³ It may be hypothesized that like industrial workers, agricultural labourers would also be equally inclined to join a union to achieve their economic well being. Similar problems such as low wages, long hours of work, and insecurity of employment may induce agricultural workers to form a union for resolving their grievances.

We now propose to review in brief the kind of problems that agricultural workers experience.

1. Low Income

The Indian agrarian structure consists of three levels. At the top of the hierarchy is the landlord, below him is the tenant, and at the bottom is the agricultural labourer. In some cases the positions of landlord and tenant overlap and are indistinguishable from each other. A person may own land and also work as a tenant on some one else's land. But the position of an agricultural labourer is very different. He is a wage earner depending on the mercy of the landlord. Wage rates are often settled below the minimum level of subsistence and often a regular wage is uncertain due to seasonal employment. The landlord can often have advantage of the contractual nature of employment and exploit his labour by paying low wages.

The common argument that the green revolution has bettered the agricultural labourers' economic conditions has been proved to be fallacious. For example, Bardhan's⁴ study indicates that the percentage of rural

²Arnold S. Tannebaum. "Unions" in James G. March (ed.) Handbook of organisations. Rand McNalley & Company, Chicago, 1965, pp.710-717.

³V.B. Karnik. Indian Trade Unions: A Survey, Bombay, Manaktalas (1966), pp 23-24.

⁴Pranab K. Bardhan "Green revolution and agricultural labours". In Rural development for weaker sections, The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Bombay 1974, pp. 26 and 39.

people in India who live below the minimum level of living of Re.15.00 per month at the 1960-61 prices increased from 38.03 in 1960-61 to 53.02 in 1967-68. At the micro level, the same study shows that in Punjab which is the heart of the green revolution, the average daily wage rate of the male agricultural labourer went up from Rs.1.82 to Rs.2.13 between 1956-57 and 1964-65, a 17% rise. But during the same period and in the same region the consumer price index for agricultural labourers went up by 34 per cent. This means that instead of going up the real wage rate for agricultural labourers actually declined during this period.

A macro level study by Mukherjee further substantiates the fact that income of this group of labourers was low.⁵ The study indicated that the percentage share of the income of agricultural labour at the 1960-61 prices both in the national income and the agricultural income went down from 9.98 and 17.80 in 1961-62 to 7.24 and 16.37 in 1968-69 respectively. While the per capita national income at the 1960-61 prices went up from Rs.254.00 in 1950-51 to Rs.329.90 in 1968-69 (an increase of about 30 per cent), the income of agricultural labour at the 1960-61 prices went up from Rs.333 in 1950-51 to Rs.339 in 1968-69 an increase of only two per cent. The index numbers for the share of agricultural labour in agricultural income also show a declining trend over the years. Taking 1950-51 as 100 the index number went down to 91-97 in 1968-69 at the 1960-61 prices.

The objective of Minimum Wages Act, 1948, was to ensure the payment of a minimum amount of wages to workers. This act was also made applicable to agricultural labourers. The state governments were empowered to fix the minima corresponding to the price level. But the implementation of this act in case of agricultural labourers has not been very encouraging. Over a long period, the minima have not been revised by the respective authorities though the price level has been increasing. It is very difficult at times to specify the money wages because of the customary payment of wages in kind. In many cases the kind payment may be equal to or higher than the cash payment. One empirical study of large farms in Punjab reports that in the state as whole, the average yearly payment of wages per farm worker by cash was Rs.810 during the period of study whereas the kind payment was equal to Rs.835.⁶ The casual nature of employment, scattered location of farms, and lack of awareness of the existence of such legislation among agricultural workers are some of the major constraints in enforcing this act in the agricultural sector.⁷

⁵ M. Mukherjee, "Share of agricultural Labour in National Income," Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, IX, 4, (April 1974), pp.563-585.

⁶ Ashok Rudra, "Employment Pattern in Large Farms in Punjab", Economic and Political Weekly, VI, 26, (June, 26, 1971) p.89.

⁷ Government of India, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, Report of the National Commission on Labour, New Delhi: The Manager of Publications.

