

Antecedents and Consequences of Union Participation: A Review

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Abstract—Labour unions unquestionably rely on member participation for their survival and ability to meet members' needs. However, there has been relative lack of participation by the membership in union activities. The present study is done with motive of identifying and developing a theoretical model depicting relationship between antecedents and consequence(s) of union participation, using systematic literature review as proposed by Tranfield, Denyer and Smart. While Demographic Variables, Union Commitment, Union Instrumentality, Union Ideology, Pro-union Attitudes and Union Support have been identified as the Antecedents of Union Participation, Human Effectiveness is the resulting consequence.

Index Terms—union participation, membership participation, conceptual model, antecedents and consequences, human effectiveness

I. INTRODUCTION

Trade unions in India have played an important role in serving the interests of the working classes and have been instrumental in securing workers' rights and entitlements in the areas of collective action, emoluments, safety, welfare, social security and fairness in labour practices [1]. Unions as organizations are worthy of note, as they are characterized by fascinating paradoxical properties: involuntary & voluntary membership, oligarchy & democracy and movement & bureaucracy at the same time. Trade unions are age old institutions for protecting and promoting the interests of workers [2]. They are formally organised coalitions of employees who encourage participation in collective activities as the primary means for achieving their goals [3].

Trade unions have survived and thrived on their power to create or curb nuisance and their importance has been dependent on the capacity to influence labour in the favour of or against industry [2]. Labour unions unquestionably rely on member participation for their survival and ability to meet members' needs [4]. While a majority of the members may have a favourable attitude towards their union, a minority is typically in attendance at regular meetings of large industrial unions. This relative lack of participation by the membership in union activities has concerned researchers over the years [5].

Considerable number of studies on union participation have been undertaken motivated by a need to understand the decline in membership over the past several years [6] since membership engagement in mutual aid behaviours is the key for union revival and the antidote for decline in union participation.

This paper is an attempt to advance literature of union participation by proposing a conceptual relationship depicting antecedents and consequences of union participation.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Systematic literature review methodology, as proposed by Tranfield, Denyer and Smart [7], has been adopted for the study, which includes following steps:

A. Planning and Conducting the Review

The present study is done with the motive of identifying and developing a theoretical model depicting relationship between antecedents and consequences of union participation. An exhaustive review of literature has been done using various secondary sources like research papers published in reputed journals, magazines, contemporary literature sources like newspapers and websites and conference papers and dissertations, to eliminate the chances of any biasness.

Various key-words identified for the study are: Union Participation, Membership Participation, Conceptual Model, Antecedents and Consequences, Human Effectiveness.

B. Reporting & Dissemination

The research establishes that demographic variables, union commitment, union instrumentality, union ideology, pro-union attitudes and union support are the antecedents of union participation and human effectiveness is its consequence, which has been duly depicted in the conceptual model.

The paper also discusses various issues related to trade union membership in India, along with the antecedents and consequences of union participation, to conclude a theoretical model.

III. UNION PARTICIPATION

Trade unionism is a legislative system of organizing workers and raising voice for economic and social

benefits [8], wherein members actively participate to make unions democratic and responsive to the needs of members [9]. The effectiveness of trade union movement depends, to a large extent, on the degree of participation it generates among its present and potential members [10]. The study of participation behaviour of union members and identification of participation correlates is, therefore, very important. The major issues identified are discussed below.

A. Concept

Union Participation is defined as the behavioural involvement of union members in the operation of their local labour organization [11]. It refers to the involvement of members in collective action [12] and other union related activities [13] which are closely related to effective working of the union [14]. According to "Reference [15]", union participation reflects on the membership and members needs to influence decisions in the union. Though little attention has been paid to the definition of union participation, there is an agreement that members participation is a behavioural construct [6], [16], requiring the expenditure of time on union constructs [17].

Behavioural studies on union members' participation fall into two categories: first, the structural determinants and second, the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of union members [18].

