CHAPTER - 7
AGRICULTURAL LABOUR UNIONS

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Introduction

This is an age of unionisation as unity is regarded as the greatest strength for protecting and furthering the interests of those who unite and sincerely and devotedly work for their unity. This fact has been very effectively and emphatically brought out by Mr. Longfellow in the Song of Hiawatha which reads as follows:

"All your strength is in your union.
All your danger is in your discord.
Therefore, be at peace hence forward,
And, as brothers, live together". 1

Many of the sections of our society have formed their unions which have been formally and legally well organised in our country. Of late, some social scientists, a few leaders of organised trade union movement, some enlightened industrialists, a few political parties, several voluntary organisations and the Central and the State Governments have started showing varying degree of interest in organising the unions of agricultural labour. It is self-evident that the workers — of any field — standing individually alone cannot bargain for their rights and interests. The prime phrase, "united we stand, divided we fall" has even today great significance in the field of all the activities of human being. If capital unite, why should labour not do it? The modern agricultural society created such challenges and conditions that poor agricultural labourers can meet them only through their organisations. There are many ways of changing the rural power structure for the benefit of the poor. They are (i) redistribution of land in favour of the poor, (ii) due representation to the rural poor in the management of economic institutions, (iii) due representation of the rural poor in the functioning of political institutions, and (iv) organisation of the rural poor. The present study is concerned with the last one which has been receiving the considerable attention of many quarters during the recent times.
The existing theory of farmer-agricultural labour relations is, by and large, totally based on the Smithian assumption that both the farmers and the agricultural labourers are assumed to take actions which are meant to increase their self-interest. When, this is put in direct action it would lead to the direct conflict between these two parties for protecting their self-interest which may be monetary or otherwise. The concept of organisation of agricultural labour is not very clear due to its misleading perception. It is in the form of its infancy. The well-wishers of the rural poor and the agricultural labourers have mental struggle in deciding who should be included in the organisation of agricultural labourers from the total rural society as there are agricultural labourers, tenants, share-croppers, small and marginal farmers, artisans and hundreds of others who are anxious to work but who do not get enough work and if a few get work, they do not get even minimum wages and other conditions of employment in agriculture and other allied pursuits. A few States, viz., Haryana, Punjab, Kerala, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu which have formal but nascent unions of agricultural labour, have accepted the definition of union, on the lines of the 'Trade Unions Act, 1926'. According to Section 2(b) of this Act "a trade union is any combination of persons, whether
temporary or permanent, primarily for the purpose of regulating the relations between workers and employers or between workers and workers, and for imposing restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business, and includes the federation of two or more trade unions."\(^2\) The unions of agricultural labour should be encompassed to include tenants, small and marginal farmers, share-croppers, artisans and others for building up their bargaining capacity at the time of struggle for the fixation, revision, and implementation of minimum wage-rates and conditions of employment.

**Need**

The need for unity of agricultural labourers is aptly and logically stated long back by Theodore Roosevelt thus "It is essential that there should be organisations of labour. This is an era of organisations, capital organises and, therefore, labour must organise".

The rural conditions of our country call for the unionisation of rural people in general and agricultural labour class in particular to safeguard their interests and to get gainful employment and to ensure at least minimum wage-rates.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 782.
The International Labour Organisation, which has so far been preoccupied with the socio-economic betterment of workers engaged in relatively organised industries and sectors, has recognised in the year 1974 the urgent need for evolving a national policy for developing free and viable organisations of rural workers capable of protecting and furthering the interests of their members and ensuring their effective contribution to the economic and social development. 3

While recognising the need for unionisation of agricultural labourers the National Commission on Agriculture had stated in its Report published in 1976 that, "the long-term solution of the problem of enforcement of minimum wages would obviously have to look towards effective unionisation of agricultural labourers. With growing politicalisation of masses, the forces favouring unionisation should get progressively stronger in the normal course of events". 4

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and its Asian Regional Office (ARO) in its Manifesto which was released in 12th World Congress held at Madrid in 1979, had strongly pleaded the case for unionisation of the rural poor including agricultural labour in such words as "On priorities for the 1980s

adopted last year in Madrid which had pledged the effort of trade unions of the world to develop fast organisations of the rural poor in the countryside so that the overwhelming majority of the rural workers are able to earn their bread with economic security and justice, attain freedom through economic and political democracy and maintain peace with freedom, justice and dignity for all".\(^5\)