2. Insecurity of Employment

The low level of agricultural wages is closely linked with the seasonal nature of employment. Under the traditional system, the agricultural workers remain unemployed or underemployed during the slack season of the year. Even during the peak season certain kinds of preparatory work like embanking and levelling take much less time than the usual working time in a normal working day. Self-employment and employment of family members of the cultivator also curtail the man days needed from agricultural labourers. In most cases the landlord hires labourers only when he and his family members are unable to cope with the work.⁸ The emergence of the green revolution has further aggravated the employment potential of the agricultural workers. The growing tendency to mechanize the farm has reduced the demand for agricultural labour. Farming is now more capital intensive than labour intensive. The traditional dependence on labour is gradually fading away. An empirical investigation in Punjab reports that many big farms were run entirely on family labour.⁹ For the state as a whole 18 per cent of the big farmers managed their farming without employing a single permanent labourer, 35 per cent of them kept only one permanent worker, and only seven per cent of the farms throughout Punjab employed four or more workers. Another study in Visakhapatnam reveals an even more grim picture of unemployment in the region.¹⁰ The study reports that while the number of male labour days available for kharif production were 87 million the number of labour days utilized were only 35 million. This means that 52 million labour days (60.10 per cent) were surplus or available for further employment. The picture is even more discouraging in case of rabi production where 90.50 per cent of the available male labour-days were surplus or unutilized.

3. The Social Disparity:

The economic disparity often creates a social gap between the landlord and the agricultural worker. In the agrarian structure, land is considered to be the main source of economic as well as social power. The power is fully enjoyed by the farmers holding key positions in the agrarian society. As a result of the green revolution a new class of people have emerged who may be called the "progressive farmers". They are more businessmen than agriculturists. Their self-sufficiency in farming has made them lose interest in community life. The new relationship between the landlord and the agricultural worker is that of dominance and dependence. The traditional customary obligations on the part of the

⁸ Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, Report on the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry, 1956-57, Vol I, (Delhi: The manager of publications, 1959, pp.38-39.

⁹ Ashok Rudra, op. cit., pp 90.

¹⁰ G.Parthasarathy and G.Dasaradha Rama Rao, "Employment and Unemployment of Landless Labour and Marginal Farmers", Rural Development for Weaker Section, Shreekanth Sambrani, (ed.) Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Bombay & Ahmedabad, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad 1974, p.41.

landlord to provide the worker food and shelter are gradually losing ground. Having gained self-sufficiency and economic power, the new farmers have also learnt the manipulative skill of using their economic and social power to get things done in their favour.¹¹ This social power and special skill acquired by the land owners have made the agricultural workers even more uncertain about their future. Any attempt by the agricultural workers to resort to the legal machinery for achieving distributive justice may be thwarted by the landlords by manipulation at the governmental level. Thus, the farmers' enormous monetary gain from the green revolution has offered them economic and social power and, in the process, the magnitude of social disparity between the two classes has also widened.

Aspects of unionization:

The foregoing sections have made it clear that there exists economic and social disparity between land owner and agricultural labourer and the magnitude of this disparity has increased as a result of the green revolution. This social and economic disparity has created among agricultural workers a class consciousness which may act as a positive force to unite them and enable them to fight collectively against the landlord for their due share in agricultural income and prosperity. Due to the personal relationship between the land owner and the agricultural labourer the latter has developed an opposing and negative attitude towards the former. The conflict of interests between the two is conducive for initiating an organized movement in the rural sector.¹²

We have already stressed that the primary reason for unionization of workers is the attainment of economic betterment for the class as a whole; this is true for the industrial as well as the agricultural workers. It may be suggested that if properly organized through an institution like union, agricultural workers can also get their due share of income through distributive justice and thus achieve economic betterment. Several empirical studies at the micro level support this hypothesis.

Qomen's study of agrarian tension in a Kerala district reports that a first agricultural labour union in Kuttanad in Kerala was formed in

Andre Beteille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure, London: 1974) Oxford University Press, pp. 113-116.