Anderson [19], [20] suggested that structural factors may be less important than individual factors in explaining member participation in union activities since willingness to participate is a personal decision and is perhaps affected more directly and strongly by individual and social factors than by the structural dimensions. Since the Indian researchers [21] have largely postulated behavioural measures to serve as indicators of union participation, the present study also focuses on the second issue, i.e. beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of union members.

B. Theory Underpinning

Membership is the constituency of a trade union and membership participation an acid test of member support and union democracy. Since the mid 1970's the entire industrialized world has recorded an unprecedented downward trend in union density rates. This decline in union membership can be attributed to several reasons including poor finances, dominance of outside leadership, multiple subscriptions of union membership, multiplicity of unions [22], [23], inter and intra-union rivalries [22]-[24], enterprise restructuring and the resultant casualization workforce [25], [26]; the unfavourable socio-economic and legal climate facing union organizers, emerging managerial unionism [25], influence of politics [22], [24], reassertion of managerial power in workplace [22], [23], and structural changes in the economy, changes in the workforce, changing gender composition of the workforce, employer aggressiveness, falling employment and management endeavours to reduce labour costs [26], both at macro and firm level.

"Reference [27]" and "Reference [28]" in their respective studies have investigated the temperament of the workers towards their unions and the fact that has stood out notably is the lack of enthusiasm in union participation. Reasons discovered for lack of participation in union activities include low identification, illiteracy, multiplicity of unions and sheer apathy. "Reference [29]" has attributed workers' apathy towards the union to the bureaucratisation of the trade unions, diffusion of employers' hostility and failure of the unions to instil among their members an ideological orientation towards unionism. It has been primarily observed that workers' conception in India is primarily that of bread and butter unionism and they conspicuously lack ideological commitment to union [30], [31].

C. Union Participation Activities

No standard measure of participation has been employed in research to date, however, union participation activities have been broadly categorized in terms of participation in either formal activities or informal activities [32]-[34].

Formal Participation: Formal participation activities are infrequent and scheduled by nature and are regulated or controlled to some extent by the structure or constitution of the union [35]. Such activities include involvement in elections, voting, filing a grievance, meeting attendance and serving on union committees [36]. Since formal participation activities do not occur frequently, the measurable opportunities for such participation behaviour become restricted [33].

Informal Participation: "Reference [37] conceptualised informal activities as extra-role behaviours, that is, involvement beyond what is required, whereas "Reference [34]" and "Reference [38]" conceptualised informal activities as those rendering compliance with minimal role expectancies. Such activities are less visible and less regulated by the union policies. Informal participation activities are typically more frequent, informal and unstructured [6] and include helping other members to file grievances, talking about the union with friends or family [36], talking to shop stewards or other union members about union or work issues [35] and reading union-related publications [17]-[20].

Both types of participation are discretionary and beneficial to the organization, and members cannot be penalized or contracted for their non-engagement [33].

IV. ANTECEDENTS OF UNION PARTICIPATION

Researchers over the years have considered two variables as possible predictors of union participation, namely, union commitment and demographic factors, with former being widely accepted as a more significant antecedent [6], [14]. While these two are the most discussed antecedents of union participation, other conceptually and empirically evidenced variables affecting union participation include union instrumentality, union ideology, pro-union attitudes and union support. These have been discussed later in this section.

A. Demographic Factors

Even though demographic variables have generally not been useful in explaining union activity, factors such as age, marital status, seniority and education have not only been used in most researches in this area but have, more importantly, shown inconclusive and inconsistent results [38], [39]. “Reference [19]”; “Reference [9]”; “Reference [31]” and “Reference [12]” have further shown demographic variables to be predictive of union activity.

