

Life-Story of Amarjeet Kaur

For IAWS



This document attempts to weave together the life-story of Amarjeet Kaur, a women's activist and trade unionist, affiliated with the Communist Party of India (CPI), who has been deeply involved with activism since her student days in 1970s.

The document came together by way of five interviews with her, which charted, in a chronological fashion, her early student years, and her three successive activist phases, within the All India Students Federation (AISF), the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) respectively.

She has been associated with AITUC since the last 20 years, and since 2017 Dec, been serving as the General Secretary.

About AITUC

India has had a rich history of labour movement, which began in the 19th century, mainly in the jute and textile mills of Calcutta and Bombay. Since early 1900s, workers across sectors, began to form unions and wage strike actions against colonial exploitation, and for better wages and less working hours. These included weavers, postmen, clerks, port trust employees, press employees, saloon crew, Calcutta tramway workers, coal miners, mechanical workers and mill workers, among others.

Some of the largest strikes were carried out in 1919 and 1920 by lakhs of textile workers in Bombay. It is in this background, that delegates from 107 unions, mostly from Bengal and Bombay, came together in Bombay on Oct 31, 1920, to form an umbrella union or platform that would collectively represent their concerns and

struggle for their rights. Thus, AITUC was founded, and became the largest trade union confederation of India.

The first president of this union was Lala Lajpat Rai and General Secretary was V M Pawar. Later, prominent figures of the freedom movement became associated with it in different capacities, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Subash Chandra Bose, V V Giri, Sarojini Naidu, C R Das, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Annie Besant, V J Patel, B P Wadia, Joseph Baptista, Lalubhai Samaldas, Jamnadas, Dwarka Das, B W Wadia, R R Karandikar, Col J C Wedgwood and others. In these early decades, the labour struggle in India was influenced by and inter-linked with both the international Communist and labour movement, as well as the ongoing freedom movement. In 1945, AITUC became politically affiliated with the Communist Party of India (which was established in 1925), and at the time also played a significant role in the formation of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU).

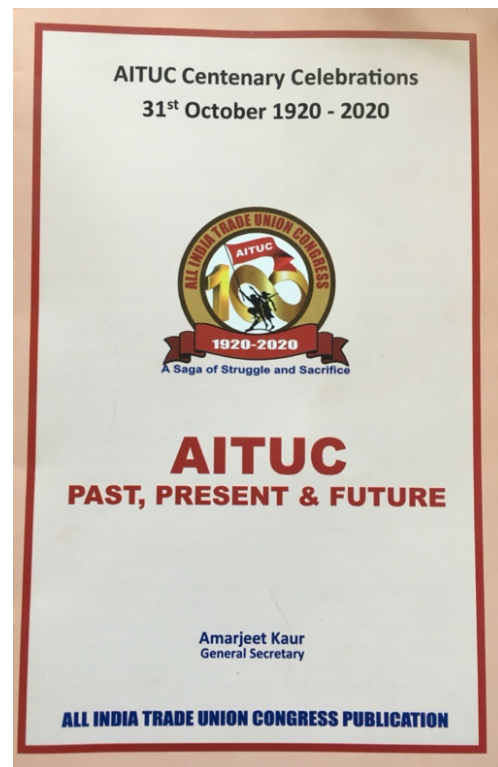
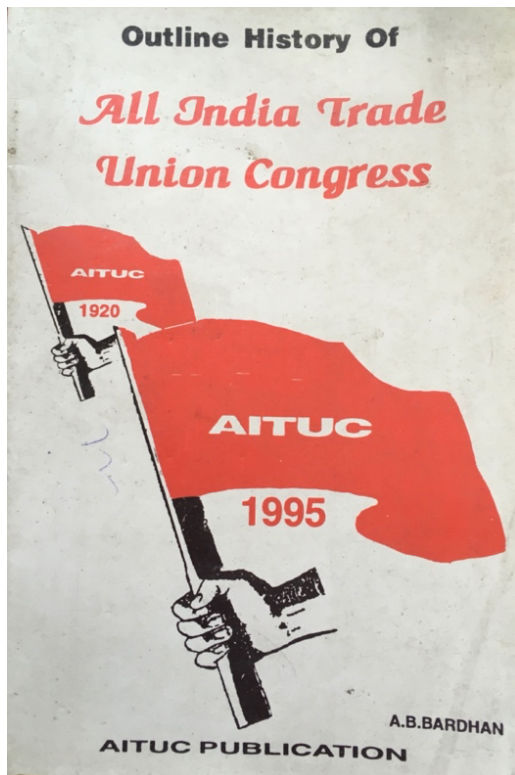
Until 1947, AITUC was the only umbrella trade union, and due to its persistent efforts, several labour legislations and rights were won, such as the Trade Union Act, Workplace Compensation Act, among others. These rights were also recognized later in the Constitution. Since independence, another 11 central unions have taken shape, spanning both left and right of the political spectrum. Many of these unions, such as CITU (Centre for Indian Trade Unions), INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress), BMS (Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh), NFITU (National Front of India Trade Unions), UTUC (United Trade Union Congress) and others work jointly on an array of issues.



At present, about 3000 unions are affiliated with AITUC, from both formal and informal sector, including those employed in auto, taxi and public transport, oil, petroleum, post office, telephone, mining, engineering, banking, insurance, hawking, construction, domestic work, welfare schemes and agriculture etc.

AITUC documents its activities by way of a fortnightly journal called the Trade Union Record.

Two years ago, in 2020, AITUC completed its 100 years. Its long and rich history has been documented in many of AITUC's own booklets, such as this one from 1995, written by Comrade A B Bardhan (Left pic), which was reprinted in 2020 by Amarjeet Kaur (Right pic)

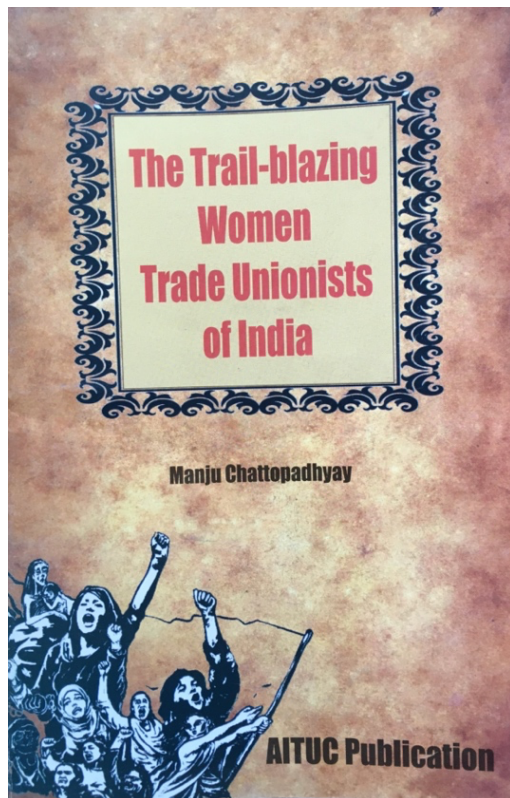


Women and trade unions

If we trace the early history of industrial workers in India, a substantial section of them were always women, especially in jute and textile industries, coal mines and tea gardens. However, women usually got half the wage of a male worker and lived and worked in abysmal conditions. Taking note of this fact, in its foundation Congress, AITUC had passed a resolution for better working conditions for women. It said:

This Congress is of opinion that every mill, factory and workshop where women are employed should be provided with special accommodation where the women workers can, during their hours of work, keep their young children. And That this Congress resolves that Government be requested to appoint special lady inspectors for the purpose of examining the condition of labour and of safeguarding the interests of women operatives.

And since then, while working women's issues and their mobilisation has been both the object of discussion *and* intervention within central trade unions, including AITUC, but as such, trade unions have remained a predominantly male dominated arena. Further, while there have been working women unions in different sectors, but women have been conspicuously absent in trade union leadership.