Professor Jan Breman had in a study of agrarian conflict in South Gujarat, suggested that the situation was ripe for explosion and had been for some time past. Yet, no concerted action had taken place, apart from a few stray incidents. Breman pointed to the lack of organization among the landless by themselves. See "South Gujarat Newsletter" in Sunday Standard, May 12, 1974.

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(4) 41

1939 with a view to resolve problems of long hours of work and lack of uniformity in wage rates for different kinds of operations.¹³ As a weapon of initial protest against these injustices the workers started coming late to work in the fields and left early. But these tactics did not pay much. The workers felt the need to represent their grievances in an institutional manner and the formation of the union served this purpose. As a result of the continuous pressure generated through this union, a committee known as the Industrial Relations Committee (IRC) was appointed by the government to examine the problems of agricultural labourers in the Kuttanad area. The IRC was a tripartite body consisting of six government nominees, 15 farmers representatives, and 13 representatives from the agricultural workers. The setting up of IRC helped the agricultural labourers in more than one way. It fixed the minimum wages for each type of operation as well as limited the maximum hours of work in a day. The IRC also recommended a periodic review of wages. For example, in October 1967, the daily wage rate for a male agricultural worker was fixed at Rs.4.85 and for a female worker at Rs.2.88. This Rs.2.88 was further revised and raised to Rs.3.40 in September 1969. It was recommended that the migrant labourers who came from outside villages to work temporarily be provided with temporary sheds and drinking water facility. It was decided that in case of discontinuity in employment the owner cultivator should either make for them an alternative work arrangement or pay them a subsistence allowance equivalent to 1.5 kg. of paddy per day.

Pandey's study of the agrarian movement in the Unnao district of Uttar Pradesh reveals that the primary demands which motivated agricultural workers to form the Khat Mazdoor Sabha in 1959 were a) a fair distribution of surplus and fallow land among the agricultural labourers, b) immediate government intervention to fulfil this demand, and c) eviction of an ex-landlord who had occupied surplus waste land.¹⁴ The result of this organized movement was a positive one in the sense that the surplus waste land was ultimately distributed among the landless agricultural labourers.

¹³ Domen, T.K., "Agrarian Tension in Kerala District: An Analysis, Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, October, 1972.

¹⁴ S.M. Pandey, "The Emergence of Peasant Movement in India: An Area Study", Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, VII. I, July 1971, pp.95-97

Muthiah's study of the Tanjore agrarian conflict further confirms our hypothesis that workers can achieve their economic betterment through an organized movement.¹⁵ In the face of organized pressure from agricultural labourers, a tripartite meeting between government representatives, land owners, and agricultural labourers of East Tanjore was held in 1972. The immediate outcome of this meeting was an increase in the wages of male labourers from Rs.3 to Rs.3.70 and of females from Rs.1.75 to Rs.2.25. By an earlier agreement the land owners were debarred from employing any outside labourer if labour was already available. Moreover, the Tamil Nadu government agreed to set up a commission to review and reexamine the multi-natured problems of agricultural labourers in the state.

Constraints to Unionization

The empirical studies cited above have left no doubt that unionization of agricultural labourers is the only means to resolve their problems. But we cannot deny the fact that these movements are localized and have limitations of their own. Indeed, there are significant constraints in the growth of an organized labour movement in the rural sector.

We have already mentioned the dominance-dependence relationship between the cultivator and the farm worker. Throughout the year the worker has to take loans from the farmer to feed himself and his family. Obviously the worker might be afraid to invite his malik's annoyance by opposing him through unionization. Also, too much personal contact often weakens their will to oppose and unite.¹⁶ Secondly, agricultural labourers are scattered over a wide area and the lack of improved roadways or suitable conveyance does not make it an easy task to assemble the workers in a common meeting place. Thus the communication gap is a major barrier in the organization of agricultural workers. Moreover, in most cases the agricultural workers work in small and scattered groups. No opportunity is available to agricultural workers to meet and organize at their work places.¹⁷ Lack of group cohesiveness is another negative factor. Even within a village the agricultural workers may be divided by their different cultures, religion, or caste.