Our Planning Commission has also strongly recommended in the Draft Sixth Five Year Plan, 1978-83, the organisation of the rural poor which included apart from landless agricultural labourers, many others like tenants, small and marginal farmers, artisans and hundreds of others who are anxious to work but who do not get work.\(^6\) According to Dr. Raj Krishna, one of its members then, "The wastage, misappropriation and corruption likely to take place when huge sums are pumped into rural areas as contemplated by the plan, the only insurance against this danger is the quickest possible politicisation and unionisation of the rural poor in every block ..... only the unions of the poor can ensure that they get due share of credit, water, pumps, animals, inputs, assets and infrastructure and social services

\(^5\) Mathur V.S., Organisation of Rural Workers: Priority for the 80's, The Indian Worker, Vol.XXVIII No. 30&31, p. 55.

which are meant to be delivered to them under numerous laws, and schemes made by the Central and the State Governments. Only the unions of the poor can ensure that Panchayats and Co-operatives are not captured by the rural rich, and also can pressurise the administration to administer rural schemes without laxity and corruption.\textsuperscript{7}

In the absence of the unionisation of such people, the anticipated benefits of the laws, the projects, the policies and the programmes did not reach them and are not likely to benefit the mass of rural proletariat of our country.

Emphasising the role of trade unions in safeguarding the rights of rural labour, the Standing Committee on Agricultural Labour has, in 1980, noted that "unless trade unions of agricultural labour are strengthened, any law to regulate their wages and working conditions would remain only a formality.\textsuperscript{8}

The Central Government has also been very keen to organise rural labour and make it broadbased so as to cover artisans, share-croppers, tenants and small farmers. It is understood that (i) legislation with certain amendments and on the lines of the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act, 1974 is likely to be the model and the States will be asked to legislate on those lines; and

\textsuperscript{7} Karnik V.B., Organisation of Rural Poor, The Economic Times, dt. 1-1-79, p.5.
\textsuperscript{8} Plea to strengthen farm labour unions, Financial Express, dt. 11-7-80, p.3.
(ii) after organising the rural labour force, their representatives would be legally included in all agencies entrusted with the land reforms, the enforcement of minimum Wages Act, the supply of credit, input and marketing, the special employment programmes and block-level planning and development.9

**Evolution and Growth**

As stated elsewhere in this work, the majority of our agricultural labourers belong to the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes communities which are mostly downtrodden and oppressed sections of our society. Their daily life is the indication of hard realities. This condition calls for their organisation for improving and uplifting their lives.

Efforts for organising the rural labour have been tardy in our country. The Rural Labour Enquiry (1974-75) data revealed that about one per cent of the labourers belonging to agricultural labour-households were the members of one union or the other for protecting their interests.10 The oldest union in our country has been the Kisan Sabha started by the CPI wing within the Congress in 1936, which catered to the needs of farmers,

tenants and agricultural labourers for the upliftment and economic betterment of the rural weak. Further, Sarvashri Harivallabh Parikh and Jinabhai Darji formed long back the All-India Khet Majdoor Kisan Parishad to create powerful agricultural labour force to see that the land reforms are implemented rapidly and the rural labour is uplifted from their current economic, social, political and cultural morass. However, the Parishad could not produce the explosive impact as anticipated by the organisers. Another all-India body, viz., Bhartiya Khet Majdoor Union (B.K.M.U.) was formed in 1968, by the Congress Party with the main object of organising the agricultural labourers for their betterment and safeguarding their rights.

In course of time, State-wise unions of agricultural labourers were also established in Haryana, Punjab, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Though the Kisan Sabha was functioning informally, from its inception, for organising the rural people throughout the State, the Agricultural Labour Association (Gujarat Khet Majoor Mahajan Sangh) was established in 1975 by the Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad to organise rural workers including small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, village artisans and cattle breeders. Similarly, Gujarat State Khet Majoor Association was started, in the year 1978, by the Indian National Trade
Union Congress, Gujarat Branch, to organise the agricultural labourers and to regularise their relations with farmer-employers.

The movement penetrated further to the divisional level, when (i) the Halpati Seva Sangh, Bardoli was established in 1961 to serve specially the tribal population, with its area of operation of the entire Gujarat State, (ii) the Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union, Surat, with the area of operation of three districts of Bharuch, Surat and Valsad was formed, in July 1977, by South Gujarat Congress (I) Workers, and (iii) the Rural Labour Association, Bardoli, was established, by the Janta Party Workers of South Gujarat in March 1982, with the area of operation of the entire region of South Gujarat, to organise agricultural labourers, small and marginal farmers, village artisans, and workers engaged in small businesses.