This fact is accepted by the unions themselves. For instance, in a pamphlet titled 'Women Workers and Trade Unions' written on the occasion of a working women's convention held in 1995 when AITUC completed its 75 years, Bardhan, the then General Secretary wrote, "As the oldest central trade union organisation, it has to look back and see what role women played in the trade union movement. To be frank, the balance sheet is not very impressive. There has been gross neglect in unionising women workers, training cadres from among the best of them, building up a stable chain of leadership of women trade unionists."

In the last 100 years, one can trace only a handful of women leaders, who, with their extraordinary zeal and commitment, were driven to form working class unions in the face of numerous socio-cultural barriers. The stories of many of these women leaders have been compiled in a document, titled 'The trail-blazing women trade unionists of India' written by Manju Chattopadhyay, and published by AITUC in 1995. This pamphlet was republished by Amarjeet Kaur in 2019.

It includes brief bio-notes of some of the pioneers from Bengal, including Santosh Kumari Gupta, who worked with *jute workers*, Prabhabati Das Gupta who worked with *scavengers*, Sakina Begum who worked with *Municipal workers*, Sudha Roy, who worked with *dock workers* and Maitrayee Bose, who worked with *port and dock workers*, among others. Then there were also eminent leaders in Bombay, namely- Usha Bai Dange (Usha Tai), Meenakshi Sane, Parbati Bai Bhore, Godavari Parvlekar. Among these leaders, a few like Shanta Bhalerao, Maniben Kara (both in Bombay) and Parvati Krishnan (who worked in the South) rose to high ranks in AITUC.

Most of these women came from middle class and educated backgrounds. Many were influenced by communist leaders and the movement at large, though they were not all party members. Some were also influenced by the nationalist and swaraj movement. A few leaders emerged from the working classes like Dukhmat, Sukumari Chowdhury and Parbati Bai Bhore.

It is in the lineage of these remarkable women union leaders, than one can now count the name of Amarjeet Kaur. In 2017, she became the *first woman* General Secretary of AITUC, in its 100-year history.

As we shall see, from very early on she developed an interest in and got associated with AITUC activities, and for the last two decades has been working full time with the union. Previously she was a leader in the student and women's front, and the experience and learnings she gathered along the way, fruitfully fed into her later work.

What has her journey been like? And what are some of her contributions? I trace a few slices of her story now, which has been drafted chiefly through her own narrative. It needs to be emphasised that Amarjeet stands today both as an important *actor* and a *storyteller* of the political history of trade unions and the broader Left movement of contemporary India.

Makings of an Activist: Early Years (1952-1969)

Amarjeet's life journey can be read as a confluence of two important ingredients: one, the enabling milieu of political Left in independent India, which she was born, groomed, and rooted in, and two, her own spirited persona and ambition to challenge and shape the structural and cultural frameworks of the Left.

She grew up in a political and progressive household, with a father who was a member of the CPI, and a trade unionist, and the ideas she got exposed to, from very early on, fired her activist bent and confidence. This first phase of her life, brings into focus her childhood and school days, which became the ground for her entry and maturity into student activism.

Childhood

Amarjeet was born in 1952, in a village in Guardaspur district in Punjab, and in a family that was involved in both agricultural and skilled labour work. Her father, Diwan Singh, was a freedom fighter, and at the young age of 18 years, got associated with a man called Teja Singh Swatrantra, who started the Kirti party, which later merged with the CPI. Diwan Singh was jailed several times for his anti-state activities, but after independence, he received the freedom fighters' pension. By his own inclination, and by way of his connection with Left ideology and movement, he was a firm believer in gender equality, and therefore, wanted his daughters and sons to be both equally educated and independent.

Amarjeet's mother, Kulwant Kaur was also a broad-minded person, who supported her daughter throughout her educational and political journey. Kulwant drew her sensibilities from her own mother (Amarjeet's maternal grandmother or *Nani*) who, it was said, was a woman of strength, and that both men and women of the village came to seek her counsel on family and other matters. One such case in which her *Nani* took a strong position, in opposition to her own family, was in relation to Amarjeet's father. He had been earlier married to Amarjeet's *mausi* (Mother's elder sister). Owing to his political activities he was often away from home. When his wife was due to deliver her first child, he could not reach on time to arrange medical care, and the child died on birth. Later, when his wife was pregnant again and in labour, he could not reach again, due to a riot situation, and this time, in a tragic occurrence, neither the mother, nor the child could survive.

Despite losing her elder daughter and two grandchildren in this manner, her *Nani* decided to marry her second daughter to Amarjeet's father, defying the wishes her own brothers, who opposed this decision saying that the man is useless or '*Nikamma*'. But, she asserted, that this man had sacrificed his family for the nation, and that such selfless devotion is rare and must be respected. In response, the brothers cut off ties with her, but in taking this decision, she marked her own commitment and contribution to the political struggle of the time.

It is with such ideas that Amarjeet's mother brought up her four children - two daughters and two sons, in face of the many challenges of a largely patriarchal society around her. Amarjeet was the second child. Her paternal grandmother had passed away early, and when Amarjeet was born, her paternal grandfather, *Dada*, refused to see her face, as he was desperate for a grand-son. The two grand-children who had been lost at birth in his son's previous marriage, were both sons, and that was a hard loss for him. He wanted this second child to be a boy, but when fate had it otherwise, he expressed his resentment by refusing to meet her. This was deeply upsetting for Amarjeet's mother. But she was consoled by her husband, who told her that it did not matter what the elder one thought, and that for them, the two daughters were the world, and they would parent them with abundant love and support.

At home, her father often shared stories of women who were celebrated political figures, such as Aruna Asaf Ali, Durga Bhabhi and Chand Bibi, and said that they should be seen as the role models for their daughters, and women at large.

School Days

Amarjeet's family shifted to Delhi when she was about two years old. But, as her *Chacha and Chachi* (father's brother and his wife), didn't have a child then and wanted to keep her, so she spent her first few years in the village, completing her class I at the local school there. When she was about 5-6 years, her mother brought her to Delhi and enrolled her in the Government Girls School in Shakur Pur, in North-west Delhi.

When Amarjeet joined this new school in Delhi, she could only speak in Punjabi, as that had been her learning medium. She was thus unable to do well in languages. But, as she was good in Maths and other subjects, her teachers put in extra effort with her on language skills, that helped her excel in all subjects. To this day, Amarjeet credits her teachers, as much as her parents, for being an enormous support in her educational growth. Throughout her schooling years, she remained, what is commonly termed as an 'all-rounder'. She was good in academics, as well as sports, such as Badminton and Volleyball, along with debating and theatre. She was always chosen as the captain of her class and also served as the head girl in her senior school.

At home, Amarjeet got exposure to a broad stream of progressive ideas. As a union activist, her father organised construction workers in the 1950s, and held regular meetings with comrades, including Teja Singh Swatantra. She used to often tune in to their discussions. She recalls that night Party schools were sometimes held on the terrace and although the children were supposed to be sleeping at the time, she used to cleverly hide in the staircase and absorb the lectures, which helped her understand certain theoretical concepts as also some national and international political developments. Her father also engaged in discussions with her. For instance, as the head girl in school, she was required to read out and elucidate on some inspiring quote in the prayer assembly every day. Her father helped her to prepare this by giving references of Bhakti saints, freedom fighters, and political leaders. Such kind of conversance with socialist and secular ideas, helped stir her activist leanings. And soon she had an opportunity to test that in practice, within her school itself.

First Strike

The year was 1968. Amarjeet was 16 years old and in the tenth standard at the Government Girls Secondary School. Every year, the school used to participate in the Jan 26 Republic Day parade. This year too, a batch of 80 girls went to the parade as part of the Dumbbell contingent, for which they practiced for weeks together. As soon as the parade got over, a school inspection was held for two days, and right then, the Principal announced that the final term exams were to begin in two days, on Feb 1.

Exhausted from the rehearsals and ill-prepared for the exam, the students asked for postponement of the exams. As the head girl, Amarjeet sought consensus of all the students, and, along with the monitors, approached the principal on Jan 31 with this demand. The Principal refused to change the schedule.

