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# Turning the tide? Economic reforms and union revival in India

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**Abstract**

Despite nearly three decades of ostensibly pro-employer economic reforms in India, trade union membership and density in India appear to have risen. Although similar trends have been reported and investigated in other emerging economies such as China and South Africa, the union revival thesis in India is yet to be fully explored. Using large-scale official survey data from 1993–1994 to 2011–2012 and primary data collected through 56 interviews with key stakeholders, this paper investigates the patterns of union membership growth in India. Findings indicate varying degrees of growth in union membership across all industrial sectors and employment types. We draw upon theoretical insights from economic theories of union growth, comparative politics and social movement unionism to explain union membership growth in India.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Trade unions globally are facing challenges of declining membership levels and weakening collective representation in the wake of neo-liberal economic policies followed by governments of various political persuasions (Chor & Freeman, 2005; Connolly et al., 2014). The trend of union membership decline is more evident in the advanced economies of the West (Frege & Kelly, 2020). Historically, union membership levels and density have been typically high in the social democratic countries like Sweden, Finland and Denmark and reasonably high in the

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coordinated market economies like Germany, Netherlands and Japan. However, OECD (n.d.) figures indicate that even in the Scandinavian countries and those typified as coordinated market economies, unions are facing a decline in their fortunes. For instance, the average union density for regular waged employees in the industrial sector across the OECD countries was 21% in 1999, which has fallen to 16.7% in 2014. Sweden's union density figure was 80.6% in 1999, which has declined to 67.3% in 2014. Germany had a union density of 25.3% in 1999, which fell to about 18%. The liberal market economies like the United Kingdom and the United States show an even grimmer picture. Union density in the United Kingdom was around 30% in 1999, which fell to 25% in 2014, whereas in the United States, the corresponding figures over the same period were 13.4% and 10.7%, respectively (OECD Statistics, n.d.).

In this context, trade unions in India appear to have shown a degree of resilience and revival. Aggregate union membership in India appears to have risen from around 35 million workers in 2008 to around 100 million workers in 2013 (Menon, 2013). This is a rather intriguing phenomenon and runs counter to the general consensus in the literature about the adverse impact of nearly three decades of economic reforms in India on the fortunes of Indian trade unions (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Roychowdhury, 2019; Sharma et al., 2014). Similar trends in union membership growth have been reported in some other countries of the Global South. For instance, union density in China has risen from 26.77% in 1999 to 60.52% in 2014 (Liu, 2020). In South Africa, trade union membership as a percentage of total employment has increased from 20.6% in 2012–2013 to 24.4% in 2016–2017, and in Brazil, unions have been able to maintain their density levels at around 17% despite far-reaching economic reforms and the financial crisis of 2008–2010 (Anner & Veigai, 2020; Southall, 2020). The union revival trends in some of these developing countries have been a subject of scholarly investigation, and explanations largely revolve around political opportunities, regulatory structures and socio-cultural factors that have contributed to union membership growth or stability (e.g., Brown & Kai, 2017; Pringle, 2011; Webster, 2017). The resurgence of Indian trade unions however is yet to be fully investigated.

The primary aim of this article is to examine the state of unionism in India. Using large-scale official survey data from 1993–1994 up until 2011–2012, we examine where Indian trade unions have gained ground. We also draw upon qualitative data collected through interviews with key stakeholders and documentary analysis to expand and clarify the trends in union membership revival in India. We explain our findings using theoretical insights drawn from economics theories, comparative politics and social movement unionism.

## 2 | ECONOMIC REFORMS IN INDIA

Notwithstanding the recent slowdown in the Indian economy, the overall trend suggests that nearly three decades of economic reforms has enabled India to position itself on the global stage as one of the fastest growing economies in the world. GDP growth over the past two decades has averaged at around 7%. Even during the global financial crisis, the Indian economy grew at the rate of 8.5% in 2009 and 10.3% in 2010 (Panagariya, 2019). India has made a quantum leap from its 142nd rank in the 2015 World Bank's Doing Business Report to 63rd position on 'ease of doing business' ranking for 2020. The World Bank (2020) has applauded India as one of the only two economies to have made it into the list of top-10 'improvers' for second consecutive years. In 2018, the foreign direct investment (FDI) from the United States into India reached US\$24.8 billion contributing 6% of the total FDI inflows in India (Department for Promotion of