There is complete absence of any formal union of agricultural labour at the district and taluka levels in Bharuch district. The agricultural labourers who wish to join the movement can do so by paying the prescribed amount of fees to any of the divisional unions referred to above.
Objectives

Agricultural labour unions, for any level, are being formed to achieve one or more of the following objectives:

(i) to organise agricultural labourers, artisans, small and marginal farmers, tenants and workers engaged in small industries and cattle breeders in a more effective manner,

(ii) to improve the working, living and employment conditions of their members,

(iii) to establish a greater sense of solidarity, unity, harmony and inculcate a greater sense of coming together to fight for the common rights, privileges and better remuneration for the toil of their members,

(iv) to see that the benefits avowed to flow from the various legislative measures enacted by the Central and/or the State Governments so far are enjoyed by the members,

(v) to create and maintain good harmonious relationships between the farmer-employers and the farm-workers,

(vi) to try to handle the grievances of the members,

(vii) to try to settle the disputes so that workers can continue their work on the farms,

(viii) to try to give help at the time of sickness, unemployment, inability of work, retirement or
death of the workers, and to help in getting the compensation for accidents,

(ix) to provide legal help to the member in case of court proceedings as and when need arises,

(x) to remove economic, social, political, cultural and civic weaknesses of the members,

(xi) to work for getting economic and social security for their members,

(xii) to provide information to the members about the labour laws and provisions,

(xiii) to get affiliated with other associations of the common interests within and outside the country,

(xiv) to undertake welfare and recreational activities for the members, and

(xv) to prevent the exploitation, injustice and outrages of the members during their employment period.

The objectives of any union of rural workers are aptly stated in the agenda of the 60th Ordinary Session of the ILO in the form of recommendations which included that any organisation of rural workers should be able to:

(a) represent further and defend the interests of rural workers, for instance, by means of collective negotiations at all levels;

(b) represent rural workers in connection with the formulation, implementations and evaluation of
programmes of rural development and at all
stages and levels of national planning;
(c) involve the various categories of rural workers,
according to the interests of each, actively in
the implementation of (i) programmes for
agricultural development, including the
improvement of techniques, (i) programmes of
agrarian reform, land settlement and land
development, (iii) programmes concerning public
works, rural industries and rural crafts; (iv)
rural development programmes, (v) the information
and education programmes and activities;
(d) promote and obtain access of rural workers to
services such as credit, supply, marketing and
transport as well as to technical services;
(e) play an active part in the improvement of general
and vocational education and training in rural
areas as well as in training for community
development, training for co-operative and other
activities of rural workers' organisations and
training of management thereof;
(f) contribute to the conditions of work and life
of rural workers and promote the extension of
social security and of the basic social services
in such fields as housing, health and recreation. 11

11. Pandey S.M., Organisation of Rural Workers in India,
The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol. XXI,
No. 4(1), January, 1979, p. 91.
Wording

As the agricultural labourers of Bharuch district have been under the direct or indirect influences of

(1) the Kisan Sabha,
(2) the Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union,
(3) the Halpati Seva Sangh,
(4) the All India Khet Majdoor Kisan Parishad,
(5) the Agricultural Labour Association,
(6) the Gujarat State Khet Majdoor Association, and
(7) the Rural Labour Association — labour unions, an attempt has been made here to review their performances in the pages that follow.

The Kisan Sabha had organised many agitations on large scale during the years of 1953-55 and 1964-67 for improving the conditions of employment of agricultural labour and for securing more rights for its members. Again, it had observed many strikes in the support of upward revision of the wage-rates and many of its members were imprisoned. The Sabha had very aptly represented, in 1964, the case of the revision in the wage-rates before the Committee of Minimum Wages. Further, the Sabha led, in 1968, many strikes observed by the agricultural labourers of Bharuch and Surat districts for the implementation of the wage-rate of Rs. 3/- per day. Moreover, in 1976, when the minimum wage-rate of Rs. 5.50 per day was prescribed under the Law, the Sabha, again, organised
strong agitations for the implementation of this rate throughout the district. The union gave a fight, in 1978, for debt-abolition and as a consequence Government had to promise to abolish the debts of agricultural labourers. To press for the implementation of the wage-rate of Rs. 5.50 per day the Sabha had, in 1981, organised wide-spread strike of agricultural labour covering about 40-45 villages of Valia taluka of the district, and forced the farmer-employers to pay the minimum amount of wages so fixed.