B. Union Commitment

Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, & Spiller, “Reference [40]”, defined union commitment as the extent to which an individual has a desire to retain membership in, exert effort for, and identify with the objectives of his or her union. On the basis of this definition, Gordon and colleagues derived a union commitment scale that empirically yielded four dimensions: union loyalty, belief in unionism, willingness to work for the union, and responsibility to the union. “Reference [41]” from a review of the union commitment literature concluded, “Members, in most cases, will not be motivated to engage in action such as participating in union activities. Unless they already possess a certain level of commitment”. Few longitudinal studies that have been conducted in the area have consistently found that union commitment helps predict union participation [36]. Although “virtually all” union commitment studies used Gordon and colleagues’ scale either in whole or in part, only half of the studies exploring the conceptual structure of union commitment replicated their four-factor structure [14], only three of the Gordon’s, “Reference [40]”, original four factors viz. union loyalty, responsibility to the union and willingness to work for the union have been widely used to measure union commitment.

C. Union Instrumentality

Cross-sectional studies in both UK and USA have shown that in general individuals join unions more out of instrumental than ideological considerations [42], [43]. In India, majority of the studies [27], [29], [44] have upheld the economic and security motives as the most important factors for unionisation. Gordon, Barling, and Tetrick, “Reference [45]”, defined union instrumentality as “the perceived impact of the union on traditional (e.g., wages, benefits) and non-traditional work conditions (e.g., job satisfaction) that define the employment relationship”. It is a measure of possible benefits that unions could achieve for their members [32]. A Dutch researcher defined instrumental motives as those intentions which drive people to participate because they think they will stand to gain by it -- financial support during strikes, protection against the arbitrariness of employers, other union facilities [46]. “Reference [47]” in his study concluded that member participation in union activities is positively related to members’ perceptions of the union’s priorities and performance in obtaining intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. Both “Reference [19]” and “Reference [18]” in their study indicated that member participation

and involvement in union activities will increase if members perceive payoffs from the union.

Other prominent support for Union Instrumentality comes from the work of “Reference [4]”; “Reference [47]”; “Reference [32]” and “Reference [48]”, “Reference [56]”.

D. Union Ideology

While the most obvious and primary motivation for unionism seems to be the concern for economic security, however, Golden and Ruttenberg [49] found that there are equally compelling social and psychological reasons for unionising. “Reference [50]” in their study argued that unions “need to emphasize both ideological and instrumental issues to promote the kind of active support needed to maintain them”. Union ideology reflects the solidarity orientation of members towards the unions, i.e. the union is seen as having social & political goals [30]. According to “Reference [29]”, “ideologically committed union members can alone be expected to have sustained participation in trade unions and those attracted merely by bread-and-butter unionism cannot have meaningful union participation over a period of time”. “Reference [51]” also suggests that members participate in union activities when they are convinced that the goal is important, that their own participation will make a difference, that others will participate, and that together they will be successful. Hence, bread and butter unionism cannot sustain participation of the workforce for long. “In unionism, the problem is to a great extent one of building the cohesion occasionally found in a crisis, into a pattern of behavior” [52]. Therefore constant ideological indoctrination also emerges as a crucial responsibility of the union. Other important studies that have identified union ideology as an antecedent of union participation include “Reference [32]”; “Reference [42]”; “Reference [43]” and “Reference [53]”.

E. Pro-Union Attitudes

Attitude towards unionism already figures notably in the literature as one of the best predictors of both union participation [6], [54], and the willingness to participate [15], [40]. Sufficient empirical support has been provided to the hypothesis that attitudes (union interest) play an important role in shaping the behaviour (union participation) [10]. Union attitude variables taps the overall perceptions about unions in general i.e. if union is too politically active, does it stifle individual initiative, or it is a blue-collar organization and so forth [55]. Other important studies including attitudes are “Reference [5]”; “Reference [13]”; “Reference [15]”; “Reference [48]”; “Reference [56]” and “Reference [57]”.