That day Amarjeet went home and shared about this situation with her father. He told her to be the kind of leader who doesn't impose her decision onto others, but takes guidance and leadership of those she represents. Taking this advice, she came to school the next day, on Feb 1, with some ideas firmed up in her mind.

This morning, instead of reading out a quote in the prayer assembly, she used the microphone to ask the students, "Our exams are beginning today. Are you ready to take your exams?". "No", replied the students in unison. "We will not go to our rooms", they added. "Is that your final decision", she asked. "Yes", they asserted. "Fine, then I shall agree to your decision and we shall boycott the exams. Today is our hartal", she declared. Despite pressure from the teachers and the Principal, the students stood by together in the grounds and refused to go to the rooms. The strike had begun.

Much drama ensued. A few monitors were called and beaten up in the Principal's office. In retaliation, some girls broke a few objects outside the office. News spread and parents and neighbours congregated outside the school building. Some local goons came and met with the Principal. There were talks that Police would be called. Through all this, Amarjeet stayed with the students and appealed to them for peaceful resistance. She cautioned them that any violence would be met with harshly, and that property damage would eventually have to be borne by their parents.

Soon, the police came, who questioned Amarjeet about who had initiated the strike. She replied that it was a collective decision. The students concurred and took joint responsibility. Officials of the Education Department were also called in, who, on examining the matter and seeing this kind of unity among the students, asked the Principal to agree to their demands. The Principal had to give in, and change the exam schedule. Thus, with the democratic support of the students, Amarjeet was successful in her first planned strike. This experience, she says, taught her much about organising, and about how to control a large crowd. And of course it gave her the first sweet taste of success.

That evening, Amarjeet asked her mother, as to why she did not come to the school, even though her daughter's name was being discussed in the neighbourhood, and rumours were rife about police action. Her mother responded that many neighbours

had come to her with warnings about Amarjeet being picked up, but if she had come to the school, it would have been seen as her daughter's weakness, which she did not want. She was confident that whatever her daughter was doing was well thought out and right.

With this kind of family support, and her own determination, Amarjeet was primed to be involved in student activism in the next stage of her life, at Delhi University.

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II

Student, Comrade, Leader (1970-1986)

Having finished her school in Sciences, in the 8+2+1 system, Amarjeet's teachers and family advised her to pursue medical or engineering. But she refused on the grounds that given her ambitions for activism, she was likely to be prevented from finishing these degrees, especially as the heavy practical component in these courses is directly evaluated by teachers. And so, Amarjeet joined the Ramjas college, Delhi University (DU) for BSc. Physics (Hons).

In her early days of university life, an incident took place, which firmed up her calling to take up political work in college. She used to travel daily in the University-special bus, and often her co-passengers gossiped about her, 'yeh koi leaderani aa gayi hai' (She is some self-styled leader...). It turned out that some of the students knew of and were talking of, her school strike. She was already popular in some way.

It often happened that a group of few rowdy male students in the bus would scuffle with the driver. One day, when the boys began to abuse and almost beat up the driver, over a minor issue, Amarjeet came to the driver's rescue, and took a bold stand in his favour. Peeved, the group began to pass derogatory and threatening remarks at her. The remarks went on for days, but ignoring them, she continued to travel in the same bus. Sometime later, the boys approached her and asked, "Aren't you afraid of us?" and "What will your family say?", to which she responded that she was not afraid, and that her family knew, and if this behaviour continued, it would be reported to the Police. They backed down after a while, but this incident gave her a sharp understanding that gender equality cannot merely be taught theoretically, it needs women to be fearlessly out in the public sphere on equal grounds. A few of her classmates also advised her to be a 'normal' woman and not engage in such matters. But, disregarding their advice, she became resolute to join student politics, and at a

time when almost no women were in that field. When friends remarked that politics is not for women, she asked, “why are women asked for votes then”?

Student Representative

At that time, the Delhi University Students Union (DUSU) had indirect elections, in which Supreme Counsellors were elected in each college, who became the electorate that voted for the University level Executive and Central Panel.

During the first year itself, Amarjeet was elected as a Supreme Counsellor in her college, the first woman to be so from there. For her college leadership, she supported and campaigned for an independent panel which was led by a Left-leaning person. That panel got elected, and with them, she participated in an agitation to remove the college Principal. The Principal was quite regressive, in that he was opposed to male and female students interacting in class or outside, and was also hostile to student politics. The agitation was successful and the Principal was removed, but before his exit, as a way to punish Amarjeet, he ensured that she was failed in her Physics practical exams. So, despite having high marks in theory, she was detained in the first year, and had to complete her Bsc. in four years.

While still in college, Amarjeet also became involved in a campaign for direct elections for DUSU, and was the only women member of a team which campaigned on this issue in different colleges, through meetings and debates. With student pressure mounting on this issue, a referendum was held in the University. Almost 90 per cent students voted in favour of direct elections, and this system was thus introduced in 1973.

First Jail Experience

While in college, Amarjeet also became involved with activities of the CPI, and mobilised students for party led national level agitations on price rise and public distribution system. Such agitations were ongoing since the last decade, but were intensified in the early 1970s, when food shortage, black-marketing, and hoarding by traders was becoming a national crisis.

In 1972, the CPI, under the leadership of B D Joshi, gave a national call against hoarding and price rise. Amarjeet mobilised other students to participate in the ‘jail bharo’ (Fill up the jails) agitation, which was to begin on Oct 1. On the first day itself, she was arrested during a march near Patel Chowk in Delhi and spent the next ten days in jail. This was her first jail experience. Her father came to meet her there and

commended and encouraged her political efforts. In jail, she met many other political prisoners and women leaders such as Vimla Farooqui, Primla Loomba, Litto Ghosh, Perin Ramesh Chandra and Sarla Sharma, who were all part of the NFIW, the mass women's organisation affiliated to the Party.

Amarjeet describes those 10 days as one of the most important learning periods of her life. These leaders took political classes, through which she not only understood more about the women's movement, but also about the Communist party and Left activism in general. She also saw first-hand the plight of ordinary women criminals and grasped the links between crime, poverty and police brutality.

AISF Leader

When she came out of jail, Amarjeet was given CPI membership, for which she had applied earlier, and she was asked by the party to organise and expand the All India Students Federation (AISF), the students front of the CPI, in the university.¹ So, from 1973 till 1985, Amarjeet was fully involved with AISF, first as Joint Secretary and later, from 1979-1983, as the All India General Secretary, for two terms.

In 1974, she also contested from AISF as a General Secretary candidate in DUSU panel. This was a panel in which BJP leader, Arun Jaitely stood as a Presidential candidate from ABVP (Akhil Bhartiya Vikas Parishad), the student wing of BJP. They both had fierce political debates across colleges, and according to her, while she was winning by a huge margin, and this was even announced on the All India Radio, but later, through its power play and fraud, ABVP managed to capture the counting hall and ensured the victory of their own candidate by a few hundred votes. Although she could not be elected, the experience of contesting the election, says Amarjeet, was a real training ground, and after that, she also became a prominent student leader of the campus.

After finishing her BSc, Amarjeet went on to do MSc Physics in DU, and at that time got elected as the student union president in college. Following her MSc, in order to continue student politics, she pursued a Law degree from DU in the Morning Law

¹ The All India Students Federation (AISF) was formed in 1936. Initially, it was dominated by men, but gradually it began to have women. In 1938, AISF organised many meetings and demonstrations throughout the country for the release of prisoners in Andaman islands, in which large numbers of women students also participated. Subsequently, a Girl Students' Committee or the *Chhatri Sangh* was formed within the AISF. The *Chhatri Sangh* drew together progressive, Left wing women students from different educational institutions and political parties and grew in Bombay, Delhi, Patna and Punjab, but had the widest spread in Bengal. The first All India Women's Students' Congress took place in Lucknow in 1940, which was inaugurated by Sarojini Naidu. Later, the AISF became the umbrella organisation for both young men and women.

Centre. She specialised in Labour and Poverty Law, and was taught by renowned teachers like Lolita Sarkar.