¹⁵ C.Muthiah, "Development of Landless Labourers : Role of Group Bargaining Power", Paper read at the Seminar on Rural Development for Weaker Sections, Ahmedabad.

¹⁶ S.Ghosh, op. cit., p.194.

¹⁷ Ibid.

They may not have similar or identical goals to fight for.¹⁸ Finally, in India cultivators are often more in number than agricultural workers. According to the 1971 census, the cultivators numbered 78 million, whereas the agricultural labourers numbered only 47 million. It is very difficult for agricultural workers to organize and fight against a force which is numerically so strong. This view is supported by an empirical investigation in the Darbhanga district in Bihar. Thakur found that the numerical strength of the cultivators in the area under study was a¹⁹ major obstacle to unionizing the agricultural labourers of that region.

Thus the scattered nature of employment, personal contact with and dependence on the landlord, lack of group cohesiveness among agricultural workers, non-identical goals, and the numerical weakness of agricultural workers are some of the major obstacles to unionizing the agricultural workers in India. But these obstacles should not limit the efforts of existing unions to organize the unorganized.

Organizational Problems:

Basic to the issue of rural unionization are the organizational problems. These relate to the objectives, personnel and structure of the union. The objective of unionizing agricultural workers is to create a pressure group for achieving economic and social betterment of the workers. Both 'agitational' and 'developmental' strategies could be employed to generate conditions favourable to union activity. The agitational approach might be directed against the employer-landowners and the government insofar as improvement in terms and conditions of employment are concerned. On the contrary, the 'developmental' strategy could prove useful in securing the administrative assistance in the implementation of minimum wage regulation, developing house sites for landless, creating employment opportunities and obtaining financial support for education, health and drinking water facilities. The rural union could thus become an instrument not only for economic protection but for the social welfare of rural landless also. It should be borne in mind, however, that the choice of strategy or a combination of the two strategies can only be worked out in the process of unionization.²⁰ This choice will also depend

¹⁸ Andre Beteille, op.cit., p.111

¹⁹ S.N.Thakur, "Trade Unionism in the Rural Sector", Indian Journal of Labour Economics, XI, 3 and 4, (October 1968 and January 1969), pp.193 and 198.

²⁰ It may be appropriate here to refer to some experiments currently being conducted. The Maharashtra Shetkari Shet Mazdoor Panchayat has been organizing some programmes for agricultural workers in Maharashtra. Similarly, Khedut Khet Mazdoor Sabha in Gujarat is organizing both marginal farmers and landless labour as a counter-force to landlords and as welfare organization for the peasants and workers. More over, an action oriented programme called "The Aurangabad Experiment" was carried out by the I.C.F.T.U., Asian Trade Union College.

on the basic policy, philosophy and political ideology of a trade union promoting the rural union.

The goal setting is the primary task to be performed skilfully by the leaders of the movement.

At the initial stages, the leadership may come from outside, from politicians, teachers, or other professional elites. But not much could be expected from outsiders; they have their preoccupations and have limited time to devote to this task. Also, they may not have much contact with rural labourers and may lack first hand experience of the intricacies of the problems of this class of workers. The agricultural workers may also feel hesitant to express their real grievances to strangers. This will result in a communication gap between the leaders and followers. Thus, unless a relationship between leaders and followers is established, at the grass-root level, many real problems of the agricultural workers would remain unrepresented. The solution to this problem lies in developing leadership, at the village level from among the agricultural workers themselves. This may not be an easy task specially in view of constraints as the scattered location of villages, poor transportation, caste system, poverty, illiteracy, and lack of awareness among the workers. Therefore, it becomes necessary to increase the awareness among this class that it is through proper organization that their problems could be solved. This basic task can be entrusted to those in the existing cadres of the union who belong to rural areas and therefore have a basic rural orientation. It is not unrealistic to assume that these cadres are more apt to accommodate and adjust themselves to the rural culture and environment. They, with their first hand experience and formal training of trade unionism, can select potential leaders from among the agricultural workers and offer them basic orientation in trade union work. Once the leadership is built at the grass-root level, it will be easier to organize and unionize the agricultural workers of a particular village.