Industry and Internal Trade [DPIIT], Government of India, 2019). The United Kingdom has been the largest G20 investor in India over the last decade with over 270 British companies operating in India and employing nearly 800,000 people. Bilateral trade between the United Kingdom and India reached £18 billion in 2017 (Department for International Trade, Government of UK, 2018). The European Union (EU) is India's largest trading partner accounting for nearly 13% of India's total trade in goods in 2017, and the trade between the EU and India trebled from 28 billion euros to 91 billion euros from 2002 to 2018 (Khorana, 2019).

It is argued that the economic reforms in India have been inimical to the interests of workers and trade unions. The policies implemented by successive governments entailed among various interventions, reducing entry barriers for foreign investors thus allowing increasing levels of FDI in various industrial sectors, divestment, privatization and job cuts in the public sector, poor enforcement of labour laws, exclusion of workers particularly those from the informal (unregulated) sector of the economy from the purview of labour and welfare laws, deregulation of labour markets and creating export processing zones that exclude private enterprises from most labour and welfare laws (Deshpande et al., 2004; Mohan, 2005; Sen & Dasgupta, 2009).

These policy changes have weakened the position of organized labour and have resulted in increased casualization of employment across the economy. Like many other developing countries of the Global South, the Indian labour market is characterized by high levels of informality with nearly 92% of all workers employed in the informal (unregulated) sector of the economy and less than 10% of the entire workforce covered by key labour laws such as the Minimum Wages Act, Factories Act, Industrial Disputes Act and the Workers' Compensation Act (Ghose, 2016; Sharma et al., 2014). The period of economic reforms also appears to have increased precarious forms of employment within the formal (regulated) sectors of the economy. For instance, casual employment (with no job or social security) grew by 55.36% in the manufacturing sector and an alarming 385.77% in the electricity, gas and water supply sectors from 2004 to 2012 (Badigannavar & Ghosh, 2020). Thus, the neo-liberal economic policies are likely to have hindered union membership growth and density.

The International Labour Organisation statistics (ILO Stat, n.d.) on union density for waged non-agricultural workers suggests that although Indian trade unions suffered a sharp decline and volatility in density in the early years of the economic reforms, they have shown a remarkable degree of resilience in recovering from their losses. From its peak of 35.8% in 1989, union density in India declined during the first wave of economic reforms to about 11.5% in 1993. However, it incrementally increased with a few dips in between to about 26% in 1997 and then fell to 19.4% in 2001. From 2002 onwards coinciding with the second decade of economic reforms, trade union density in India increased from 21.1% to 32.9% in 2005. In 2012, this figure stood at 36.60% (Pal, 2008; authors' calculations from various National Sample Surveys [NSS] rounds). Thus, union density for waged non-agricultural workers in India is higher than the union density for comparable groups of workers in countries such as Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States and the OECD average of 16.7%.

### **3 | THEORETICAL DEBATES ON UNION GROWTH AND DECLINE**

Causes of union growth and decline have been well rehearsed in the economic theories for several decades (Davis, 1941; Doucouliagos et al., 2018; Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Metcalf, 2005;

Stepina & Fiorito, 1986; Western, 1995). The salient factors identified by economists that help or hinder union membership growth are economic prosperity versus depression, business cycles, business failure rates, price inflation and union wage mark-ups in specific industry and across the economy. Notably, these studies suggest that the economic prosperity versus depression theory offers at best modest explanation for union membership growth although early work in the United States indicates that union membership increased in times of economic prosperity. This was probably because workers perceive lower risk of job losses and the cost of labour resistance for employers is higher. Consequently, in an environment of rising demand for product and services and labour shortages, employers are more likely to concede to union demands, which in turn enables them to recruit new members (Blum, 1968; Stepina & Fiorito, 1986).