Expanding her political field, during this period of the early 1970s, she, along with fellow students, also began participating in AITUC led trade union agitations in the textile mills around the North campus, such as the Ayodhya textile Mill, Birla Mill, Swatantra Bharat Mill and DCM Mill, which had about 25-30,000 workers. The students stood in support at the mill gates and also stood by the workers' families. She also got involved with the teachers' union protests and interacted closely with the other workers, through the Delhi University Karamchari Union, a relationship that continues till date, via AITUC. AISF members supported the karmamchari union activities by joining their meetings and strikes and pasting posters across campus. This was her first experience of joining workers' movement and it became the inspiration for her to take up this work in later years.

Alongside, she also mobilised students for the joint campaigns carried out by NFIW and other groups on sexual violence, that were at a peak in the 1970s, especially with the Mathura custodial rape case, which at the time also became the catalyst for changes in the rape law.

She recounts several experiences of the pre and post Emergency period, in which the Delhi University students carried out joint agitations against the government, both the Congress government and later the Morarji Desai led Janta Dal government. They took delegations to the Prime Minister on issues such as unemployment, communalisation of campuses and change of curriculums, particularly of history. One such agitation that AISF took lead in, was on preventing Congress leader Sanjay Gandhi from entering the Delhi University campus in 1976.

In 1980, AISF, along with AIYF (All India Youth Federation) organised the 'Job or Jail' agitation in seven states. In Delhi, students captured the Delhi Stock Exchange for many days, and even entered the Parliament and sloganeered, all actions that received a lot of newspaper coverage. In 1983, they also carried out a long cycle yatra on education and jobs.

As an AISF leader, Amarjeet organised and participated in several student conferences across India. She also travelled abroad to every continent in her tenure. Her first international visit was to Prague, where she led a student youth delegation, and herein she learnt a lot about the ongoing student movements in various countries, through interaction with foreign students. Subsequently, she participated in several Left based international student conferences, such as those by the International Union

of Students (IUS) and the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY). She also attended the Communist Party school in Leipzig, and got much conceptual learning on the political orders of fascism, capitalism and communism.

AISF also carried out solidarity efforts for international peace, supporting platforms such as All India Peace and Solidarity Organisation (AIPSO), the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), and Indo-Soviet Culture and Friendship Society. They served as volunteers during the visits of international leaders such as Castro, Arafat, and Madame Minh to India, and opposed the visits of Nixon and Shah of Iran. They agitated against Vietnam occupation, and for the release of Nelson Mandela.

Alongside such political engagements, Amarjeet was also active on the cultural front. She initiated the student wing of the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) in DU. IPTA produced many plays, which were also performed in Mandi House. She started the Bimal Roy Choir competition on campus, and one of its themes was 'revolutionary songs'. AISF also organised film shows on different political and social themes, such as fascism, freedom movement and women's movement, which were often times disrupted by ABVP. Further, AISF organised youth festivals at state and national level, mostly in partnership with other student groups.

Amarjeet was still with AISF when the anti-Sikh violence broke out in Delhi and elsewhere, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Along with other Communist outfits, AISF opposed the violence, as it had been opposing the Khalistani movement, with slogans such as, 'Na Hindu Raj, Na Khalistan, Jug Jug Jiye Hindustan' (Not Hindu rule, nor Khalistan, long live Hindustan...). This slogan had been given by Madan Didi, a popular women's activist, and popularised by Satpal Dang, a unionist, and his wife Vimla Dang, a leader of NFIW from Punjab. Amarjeet had lost many relatives during the Khalistani movement. In 1981, she had married Dr Arun Mitra, who had also been a political activist in his student days. They were both on the hit list and one time their house was attacked in Ludhiana. Through these years, she thus closely saw vicious communal politics at work.

Her experience of the student days - leadership in AISF, participation in national and international seminars and conferences, taking delegations to Vice Chancellors and political leaders, protest actions and jail terms - was the solid learning upon which she built her work later in both women's and trade union front. As a student leader, she had already been closely interacting with and participating in the activities of both the fronts. And this is why she says, "Whatever I am today is because of my student days and the rich experiences I got at the time."

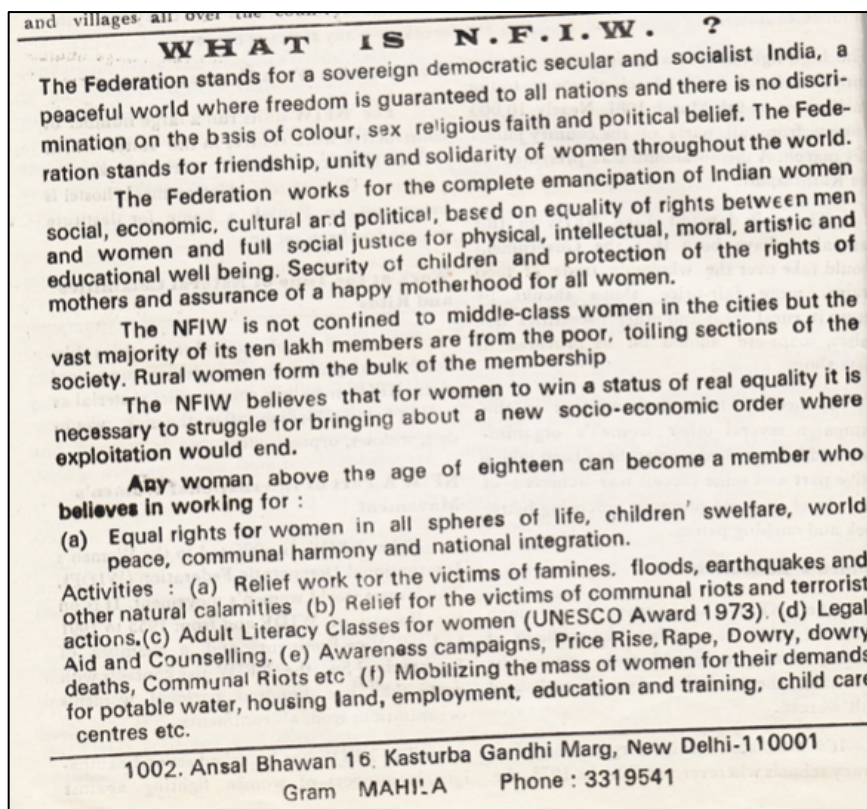
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III

A Women's Activist (1987 to 2002)

The second phase of her political journey, was as a leader of the women's movement, through the platform of NFIW, which began in 1986, after she retired from AISF leadership in December 1985 in its conference at Guntur.

Formed in 1954, the NFIW is one of the oldest and largest, Left-leaning mass women's organisations in India, with units in more than 20 states.² Its Constitution was adopted in the first Congress in Calcutta in 1954, and since then a Congress is held every three years, in different cities, where delegates all across the country congregate to review the work done, discuss and resolve on the issues and agendas ahead, and choose national level leadership.

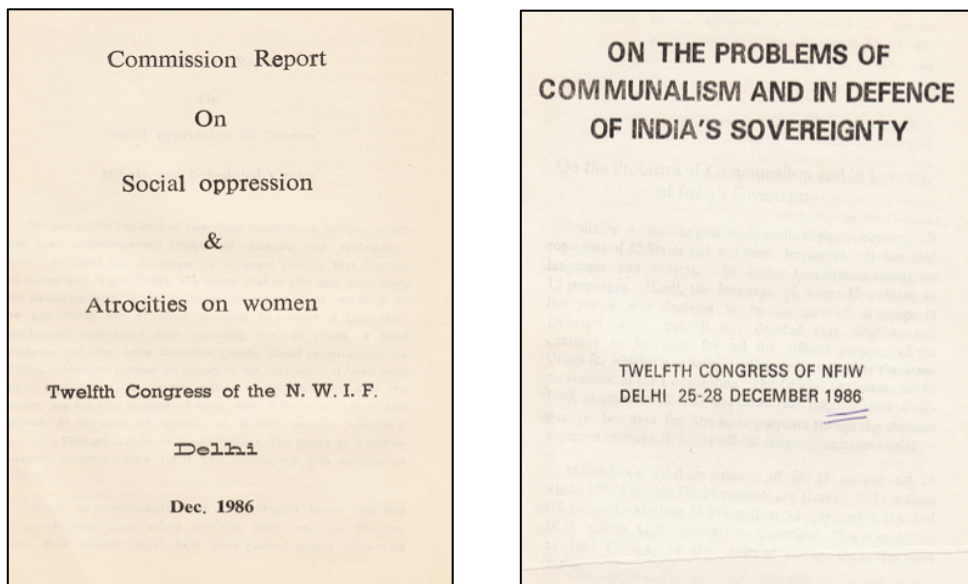


From a booklet published on the 40th anniversary of NFIW, 1994

² Many of the founding and current members of NFIW have been members of the CPI. But the Federation itself was constituted as a broad-based, mass platform, open to organisations and individuals from all social backgrounds, regardless of their affiliation to any political party. NFIW got affiliated with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a transnational, Left leaning women's organisation formed in Paris after the end of the Second World War in 1945, as a broad platform for peace, and for defence women and children's rights.