Though, the Dakshin Gujarat Halpati union was functioning informally in the region of South Gujarat for long, it was get registered only in July, 1977. Between the years 1977 and 1981 it had organised at taluka and district levels over 200 meetings, rallies, 'Satyagrahs', 'Dharnas' and fasts to support the demands of agricultural labourers for higher rates of wages and improving working conditions. It has also been guiding the members for making applications for sites for houses and financial assistance for construction of houses. Its efforts to bring pressures on the concerned authorities to provide lighting facilities, drinking water, and approach roads to nearly 27 villages were successful.

The President of the said union had submitted in September, 1980, a Memorandum to Shri Sanatkumar Mehta, Finance and Labour Minister, Government of Gujarat on various matters relating to minimum wages, unemployment, housing sites,
separate legislation for agricultural workers and provision of financial assistance, to agricultural workers.

Insofar as the working of the Halpati Seva Sangh is concerned, it may be stated that it was fortunate to have the active association of one of the Veteran Gandhians Shri Jugatrambhai Dave as its President and could do some constructive work for landless agricultural labourers and adivasis. The Sangh runs 13 Ashram shalas, 12 post basic Ashram shalas and 300 Adult Education Centres, 30 hostels for boys and girls, 40 Balwadis, 5 poultry farming societies, 5 milk co-operative societies, 7 labour co-operative societies, 30 land labourers' co-operative societies, 5 sarvodaya schemes, and one rural craft and nutrition project, in the three districts of Bharuch, Surat and Valsad. The Sangh has been carrying out varied industrial activities through production of worth Rs. 30,70,669 in Khadi and Sutar and sale centres which sold goods worth Rs. 1,54,58,404. It also manages 60 Ambar Charkha Centres, 4 production Centres of Carpentry and Black Smithy, 4 Hand Pounding Centres, one Oil Ghani unit, one Soap Production unit, one Bakery unit, one Gur unit, one Hand-made paper centre, 3 Pottery units, one Janta matches unit, 914 Gobar gas plants and Nira Centres and has been providing full and/or partial employment to thousands of Adivasis including agricultural labourers of these three districts. Further, the Sangh has, so far,
provided sites for houses to about 35 thousand families in Surat, Valsad and Bharuch districts and has directly constructed over 15000 huts in these districts. Moreover, the Sangh has been providing every year free medical (cash) aids to about 500 needy poor people.12

The Agricultural Labour Association had, initially, attempted to cover Bharuch district in its area of operation and tried to organise agricultural labour but it could not get favourable response from them. It has been now concentrating on the three districts of Ahmedabad, Mehsana and Kheda for organising agricultural labour force. It had made an experiment, in 1980, to expand its work by selecting village organisers from the very group of villages and by giving them necessary training for creating awareness amongst the agricultural labourers through educational seminars. It had also undertaken socio-economic survey of a few villages to assess the impact on agricultural labour of the various beneficial schemes of the Central and the State Governments. Moreover, it had organised a few medical camps at the different centres in selected villages. It has been providing service to its members in the forms of (i) pre-nursery training, (ii) assistance for obtaining sites for houses, (iii) assistance for construction of houses, (iv) training to operate diesel engine pumps and

(v) assistance for getting Ambar Charkhas.13

The Gujarat State Khet Majoor Association did not produce any explosive impact on the agricultural labour force of Bharuch district even though it had backing of political party in power. It could only organise a few meetings and manage to pass a few resolutions covering places for doing something for rural workers of the district.

The Rural Labour Association has been the outcome of the first meeting of its promoters and supporters held at Bardoli, in March, 1982, which passed resolutions regarding its formal registration, enrolment of members, abolition of debts, implementation of minimum wage-rates, construction of houses for agricultural labourers, and grant of protection to Harijans and adivasis from their exploitation by the vested interests.

The above presentation would show that the none of the unions of agricultural labour could give a satisfactory account of its performance. The success of any labour union primarily depends upon (i) its age, (ii) its capability of the union to attract agricultural labourers as its members, (iii) its financial strength, and (iv) its ability to handle the problems of labour successfully. On

analysing these factors in detail one would find that while (i) the Kisan Sabha, (ii) all-India Khet Majdoor Kisan Parishad, and (iii) the Halpati Seva Sangh had long years of service to their credit, the Agricultural Labour Association, Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union, the Gujarat State Khet Majoor Association and Rural Labour Association had an age of 7 years, 5 years, 4 years and 1 year respectively.