There is stronger support for the relationship between union membership growth and price inflation. Workers are more likely to join unions during times of price inflation. Price rises are often accompanied by increasing production and decreasing unemployment. If, however, inflation is accompanied with falling production and falling employment, then it is more likely to precipitate union membership losses. Price rises of essential items affect all workers causing widespread grievance whereas business cycles affect certain industry sectors and groups of workers to varied extent. Hence, mobilizing workers around price rises probably offers greater opportunities for union revival as compared with business cycles. Union instrumentality effect has also been associated with membership rise, in particular unions' ability to secure higher wages (Charlwood, 2002; Stepina & Fiorito, 1986).

Not all factors that help or hinder union growth are precisely quantifiable. For instance, socio-political climate that may result in favourable or unfavourable labour laws being enacted by the state, strategic union decisions to invest resources in rank-and-file organizing and role of the union leaders in framing issues to galvanize union membership and secure wider public support to their cause are important factors that may explain union growth or decline. However, to capture their effects through econometric modelling is fraught with problems and may yield unreliable results.

Institutional theorists have long argued the salience of institutions that promote labour's participation in the decision-making process at various levels as important contributors to union membership growth. In Western Europe, for instance, unions' role in the administration of welfare schemes and their influence in co-determination have ostensibly helped them to attract and retain members (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Morgan et al., 2010). The varieties of capitalism literature also suggest that unions do better in terms of securing worker rights and consequently membership levels in countries such as Germany and Netherlands, which are typified as 'coordinated market economies' with well-established institutions that promote social dialogue compared with 'liberal market economies' such as the United Kingdom or the United States with weak institutions (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Kelly, 2013). However, some of the German labour studies question the ability of institutions to effectively promote union influence and collective bargaining through national- and workplace-level institutions (Greer, 2008). While acknowledging the significance of institutions, there is a strand of literature that examines individual determinants that may explain worker propensity to join or leave unions (e.g., Klandermans, 1986; Schnabel & Wagner, 2003; Visser, 2002; Waddington & Whitston, 1997). These studies often underpinned by rational choice and interactionist/social network theories suggest a range of individual and collective reasons why workers may or may not join unions and how best union could stem the flow of membership loss.

The literature on comparative politics takes a different view of institutions. For instance, Peters (2014) argues that institutions by themselves do not act. It is the actors within those institutions and their interests that shape the trajectory of outcomes. Ideologies also matter. Although ideologies are amorphous in nature, the policies that emanate from them can have a positive or detrimental impact on union growth and influence. This is evident, for instance, in Brazil where trade unions made significant gains in collective representation and tripartite negotiations during the presidency of Lula da Silva of the Workers Party from 2003 to 2011 (Anner & Veigai, 2020). Likewise, the union leadership of COSATU and its alliance with the political leadership of African National Congress resulted in the passage of the Labour Relations Act of 1995, which secured the position of labour within the national development framework (Southall, 2020).

The social movement and mobilization theories offer alternative explanations of union growth and decline (Kelly, 1998; Tilly, 1978). According to these theorists, workers must have a strong sense of injustice, which is deeply felt and widely shared. However, a sense of injustice by itself is inadequate to attract them to unions or encourage participation in collective actions. Workers must attribute the blame for their grievances to an agency like employers or the state and not to ambiguous forces such as globalization. Workers must perceive their union to be effective in being able to resolve their grievances. The role of union leaders in ‘framing’ issues is pivotal in union membership recruitment and collective actions—an area which is yet to be fully explored (Kelly, 2018). At the macro level, union revival and collective actions are contingent upon a range of conditions such as the degree to which unions have access to political decision-making structures, are able to exploit unstable political alignments including divisions among the ruling elite and have influential allies within the political system and in the wider civil society (Tarrow, 2011). For instance, the Russian labour movement appears to be a case of institutional demobilization whereby trade unions in the Soviet era were conditioned to be subservient to the state and management of the state-owned enterprises and any form of labour dissent was an anathema. Consequently, in the post-Soviet era, Russian trade union leaders who were historically trained in bureaucratic politics found mass mobilization unfamiliar. The coercive form of social partnership in Russia has disabled the mobilization capacity of trade unions who are unable to influence decision-making processes despite having access to the ruling elite (Ashwin & Kozina, 2020).