After her retirement from AISF, the Party gave Amarjeet the responsibility of being the General Secretary of the Reception Committee that was to host the NFIW Congress in December 1986 in Delhi. This was the 12th Congress, which was to be held for six days, at the Talkatora stadium. As the Secretary of the reception committee, Amarjeet was to make arrangements of stay and other logistics for the 1500 odd delegates. She was pregnant at the time, but travelled around the city on her motorbike to carry out these duties of organising women's meetings, enrolling volunteers, making accommodation and other technical arrangements.

Following the Congress, in February, Amarjeet gave birth to her son and after a six month maternity break, joined back NFIW, first, as General Secretary of the Delhi unit and then as All India General Secretary for one term (1999-2002). She retired from active NFIW work in 2003, but remained as one of its Vice-Presidents for a few years.



Commission Papers for the 12th Congress of NFIW

When she joined NFIW, it, along with other women groups, had already been playing a key role in agitations on sexual and domestic violence, and dowry murders, many of which Amarjeet had participated in as a student. These interventions helped bring in important legal changes, and it is through the pressure of the movement that Crime Against Women cells and the National and State Commissions of Women were established at the time.

In Amarjeet's leadership, NFIW expanded their family counselling centres, across districts, in which they dealt with hundreds of cases of women facing domestic violence, sexual harassment at work place and many other kinds of social oppressions. These included women from all strata, including those working in police, law, schools, universities, hotel industry and other services sectors.

While helping these women on their respective cases, the organisation also advocated for changes that could change things at a larger level. For instance, there was a case of domestic violence in Delhi, in which a woman was being thrown out of her house by the husband. The flat had been an allotment by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and the woman had contributed almost 70 per cent of the money on its instalments. But as the flat was in her husband's name, she was not able to claim any stake on it. So, when she came to NFIW, they not only helped with her case, but also managed to advocate with DDA to change the rules, such that all future house allotment to married couples, were to then be in both names.

March to Ayodhya

On October 20, 1989, more than 15,000 women from all over the country, who were affiliated with NFIW, came together in Faizabad and marched to Ayodhya, to express their commitment to secularism and religious unity of the country, and as a call for a peaceful settlement of the Babri-masjid dispute. The demand was to make this disputed site as a monument of unity, a place where both Hindus and Muslims could visit, and to make a public hospital around it. They pleaded that a new place of worship should not be built over ruins of another, and pointed to the dangers of communalism, especially for women. Amarjeet took 500 participants with her from Delhi.

On the 9 kms route to Ayodhya, the marchers raised slogans³, carried placards, and distributed pamphlets⁴ and got a heartening support from the locals, who served them

³ Some of the slogans raised by the women were:

Hindu Muslim Nahin Ladega, San Santalis Nahin Banega (Hindu Muslim will not fight, it will not be another 1947)

Desh Ki Raksha Kaun Karega, Hum Karenge, Hum Karenge (Who will protect the nation, we will, we will)

⁴ A pamphlet was brought out titled, 'Women Must Not Permit Destruction in the Name of Religion'. It said: India is a multi-religious country, inhabited by 100 million Muslims (more than in Pakistan). They are in a majority in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. There are 30 million Christians in India and they are a majority in the three states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram. Sikhs form a majority in Punjab. In case Hindus, who form nearly 85 % of the country's population, become aggressive towards other communities, they cannot expect the minorities to remain in India as docile and subservient to them. At present the BJP, VHP, RSS, Shiv Sena and other communal elements are conducting a countrywide campaign to demolish Babri-Masjid at Ayodhya and construct *Ram Mandir* at its place. This attempt to reverse history is unreasonable and aggressive... Majority of members of the NFIW practice religion in their own different ways. But we maintain that religion is a matter of personal faith. It should make people nobler and merciful. It should not be used to incite hatred against others or to disrupt the unity of the people. ...For building *Ram Mandir*, demolishing of Babri Masjid is an abhorrent idea and it has to be defeated... Women, who are the worst victims of the actions of communal and fundamentalist forces cannot watch these events silently. They have to come forward in large numbers and launch a determined struggle to save the nation from the evil designs of those who are working to divide the people on the basis of religion and thus weaken the nation...

water and tea all along the route. The administration initially tried to stall the march, but with thousands of women coming in, they allowed it to proceed. The locals supported this demand for peace and expressed their anger with political leaders, who were flaring communal tensions for personal gains.

The March ended at the Tulsi Udyan in Ayodhya. A public meeting was held and leaders of NFIW, such as Vimla Farooqui, Hemlata Swaroop, Aziza Imam, Renu Chakravartty among others addressed the gathering.

Gujarat Relief

Following the demolition of Babri Masjid, large-scale communal violence broke out in several parts of the country, in which women faced the maximum brunt. Through that period, NFIW delegations visited many affected areas across the country and helped in relief work.

In February 2002, one of the worst communal carnages took place in Gujarat, following the Godhra train fire. Amarjeet was then the General Secretary of NFIW, and got active with collection and distribution of relief material and money to Gujarat. Many meetings and rallies were held in Delhi and elsewhere, as calls for justice. On March 8, 2002, a protest march was jointly organised by various women's organisations, including AIDWA, NFIW, JWP, MDS, YWCA, Jagori, Ankur, Saheli and others. The march started near Purdah Bagh at Netaji Subhas Marg and culminated at Ferozeshah Kotla grounds. Women raised slogans of peace, harmony and justice and demanded the removal of the then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, and punishment to the perpetrators. They also demanded a ban on communal outfits the RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal.

In view of the growing communalisation, a new front called the *Aman Ekta Manch* was jointly formed by a group of voluntary organisations. Its first programme was a six-day relay fast and *dharna* for peace and communal harmony from 23 March to 28 March 2002 at Jantar Mantar in Delhi. NFIW was a part of this Manch along with other women's organisations. A special number of NFIW bulletin was brought out, titled, "Never More! Save Secularism Save India" on the eve of the 16th Congress of NFIW held in May 2002, in Chennai.

A year after the Gujarat violence, NFIW organised an evening of music for communal harmony and to raise money for the victims of the carnage. It was held at Chinmaya Mission where distinguished singer Shubha Mudgal sang some of her new

compositions on the theme. On this occasion, NFIW brought out another special *Bulletin* with the theme: "Let's come together for Communal Harmony".

March for Poverty



'World March of Women against Poverty and Violence' was organised by many international groups in 2000 to mark the end of the Millennium. In December 1999, in preparations for this global march, seven national mass women's organisations or 'seven sisters' as they were called, jointly organised a National Convention, which helped

prepare a document on the impacts of globalisation and privatisation on all aspects of women's lives. The organisations also collected mass signatures on a petition launched for the March, which was presented to the UN Secretary General and the chief of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). NFIW state units organised mass rallies, where signatures were collected in different regional languages on white handloom *sarees*, with borders typical of each region. When these were brought to Delhi, a rally was taken out, which was led by Amarjeet Kaur. These signatures were sent to New York through the UN representative at New Delhi. Eight NFIW representatives were present in U.S. to participate in the World March. They were led by Oshima Raikhy of the Punjab unit of NFIW, the *Punjab Lok Istri Sabha*.