Insofar as strength of membership is concerned, the precise data (vide: Table 7.1) in regard to their membership were not available despite the best efforts for procuring them from their office-bearers. However, the analysis of the data in regard to the membership of the various labour unions held by the agricultural labourers contacted during the year 1979, would reveal that (i) out of the total 4998 agricultural labourers, only 1428 agricultural labourers had joined one or the other labour union, (ii) 47.00 per cent of the total agricultural labourers who joined the unions were the members of the Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union, followed by the Kisan Sabha with 37.00 per cent, Halpati Seva Sangh with 13.00 per cent and all-India Khet Majdoor Kisan Parishad by 3.00 per cent, (iii) the Agricultural Labour Association, the Gujarat State Khet Majoor Association and Rural Labour Association could not attract any agricultural labourer to accept their membership. Again, these members had the mixed feelings
Table 7.1\textsuperscript{14}

Membership held by agricultural labourers of the different labour unions in Bharuch district during the year 1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of union</th>
<th>Total number of members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kisan Sabha</td>
<td>529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Khet Majdoor Kisan Parishad</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halpati Seva Sangh</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union</td>
<td>670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Labour Association</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat State Khet Majoor Association</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Labour Association</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>1428</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

about these unions (vide: Table 7.2), while 50.74 per cent of them had opined that their unions could achieve little success in their operations, 26.84 per cent held the view that the functioning of their unions was satisfactory. However, most of them had held the view that their unions had tried their level best to get the rates of minimum wages revised upwardly.

\textsuperscript{14} Based on author's field-work.
These labour unions had two principal sources of their annual income, viz., (i) membership fees, and (ii) donations from members and non-members. As stated earlier as none of the unions was able to attract sizable number of agricultural labourers as their members and as the members were irregular in payment of their membership-fees to their respective unions, the labour unions could not gather necessary funds needed for their activities. Again, except the Halpati Seva Sangh, none of the labour unions could undertake economic activities for want of funds and foresight of their leaders. Collection of funds through donations, grants, relieffunds, etc. depends greatly on the image of the leaders holding the office-bearships of the concerned unions. All these limitations were responsible for keeping their financially weak.

<p>| Table 7.2 | Overall perception of members in unions' success in achieving their objectives in Bharuch district |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of success</th>
<th>No. of members opined about the success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little success</td>
<td>725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No success at all</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No idea of it</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1428</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Based on author's field-work.
A labour union headed by the dynamic leaders and supported directly or indirectly by the political party in power can normally handle the problems of their members more effectively and successfully. The two unions, viz., Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union and the Gujarat State Khet Majoor Association were dominated by the workers of the Congress (I) and, therefore, were in a better position to secure the support of the Government authorities through their party channel. Both of them were regarded as the tool of the Congress (I) organisation. As the Halpati Seva Sangh was regarded as a non-political labour union, it could get support from any political party in power. It was one of the reasons only it could undertake multidirectional activities for the benefit of the members.

**Concluding Observations**

While it needs no emphasis to have unions of agricultural labourers to protect their interests and to improve their bargaining power, the movement in regard to the agricultural labour unionisation was in its infancy in Bharuch district. Though three unions -- (i) the Kisan Sabha, (ii) the Dakshin Gujarat Halpati union, and (iii) the Halpati Seva Sangh -- each with area of operation of the whole of the South Gujarat and dominated by either a separate political party or economic ideology, were...
functioning in the district, there did not exist any separate union of agricultural labour either with district – or taluka – wide area of operation. The multiplicity of agricultural labour unions had resulted in the inter-union rivalry which had caused much damage to the interest of the agricultural labour community of the district. None of these unions could spread, in the massive scale, the message of unionisation amongst the agricultural labour force in the district. Moreover, direct and close contact between the agricultural labourers and farmer-employers, hereditary relationship between farmers and agricultural labourers, proximity of residential locations of both the farmers and their agricultural labourers, the existence of closed society of our villages, the paucity of leadership and the prevalence of poor standard of literacy and education among the agricultural labourers and their living below the poverty line are the major factors coming in the way of the rapid growth of agricultural labour unions in the district.