F. Union Support

Union support perceptions are based on members’ global beliefs concerning the extent to which the union values their contributions and cares about their well being [58]. It includes items like, my local cares about my general satisfaction at work; my local would ignore any

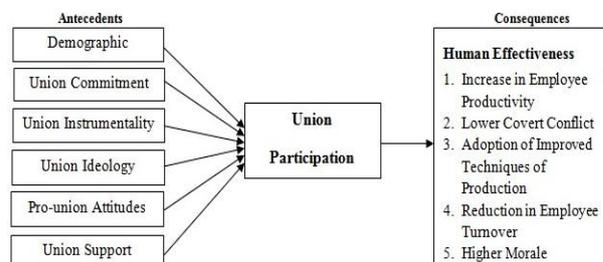
complaint from me; the local strongly considers my goals and values etc. "Reference [4]" in their study identified Union support as an antecedent of Union participation.

V. CONSEQUENCES OF UNION PARTICIPATION

Members may participate if they perceive that participatory activity will be successful in satisfying their goal(s) -- and that the advantages of participating will offset the costs involved [18]. According to Child, Ray, & Warner, "Reference [59]", a full appreciation of participation requires an 'understanding of the meaning the union has for its members', i.e. perceptions about union influence the extent of participation. Participation has direct impact on industrial relations [60]. It is seen as reflecting the existence of majority rule at union meetings, a means of sensitizing leaders to the problems of members and keeping a check on the oligarchic tendencies of union leadership [19].

Though union participation as a concept has been extensively deliberated upon, however, discussion on the consequences of union participation has rarely been penned down. Such consequences, though explicit from the review of literature, have barely been catalogued and assigned a nomenclature or subjected to empirical tests. In the classic studies of "Reference [61]" and "Reference [62]" it has been established that performance improvement is the basis for participation involvement and that improved productivity is the result of the improved human relations arising from worker participation. Following Myers, "Reference [63]", assumptions, guiding principles and implementation requirements of human relations theories in the context of human effectiveness in organizations, a climate of competence, trust, achievement, and cooperation through individual and group relationships throughout the organization leads to marked reduction in absenteeism, tardiness, indiscipline, grievances and unrest thereby resulting in enhancement in the capability of the organization to meet the challenge of change. "Reference [64]", envisaged that unions could have a positive effect on the productivity through the 'voice' effect where employees express their voice through unions which consecutively leads to lower covert conflict at work, as well as, to adoption of improved techniques of production. In non-union workplaces, dissatisfied workers tend to quit the organization, causing turnover costs for employers; alternatively, in union workplaces, they stay and seek to change the problems they identify. Direct and indirect participation by employees—preferably in combination—on average lead to lower labour turnover, lower absenteeism, higher morale and employee satisfaction, conditional upon the favourable workplace and institutional circumstances [65]. Thus these consequences of union participation can be collectively termed as Human Effectiveness, defined in terms of an increase in Employee Productivity and Higher Morale, Adoption of Improved Techniques of Production, Reduction in Employee Turnover and Lower Covert Conflict at workplace.

The systematic literature review thus helped us conclude the antecedents and consequences of union participation and their related variables as represented in Fig. 1 below. The Conceptual Model provides a good direction to further empirically test and validate the model.



Source: Concluded from Review of Literature

Figure 1. Antecedents and consequences of union participation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Present paper adds to the limited body of knowledge that exists on union participation antecedents and particularly its consequence(s) in Indian context. In the midst of global decline in union membership, it has been shown across nations, cultures and sectors that membership engagement in mutual aid behaviours is the key for union revival and the antidote for decline in union participation. Through a systematic review of literature, this study has helped gain familiarity with the concept of union participation, theory underpinning participation and its measures or activities. It further aided in identifying the important variables of antecedents and consequence(s) of union participation. While Demographic Variables, Union Commitment, Union Instrumentality, Union Ideology, Pro-union Attitudes and Union Support have been identified as the Antecedents of Union Participation, Human Effectiveness, defined in terms of an increase in Employee Productivity and Higher Morale, Adoption of Improved Techniques of Production, Reduction in Employee Turnover and Lower Covert Conflict at workplace, is the resulting consequence.

By including the full set of possible antecedents and consequences presented in the model above, it will be possible to more accurately investigate the factors that determine membership participation in union activities and its resultant outcomes. These variables however need to be tested further so as to be able to generalize the results and give recommendations for industry and academia at large.

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