International Advocacy

Following the UN Decade on Women (1975-1985), in 1987, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi convened a meeting of women leaders to discuss issues of women's development. The government proposed a 'Perspective Plan for Women's Development'. NFIW participated in formulating the Plan (1988-2000), in a joint exercise with 143 participants from 39 women's groups. Among the 12 participants who participated on behalf of NFIW were Geeta Mukherjee, Vimla Farooqui, Sarla Sharma, Primla Loomba, Amarjeet Kaur, Rita Seth, and others.

Earlier, in 1980, Amarjeet had participated in the Second World Conference of the UN decade for women in Copenhagen. Here she had gone as a student leader, representing Asia-Pacific for the International Federation of Students. At the meeting, she saw first-hand the dominance of women from America, Europe and Scandinavia,

in discussions. When groups from socialist and developing countries brought up issues of women's reservation, war and peace, socialist systems of care etc, they were told that these were 'political issues', and not 'women's issues'. Along with other comrades, Amarjeet argued that in India and many other developing countries, women have been shaped by the colonial process and have been part of political movements. Their vision was thus that of an equal society for men and women at all levels - social, economic and political. Such articulations by women from the global south yielded results, says Amarjeet, such that in the 1985 UN Conference at Nairobi, all those issues which had been declared branded as 'political', came onto the common agenda.

Amarjeet also participated in the 1995 Beijing conference, in which 500 women representatives from India also took part. She went there as a member of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), while being associated with both NFIW and AITUC. The 1995 conference was remarkable in its recognition of 'women's rights as human rights' and in declaring that the onus of women's equality lay with the whole society, and not just on women. By then, the women's movement in India had won the demand of reservation of seats for women in local governance, and which was being regarded as an exemplary achievement by all. Alongside these UN conferences, in this period, Amarjeet also participated in meetings of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), meetings of World Federation of Trade Union, International Labour Organisation (ILO) conferences, and many other bilateral meetings.

Political Reservation for Women



Amarjeet addressing a NFIW meeting on opposition to Bush visit to India

For the last 25 years, NFIW, along with other sister groups, and the National Commission of Woman, has advocated for 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in union and state legislatures. It was NFIW leader and Member of Parliament, Geeta Mukherjee, who had introduced this bill. She was also the member of the joint parliamentary committee that took in suggestions and drafted the final draft. However, despite continued

efforts by women's groups, and despite repeated promises by political parties, the bill remains pending till this date.

According to Amarjeet, there is very little interest in male politicians on this issue, even though there are enough examples of the far-reaching positive impacts of reservations in local governance, especially in states such as Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Kerala, Maharashtra, Bengal and Orissa. Electoral compulsions such as winnability are often parroted in order to dismiss women candidates, including by Left parties. While the Left asserts its support for women's rights, but when it comes to giving space at political level, same old conservatism appears.

Amarjeet retired from active leadership of NFIW in 2002. And then got fully involved in the front she felt most committed to, which is AITUC.

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IV

Trade Union Activist (1994 - now)



May Day Protest in 2006, joined by unions of DTC workers, rickshaw pullers, hotel workers, DU teachers and karamcharis, among others

In 1994, while being a leader of NFIW, Amarjeet also joined the AITUC, and became one of its national secretaries. Right from her student days, she was interested in pursuing union work and was interacting closely with Delhi based unions. After her retirement from student activism in 1985, she was keen to join AITUC as a full time trade union activist.

But the Party, she says, thought that being a woman, it was a natural and better course for her to join the women's front. So, she was at NFIW for almost 15 years, before retiring in 2003 to be full time in AITUC, first as a National Secretary from 1994-2017 and then as General Secretary from Dec 2017 onwards

Working Women

While not her first choice, the experience of working with NFIW, and interacting with women from various strata, notes Amarjeet, served very useful to get a richer understanding of women's issues.

Three learnings were particularly important for her, which she also employed later in organising women in unions.

- One, how the familial structures bear on the opportunities women get for education, especially skilled education, and to do jobs.
- Two, education and economic security is not the pinnacle of women's empowerment, for women continue to face discriminations at work place, and often do not have control over their own incomes. Married women who work outside also have a double burden, as their household work is mostly not shared by the husband and other family members.
- Three, all women are workers and the 'invisible' work they do in the house has a huge economic value, unaccounted in the growth narratives.

Both as a woman unionist and a women's leader, organising working women became a priority for Amarjeet within AITUC. Right after joining, she began participating in seminars and meetings on working women in order to acquire a better understanding of their issues. She also attended national education classes of the trade union on the same.

As she underlines, given the worsening work situation for the majority of women since liberalisation, the need to intervene for their better working and living conditions has never been more urgent. In this regard, a few of the issues and challenges that the unions have been emphasising, include the following:

- Regular employment is shrinking for both men and women, and there is a persistent push for more informalisation, contractualisation, casualisation and outsourcing. In some sectors, regular work force is less than 10-20 per cent, and within regular work, women are much less in number. This has to do with lack of both educational and training avenues, and job opportunities, as well as preference for males in high-skilled and better paying work.

- As such, one sees higher stratification among women workers. On the one end are women who earn decent wages in executive positions or in high-tech jobs, on the other end are increasing numbers of poor women within the unregulated informal sector, who are underpaid and over worked, and lack job security and other social protections. A large number of them are home-based workers in villages and slums, doing piece-rate work for industries like garments, electronics, food and consumer items, having no coverage of labour laws, and thus no provisions of minimum wage, fixed hours, leave or medical benefits. Flexi-labour practices are essentially a means to dilute all labour rights in favour of employers and profit.
- Almost 50 lakh women work in the government schemes and programme at central and state level, including Anganwadi workers and helpers, ASHA workers, mid-day meal cooks. Even while they work full-time and perform extremely important 'caregiving' tasks like primary health care, delivery and child-care, but they are not recognised as 'workers', but rather as 'volunteers' or 'part-time workers'. They are paid a meagre amount as honorarium and denied benefits of regular employment. And, much like scheme workers, women employed in plantations, bidi or garment industries or those working as helpers, cooks, care-givers in other services sectors, face hostile working conditions for wages that are a pittance and no social security.
- In the rural areas, majority of women are still in the agricultural sector, and despite that they work with land, cattle, fish or looms etc, they have almost no access to development resources. With a roll-back of public sector credit schemes, and entry of private lenders who take much higher interest, the opportunities for women to start small or micro enterprises have also shrunk. And given that assets like land or house are mostly in men's names, they also face a disadvantage in relation to getting loans from the existing banking and other credit institutions.
- A major issue faced by women across sectors is of occupational health. Given that majority of women in India are anaemic, so, that factor, combined with over work and hazardous work conditions, means more health complications for them. For instance, mine and quarry workers are exposed to silicosis, and cotton pickers and plantation workers are exposed to risk of lung infections, dermatitis and bleeding of fingers. Similarly, agricultural women workers engaged in operations like weeding, sowing and transplantation suffer from postural problems, and risks coming from exposure to dust, chemical fertilizers and pesticides etc. In the fisheries sector, women are exposed to saline water,

which disturbs their menstrual cycles. What is also important to note there is that earlier, the Factories Act provided that women would not be employed in hazardous factories, but now that clause been changed to only apply to 'pregnant' and 'disabled' women'. This has increased the health risks for them.

- Unions have also exposed many other kinds of disabling conditions women now face at work, including sexual harassment. For instance, the earlier provision of not having night shifts for women between 6 PM and 6 AM in factories and mines, has now been reversed, which puts them more at risk . In Export Processing Zones (EPZs), where young women are preferred, and where residence is sometimes also provided, harassment comes in the shape of restrictions on mobility, or on formation of unions. In some sectors like hosiery, wage standards and working conditions are akin to modern slavery.
- Within the organised sector, one sees a further dilution in the implementation of existing labour legislations. Despite the Equal Remuneration Act, equal pay is still distant reality and similarly, despite the Maternity Benefits Act, in most establishments, pregnancy and childbirth leads to either loss of work, loss of wages, or suspension.
- Overall, whether it is work and social security, quality of work and life, or basic dignity, women are now facing the bigger brunt of the violent liberalised order.