The lesson we have drawn from the empirical evidence mentioned earlier is that in most cases the movement was unstructured and lacked coherent form. If a union wants to consolidate its labour movement among the agricultural workers it should built up a separate rural structure for its organization. The settlement of disputes between agricultural workers and their landlords or getting government decisions in favour of the workers would involve formal procedures like negotiation or representation of grievances to the respective authorities as done in the case of industrial workers. This would require an administrative system to take major decisions and keep regular communication between the workers and governmental authority as well as maintaining contact with other allies. We can try out an experimental rural organizational model for the trade union. Chart 1

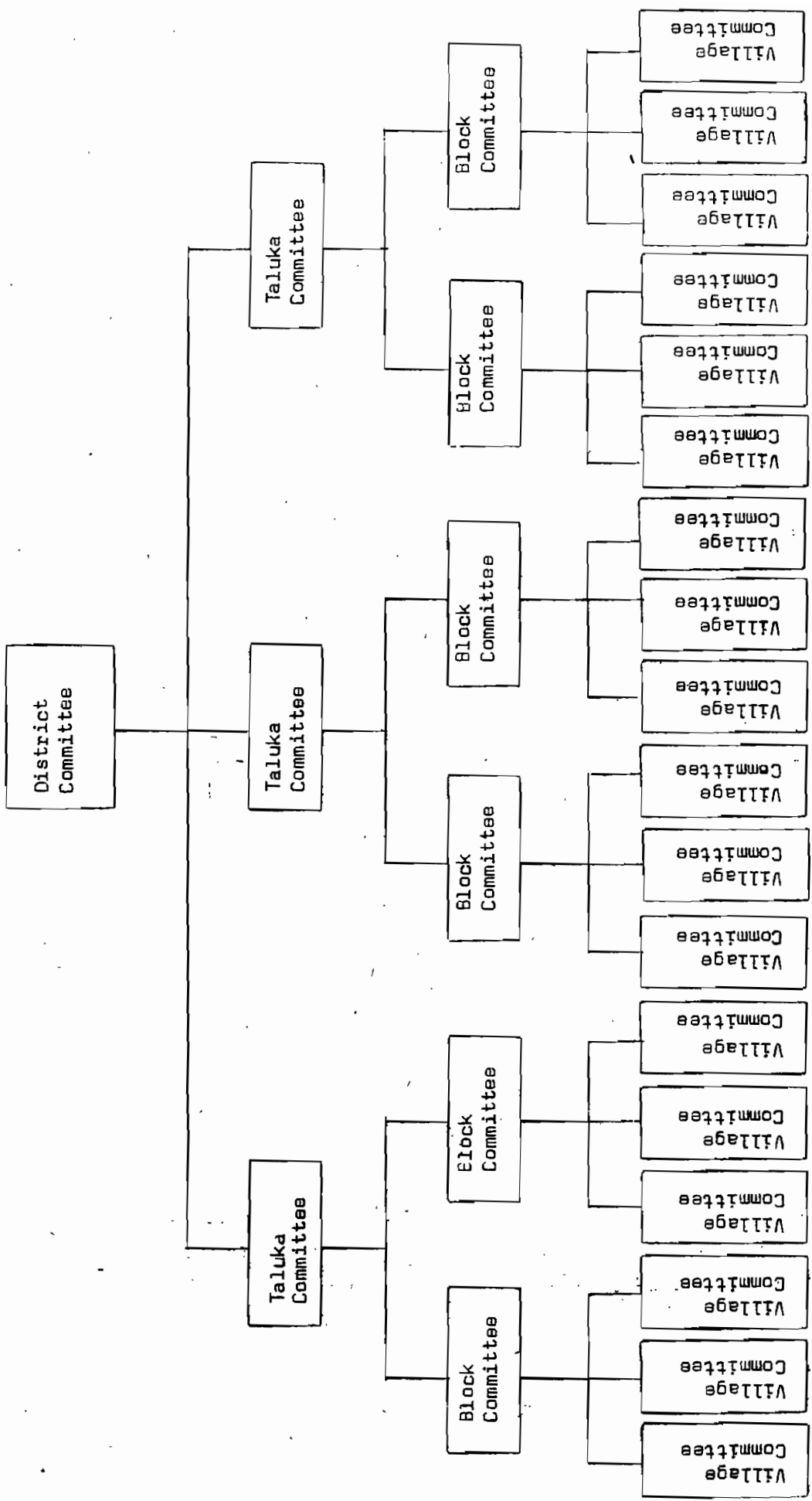
gives the proposed organizational structure. We have limited this structure up to the district level.

