Monthly Reports of the Indian Branch Office of the International Labour Organization, 1929-1969

A Finding Aid

Preface

In 1919, British-ruled India was one of the 29 'founder members' of the International Labour Organization (ILO). While this membership was intended to strengthen British influence on this Versailles treaty organization, various Indian political actors soon appropriated the new international platform to the purpose of propagating their demands to the colonial government. By the 1930s, with nationalists preparing themselves for an increasingly discernible postcolonial era, ILO-sponsored models of social policy seemed to offer them an alternative to a scenario of escalating industrial conflict and labour radicalism that had emerged in the postwar decade and had reached a preliminary climax in 1928/29. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, social policies, in India as much as in other regions of the world, were thus strongly focused on the 'labour problem'. Consequently, the subcontinent's worlds of labour attracted considerable national and international attention.

In this historical context, the ILO set up a 'regional office' in New Delhi in November 1928, of which Dr. P. P. Pillai, an economist and former League of Nations official, served as director until 1947. Since its establishment, one of the office's core tasks consisted in gathering information on all issues concerning Indian workers. From January 1929 until December 1969, the Delhi office thus prepared detailed monthly reports on the Indian labour scene and related problems of social and economic policy, comprising seldom less than fifty typed pages and sometimes more than one hundred. These reports were regularly sent to the main offices in Geneva and, during World War II, in Montreal and accumulated over time into a considerable database of about 40,000 pages. Among the series of reports the ILO received from its various regional offices, the Indian series was considered to be of particularly high and consistent quality.

The reports contain summaries of newly enacted laws, of official reports and other government materials, of conferences held or publications issued by various non-state actors such as business associations, trade unions or political movements. They also carry summaries or verbatim copies of relevant press coverage in Indian English language newspapers. The reports constitute an important historical database for two reasons. First, they provide a wide-ranging overview (rather than an in-depth account) of major events and processes with regard to India's economic and social development from a predominantly national or state level perspective. Second, they provide a detailed chronology of these events and processes for the final 18 years of colonial rule as well as for the Nehruvian period and its aftermath. They thereby render visible processes that cut across conventional boundaries of periodization that continue to structure and, in my view, impede studies of Indian contemporary history.

Providing us thus with a semi-official outline narrative of what might be called the 'politics of the social' *and* a counter-intuitive chronology over four decades, the reports can serve as a valuable resource for a multiplicity of researches in India's economic, social and political history in the mid-twentieth century. The range of topics includes labour legislation and its implementation, economic conditions and policies, various issues of an emerging Indian 'social policy' such as education, health, or housing, and extends to the cooperative movement, public debates on social reform, forced labour in India's princely states and international labour migration.

The originals of the reports are preserved in the ILO Archives in Geneva, where they came to my attention in the late 1990s. With the support of ILO colleagues, the digitization of the reports commenced at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO, Berlin) in the early 2000s as a side activity in the context of a more specific project and was pursued more systematically and completed at the Centre of Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS) at the University of Göttingen between 2010 and 2012. The digitized set of reports is almost complete with some minor gaps (mainly lists of relevant publications). They are open sources, mounted on several servers and accessible, at present, from the websites of the Centre of Modern Indian Studies http://www.unigoettingen.de/en/324221.html and of the International Labour Organization http://www.ilo.org/century/research/keydocuments/lang--en/index.htm.

A major impediment for making this extensive database accessible to scholars was that the creation of searchable digital documents proved impossible given the technical and financial constraints of the project. Most of the reports were preserved in the form of often low-quality carbon copies. The pedestrian, labourious but effective method we found to overcome this impediment consisted in manually copying all the tables of content that were attached to most of the reports and to create new ones in case they were missing. The present finding aid, presented both in a more lasting printed *and* a fully searchable electronic form, is the result of this cumbersome exercise. Student assistants did most of this hard work: Christoph Gabler took it up with unflinching perseverance at the ZMO. Rani Dhupia, Kiran Gall, Florian Höllen and Stefan Tetzlaff, all associated with CeMIS, completed the scanning process in Geneva, copied and edited the tables of content - painfully unexciting tasks that required great care and long hours of meticulous work nevertheless. In Geneva, reliable allies were found whose contributions to the realisation of the project have been crucially important, too: the ILO's archivist Remo Becci, whose generous support made it possible to commence the project, and, at a later stage, Emmanuel Reynaud and Dorothea Hoehtker, both driving forces of the ILO's 'Century Project', as well as Sandrine Kott, University of Geneva, whose joint help enabled us to complete it.

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