Joint workshop of trade unions on ICDS demands, Aug 21, 2005

Given this scenario, in the initial years, one of the responsibilities for Amarjeet as a National Secretary was to oversee as well as organise women workers, in sectors they were predominant in. These include Anganwadi workers, bidi workers, domestic workers, and home based workers.



AITUC Anganwadi workers rally on Parliament on Nov 24, 2006



All India Anganwadi Workers Federation rally on Feb 19, 2009



All India Bidi, Cigar and Tobacco worker demonstration on Nov 27, 2011.

She was also responsible to organise women workers in Public Sector. Her focus was on leadership building, and in sectors where men were mostly in leadership, such as banking, she organised trainings and special conventions to help women take leadership roles. These conventions included discussions on the banking sector, in the context of national and international developments, issues related to women bank workers and their

participation in the union. Thereafter, banks were encouraged to have national and state level women's convention, a process, which continues till today. As a result of such initiatives, women in banking became more politically aware and more of them joined union the General Council and Working Committees of the All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA). Many women leaders emerged in public sector, who were able to intervene strongly for their demands. Similar processes were initiated in insurance sector and oil sector.



Rally of the All India Bank Employees Association, in March 2005

In 1995, AITUC organised the first All India Women's Convention, which brought together working women from different sectors and regions of the country. The All India Women Workers' Forum has since been actively involved in bringing women to leadership positions.



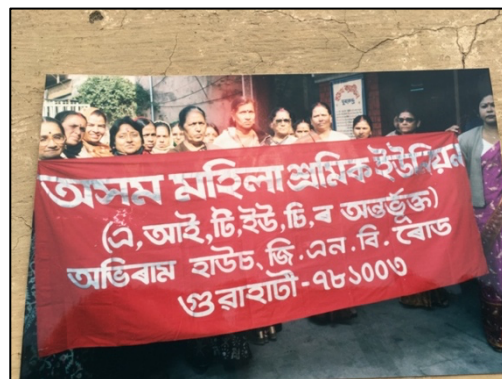
Meetings on Working Women

Over the last two decades, AITUC has facilitated many unions and protests of Anganwadi and Asha workers and a new crop of women leaders have emerged in those areas. In the beginning of her tenure, the Anganwadi union was in two states, but in the coming years, AITUC was able to unionise them in 18 states. In many sectors, it has been more difficult to organise women. For instance, in aqua farming area, in Maharashtra, vast majority of workers are young, unmarried women. They live and work in cramped sheds, and are not allowed to form or interact with unions. With the help of women's groups in the area, AITUC was able to get access to these workers, carry out a study on their work conditions, and negotiate with the employers for occupational safety and health issues.

According to Amarjeet, the process of unionisation has always been empowering for women to demand rights and proper implementation. There are many examples of important struggles by bidi workers (where women are more than 80 per cent in

number) or construction sector and quarries or brick kiln workers (where they are about 40 per cent) or the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) workers (where women are 100 per cent).

Women's participation in unions has been growing over the last few decades, especially in the informal sector where they are being mobilised in working women's forums, cooperatives and other associations. However, in an overall assessment, the number of unionized women workers in India is still low. And, importantly, women are also not in prominent leadership positions within the unions. This is not only because of patriarchal mindsets in families, but also in the unions. As Amarjeet says, till now, it has taken great effort within a male-dominated AITUC to push for women in leadership. It is easier to have them as members. Even in sectors with large numbers of women workers, it is mostly the male leaders who tend to take lead in negotiations. They undermine the capacity of women to talk, negotiate or handle administrative affairs, and as such are not inclined to take up women specific issues, such as maternity leave or creche services.



First National Convention of Working Women, Jan 10-11, Kolkata, 2004

Very few male comrades encourage women to be active politically. Although, as Amarjeet underlines, “It is not even about encouraging, it is about facilitating. It is not enough to say ‘humne kabhi roka nahin hai’ (we haven’t stopped them). One has to create conditions for women to go out and do political work. Men are naturally facilitated, as their basic needs of food and clothing are usually taken care of by women. But women are not. They are expected to do everything – job and household work, and in absence of support structures, both in the house and outside, it becomes very difficult for them to take on new roles.”

She adds, “Whether at the level of trade unions or political level, I found many non-Communists (not members of Party) to be better than Communists, in terms of their gender sensibilities. There are comrades who don’t allow their daughters to choose own partners or to join politics. They tell their wives, sisters or daughters, ‘Meeting

mein jao, lekin pachde mein nahin padna' (You can go to the party meetings, but don't get involved in the business').”.

Since her association with AITUC, Amarjeet has continually engaged in discussions with her male comrades on the need to strengthen women's capacities and give them leadership opportunities. In this vein, she has also pushed for support provisions at the union office, such as creche and transportation services, and also ensured that women don't have to stay late hours. “I tell my male comrades that merely saying that they want to give women a chance is not sufficient. Enabling conditions have to be put into place to make this a reality.”



Figure 1 AITUC National Workshop on Collective Bargaining and Gender Issues in Trade Unions, Delhi, Dec 29-30, 2003,

So, alongside enrolment as members, one of her priorities has been to train women future leaders, by way of educational classes. “Women need to learn to engage in dialogue processes, negotiations, collective bargaining and settlements with employers. They must have the opportunity to get trained and build their capacities.”, she says. A lot needs to be done at this front. Unions need

to think and work actively to create an environment of equal opportunity. More women leaders is a bold sign that unions are taking the idea of gender equality and inclusion seriously.

Sexual Harassment Act

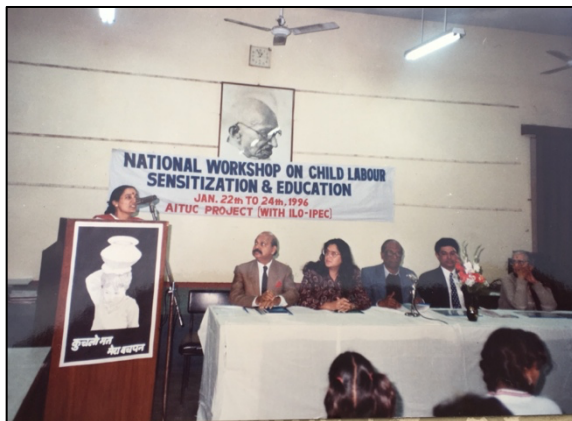
On behalf of AITUC, Amarjeet has particularly striven for the proper implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, in public and private sector. Following the Vishakha guidelines in 1997, trade unions took up the issue of sexual harassment in a paced manner. While they had been facing many cases of work place harassment earlier, but there was no formal mechanisms to address this. These guidelines however changed everything. Given their field experience, trade unions played a significant role in drafting and pushing for the law, following the recommendations of the Verma committee after the Nirbhaya rape incident in 2012. One of the issues that the unions are currently struggling for, is to ensure its proper coverage in the informal sector.

Child Labour



Apart from organising women workers, child labour project was her first long-term project after she joined AITUC, and something close to her heart. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) had constituted a body of representatives from different organisations for a review of all the ongoing projects related to this issue in

India. Amarjeet was part of this body from the trade union front. They held discussions on this with various stakeholders – employers, government, other trade unions. AITUC also conducted studies and attempted to broaden the political understanding around it, linking it to allied issues of income inequality, nature of informal economy, living spaces and education facilities. Raids were conducted in different sectors, especially in hazardous industries, to expose the stark



Workshop on Child labour, 1996



Exhibition on child labour

contrast between government claims and ground reality. It revealed how children were involved in work almost everywhere, including in prohibited areas. Further, concerns around bonded labour and occupational health were also highlighted. Following the research, a photo exhibition on different aspects of child labour was put up in Delhi. It showed some of the key sectors in which parents and children worked together, such as bidi, match making, fireworks, brick kiln, carpet weaving, diamond cutting, as well as home based work.

