

India and the ILO in Historical Perspective

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In the 91 years since the International Labour Organisation came into existence, there have been many intersections and parallels between the development of labour and social policies in this body and in India. Nations and international organisations influence each other in subtle and not so subtle ways. This group of articles explores some aspects of these interactions from an Indian point of view. The hope is that they will stimulate further work on the history of economic and social conditions and policies in India and beyond.

The history of India's participation in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) provides an instructive illustration of how both national and international policies are formed. India was a founder member of the ILO in 1919, and has been a prominent player in the organisation both before and after independence. The ILO has the peculiarity, among international organisations, that not only governments but also other major social actors – workers and employers – participate in its debates and decisions, giving additional dimensions to the interaction between national and international policy. Its field of work – labour and social policy – has seen major changes over the last 91 years. As a result there have been many intersections and parallels between the development of labour and social policies in India and in the ILO.

Nations and international organisations influence each other in complex ways. International organisations set standards, provide models and supply mechanisms for coordination, cooperation, and advocacy, and so in some degree shape national policy. But, at the same time individual countries, in particular, large or powerful ones, set the agendas, values and actions of international organisations. They do this through their participation in debate and decision-making, and through the choice of international organisations that they promote and support. It is also done in more subtle ways. For example, through their nationals on the staff of the secretariats of these organisations, who as international civil servants are independent of national governments, but whose perspectives and values are inevitably moulded to an extent by the societies from which they come.

This group of articles explores some aspects of these interactions. It includes a broad historical overview, a study of the contributions by Indian staff members of the ILO in the early decades, and reviews of two domains where the international and Indian agendas connect – employment policy and rights at work. We hope that these papers will stimulate further work on the history of economic and social conditions and policies in India and beyond, including topics such as the roles of employers' and workers' organisations and key individuals within them, international migration, the growth of the Indian labour movement, and so on. The ILO's Archives provide an important source of documentation and archival materials for such research.

This research was initially inspired by work undertaken in preparation for the ILO's 90th anniversary in 2009. Nevertheless it is a private activity, and the views expressed here are those of each author, and not of the ILO. Preliminary versions of these papers were presented at the Indian Society of Labour Economics Conference in Lucknow in December 2008, and (in collaboration with the Association of Indian Labour Historians) at a workshop at the V V Giri National Labour Institute in Noida in January 2009.

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