At the bottom of the rural structure is the village committee. The members of this committee would be elected by the workers of the village. The elected village committee members would in turn elect a block committee. The members of several block committees would make a taluka committee and a few taluka committee members would ultimately form the district committee. The major policy decisions like deciding strategies for agitation or preparing the charter of demands would be made by the district committee in consultation with members of other committees. Since problems arise only at the village level, the problem solving approach should be started at that level. At the governmental level the Block Development Officer (BDO) plays a mediatory role between villagers and the higher authority. Any problem arising at the village level should be first reported to the block committee of the union for negotiation with the BDO. Any dispute unresolved at the BDO level may be referred to the Taluka Committee or the district committee for further negotiation, either with the Taluka Officer or the District Collector.

There should be a periodic review of the working of the various committees through meetings. Planning and coordination is an essential task to maintain uniformity in the system. This task may be entrusted to the district committee.

Thus by developing effective leadership at the grass-root level and building up a formal structure and administrative system for the rural set up, the Indian trade unions could succeed in their task of organizing the unorganized. It would be naive to overlook the existing problems of the unions. For example, unions are already suffering from a shortage of trained personnel to run their own administration. Setting up of a full fledged rural structure would only enhance this problem. Building the rural cadre is also a formidable task. The prevailing apathy or disinterest in union affairs among industrial workers needs no mention. The same may not be unlikely in the case of agricultural workers. Irregular payment of subscription could be yet another problem. In spite of all these anticipated problems one would expect the labour leaders to shift their emphasis from the urban sector to the rural agricultural workers. The incentive would be the addition of the rural work force to their organizational strength. Since membership support is an essential input to maintain the union's viability it would be unrealistic of unions not to explore the potentiality of the vast agricultural work force. The time is ripe to take advantage of the increasing awareness among the agricultural

Proposed Organizational Structure for Agricultural Labour Union



workers and channelise it towards consolidating the labour movement in a balanced way.²¹

Conclusions

This paper has focussed attention on the constraints within which rural unionism can grow and function. It has been argued that the prevalence of economic and social disparity between the landowner and the agricultural workers provides a motivating factor for these workers to organize. Workers in various fields of economic activity unite in order to collectively fight for their due share in income and prosperity. Agricultural workers need be no exception to this general phenomenon.

It is unfortunate that many movements initiated by agricultural workers have remained sporadic and localized. No systematic attempt has been made by the existing unions to consolidate the movement on a large scale. Although there are significant impediments in organizing the landless, these are not insuperable. Far more important than these impediments is a total lack of effort in developing strategy, leadership and structure in commensuration with the conditions prevalent in the rural sector.

In this discussion, we have been concerned with the problems associated with organizing the agricultural workers. But the class of rural poor is not limited to such workers; there are small and marginal farmers, artisans and other self employed people who fall within the class of rural poor. A rural union's primary focus can only be limited to the landless; while in its wider welfare activity it could attend to the problems of rural poor. The identification of a 'target group' will be the first step toward successfully organizing a rural union.

Let it be reemphasized that in their own self-interest as well as achieving greater working class solidarity, there should be no hesitation on the part of the national unions to organize the mass of agricultural workforces. It is encouraging to note that some national centres have begun to seriously consider the possibilities but considerably more sustained efforts will be required before concrete results emerge.

²¹ V.V.Giri, Labour Problems in Indian Industry, Bombay: (Asia Publishing House, 1972), p.460.