Thereafter, they began advocacy and policy intervention for changes in the law, in order to make it more stringent, and to remove the word regulation and replace it with prohibition and abolition. Advocacy was done to regulate export oriented sectors, where child labour was preferred, like mini cigarettes and sports goods. In

this vein, AITUC organised workshops in different states with government officials, lawyers, judges, local panchayat leaders, MLAs, MPs and other central trade unions. It was seen that the political representatives and legal fraternity did not know much about the Child Labour Act. Children were employed even in their own chambers. It was even the case with trade unionists, whose focus was mainly adult male labour, but these workshops helped build their awareness on this matter. Discussions were also held with non-governmental organisations to enable them to view the issue in its structural links, rather than as a development issue.

Simultaneously, they pushed for free and compulsory universal education, better nutrition, creche centres, full-time anganwadi centres and so on. They wanted to break the myth that parents do not want to send their children to school. Rather, given access to schools and nutrition, parents prefer to send their children there. It is from such discussions, that the discourse on mid-day meal scheme emerged.

Overall, as Amarjeet underlines, AITUC, along with other trade unions, was able to articulate the child labour issue within the framework of child rights, and show its intricate links with other economic and welfare questions, including food security, health, education, wages, indebtedness and social security, which the unions were already working on. An integrated policy framework on the issue was thus drawn up.

Unionization and Protest

In the last few decades, liberalisation has posed newer challenges for the workers movement, with successive regimes bringing in a number of pro-business and anti-worker reforms, upturning many of the gains made by the movement over the last century. AITUC, along with other central unions, has been strongly opposing these changes, including the new labour codes (Wage Code, Industrial Code and Social Security Code) that are all pitched to serve advantageous for the employers.

The unions have also been opposing privatisation of public sectors, and flexi-labour arrangements, and demanding expansion of and better wages within MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act) as well as regularisation of contract workers, among other concerns.

As a leader of one of the largest trade unions, and also of the joint platform of unions, Amarjeet has been at the forefront of such advocacy efforts. However, she notes, given the hostile regimes and pressure of the business lobby, it is now increasingly difficult to push the workers agenda within the political process. As is seen, governments either do not consult with or do not regard the suggestions of

the trade unions, whenever changes are being proposed by way of amendments or new legislations. She points to a number of other challenges that have come to the fore.

With increasing contractualisation, it is now difficult to unionize a large segment of casual workers employed in the service sectors, such as hospitality and construction. The new industrial hubs, Special Economic Zones and Export Processing Zones proliferating within the liberalised economy are also increasingly without any unions. These industries mostly employ young, semiskilled workers, and in this fragile economy, the workers fear losing their jobs over anything else. The employers also use money, muscle and pressure tactics with government, to ensure that unions are not allowed entry. And if the workers do try to form unions, they are suspended or fired. The IT companies have similar attitudes, and here, workers also change jobs more quickly so it is not easy to tap them. Most of the multinational corporations investing and operating in India blatantly violate labour laws, but have the protection of the government.

In spite of these challenges, unions have been actively working on the ground to try and unionize workers, in old and new industrial areas and increasingly so within the unorganised sector, and as a result also secured welfare legislations such as the 2009 Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act or the Beedi Welfare Act. According to Amarjeet, more than 70 per cent of AITUC's membership today comes from the unorganised sector. Unions are advocating for better pay, social security protections (such as ESIC or Employees State Insurance Scheme coverage) and welfare boards for this sector.

Since the early 2000s, under the leadership of Gurudas Das Gupta, Amarjeet got involved in organising factory workers in Gurgaon and Noida, alongside her work with women and children. "When we began to organise the workers, the employers used to fire any worker who was taking active interest in this. Foreign companies used to dissuade unions and so there was conflict", says Amarjeet. In 1995-96, they started a process of making a union in Maruti Udyog. Many workers were laid off. This brought to light how the foreign companies, which followed labour laws in their own countries, did not comply with the laws here. And the Indian government, which was merely interested in investment, did not care this compliance either. In fact, the labour departments targeted those who gave application for becoming union leaders.

The ongoing crisis fuelled when, in 2005, the Honda management in Gurgaon suspended 80 workers and the protesting workers were brutally attacked by the Police and the goons hired by the management. The horrific incident became national news.

Since 2001-02, AITUC had been facilitating the formation of Honda workers union and just as the effort was bearing results, the management, which was unwilling to recognise the union, decided to cut short this process with violent means. AITUC continued to intervene in the matter. On AITUC's behalf, Amarjeet, along with others, visited the injured workers in hospitals, as well as their families, organised protests at Haryana Bhawan, participated in talks with the government, and had regular meetings with the workers, all of which finally bore results. The union was registered, jobs were restored and the management came on the negotiation table with the newly formed union for further talks on wage issues etc.

This experience yet again proved the importance of raising workers consciousness and paved the way for more efforts at unionisation in the industrial areas. All the central unions came together at the time, which helped put pressure on the government and the employers. They were able to press upon the government that repression of trade unions would mean less industrial peace, which is in itself detrimental to goals of investment and development.

Bandhs

To push their collective demands, including the right of workers to protest and form associations, many of the central unions jointly organise nation-wide protests and bandhs nearly every year, in which lakhs of workers from different sectors participate. However, despite the fact that huge strikes have taken place in the last few years, but the impact tends to get diluted due to the hostile coverage of the largely pro-government corporate media, which frames these actions as nuisance and inconvenience for the ordinary public. Yet, the trade unions continue to come on to the streets and represent their demands to the legislators. For this, a lot of work preparatory work is done for months before. Amarjeet plays an important role in mobilising large and small unions for such protests, along with other joint initiatives.

As she underscores, in the current political and economic context, it is imperative that the unions continue to work together through common fora at local and national levels, in order to update and learn from each other on ongoing developments within government, industry and international organisations, as well as for collective action towards better laws and better implementation of existing laws.

Farmers Movement

In the last two years, Amarjeet was actively involved with the farmers protest. AITUC, along with other unions supported the farmers agitation since the ordinances were

issued, and shared their long-term experience on the need to keep the struggle peaceful, despite provocations from the government. The union brought out solidarity statements, carried out joint meetings and processions, and supported national calls of protest. AITUC members were present at all borders, where protests were being held, and the farmers issues were also brought up in discussion at WFTU and other international fora. Amarjeet spoke many times at the protest sites. She says, “We knew that if farmer movement is successful, it will help the workers movement. We also hoped that a win on this front may be the countdown to the downfall of this government.”

In conclusion



In an AITUC delegate meeting in 2006.



All India Trade Union Convention, July 9, 2005

Reflecting on her activist journey of the last five decades, especially as a woman who has managed to break the glass ceiling in trade union leadership, Amarjeet says that as a student leader, she never felt that being a woman was coming in the way of her taking on leadership roles. But within this front, she had to prove herself capable again and again.

“They used to doubt my capacity to take on what they considered tough work. And wonder what she will do here. Even though everyone knew I had come from the student movement, both at the state and national level, and that I had organisational skills, but for a long time the male party members felt I was better suited to the women’s front and won’t be able to handle trade union work. The assumption was that women cannot rough it out.”

In the initial years, she realised that she was being given lighter work compared to national secretaries, such as for organisation of large gatherings or parliament march. She challenged the assumptions behind this distribution and for the next events, took on much more responsibility. “I had to do double work to show I could do much better”, she says.

For Amarjeet, her role model was Parvati Krishnan, who had entered trade unionism directly after student activism, and was for a period the Vice-president of AITUC. So, following her example, even while being at NFIW, she continued her work with the union. Her efforts paid and she not only rose to tanks in AITUC, but also in party leadership. In 1974, she joined the State Council and then in 1995, the National Executive and then in 2005, the National secretariat and now the Secretary, Delhi State, a role which she is fulfilling, along with being the General Secretary, AITUC.

Amarjeet works and travels tirelessly, mobilising and inspiring working men and women across the country. Through her five long decades of work, she has carved a unique and exemplary space as a Communist woman leader within India's political landscape.

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Supriya Chotani