## 4 | DATA AND METHODS

The data for this research came from two different sources. First, we have analysed worker reported data from the NSS conducted by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India. We analysed data from the ‘Employment-Unemployment rounds’ of the NSS from 1993–1994 up until 2011–2012. The NSS are large nationally representative official surveys in India and the only ones that include ‘union membership’ variables. Respondents are asked to report whether there is a union at their workplace and whether they are members of a union. The total number of workers covered (as a sample) in the employment–unemployment rounds of the various NSS rounds is as follows: 1993–1994 (202,978), 1999–2000 (210,133), 2004–2005 (244,848), 2009–2010 (173,334) and 2011–2012 (172,281). The total number of workers (adjusted to census population) as per different employment–unemployment rounds of NSS surveys is as follows: 1993–1994 (374,429,486), 1999–2000 (398,414,949), 2004–2005 (457,643,438), 2009–2010 (462,592,214) and 2011–2012 (471,999,365). We only included

‘unique entries’ for each worker and have excluded cases where there could be multiple entries of employment and union membership for the same worker. The limitation of the NSS data however is that it does not provide panel data that would allow longitudinal analysis. Each round of the NSS is a cross-sectional data, and at best, we can establish pattern of changes over a period of time at the national and federal levels.

The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which came to power in May 2014 (and got re-elected for a second term with an increased majority in May 2019), did not release the NSS data on employment–unemployment after the last round of 2011–2012. The Periodic Labour Force Surveys, which replaced the NSS employment–unemployment surveys, do not include variables on union membership. Consequently, we can only map the terrain of trade union membership in India using NSS data sets up until 2012. Nevertheless, the available NSS data that we have used in this article cover a period of nearly two decades of economic reforms. We have augmented our analysis of official survey data with primary data collected through 56 interviews with union officials, activists, employer associations, government officials and labour lawyers. These interviews were carried out across the major industrialized states of India from 2010 to 2019. The federal states covered were Maharashtra, Gujrat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The major national trade union federations and their affiliated unions covered in our field work were the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC—affiliated to the Congress Party), Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS—affiliated to the BJP), All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC—affiliated to the Communist Party of India), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU—affiliated to the Communist Party Marxist), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS—affiliated to the Socialist parties) and the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of India (CFTUI). The CFTUI is the largest politically non-affiliated trade union federation registered in India. We also reviewed unions’ campaign literature and their official submissions to Labour Commissions, judicial verdicts on labour issues and government reports on industrial relations.

## 5 | RESULTS

### 5.1 | Union membership growth

As reported earlier, aggregate union membership based on official returns filed by major national trade union federations in India has risen substantially from about 35 million in 2008 to around 100 million in 2013. One can expect that there is some lag in recording union membership figures and consequently the figures reported in 2013 more accurately capture union membership levels of 2012, which corresponds with the period covered by the NSS round (2011–2012). We looked at the national union membership data reported by five major trade union federations affiliated to various political parties including the ruling BJP. Table 1 provides details of the membership breakdown of these national federations.

Data from Table 1 suggest that aggregate union membership of just five national trade union federations combined has increased nearly four times from around 20 million in 2008 to about 79 million workers in 2013. The largest increase has been recorded by the INTUC union federation affiliated to the Congress Party, which governed the country and several federal states for over five decades since independence and lost power to BJP in May 2014 general elections. The BMS affiliated to the BJP has recorded nearly three times increase in its national membership levels during this period. The socialist and communist trade union federations too

**TABLE 1** Union membership of five major national union federations in India 2008 and 2013

Union federation	2008 <sup>a</sup>	2013 <sup>b</sup>
Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)	3.9 million	33.3 million
Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)	6.6 million	17.1 million
All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)	3.4 million	14.2 million
Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS)	3.2 million	9.1 million
Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU)	3.0 million	5.7 million
Total Membership of Five National Federations	20.1 million	79.4 million

Source: Menon (2013).

<sup>a</sup>2002 annual returns. Membership verified by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India in 2008.

<sup>b</sup>Membership claimed by respective national union federations in 2013 based on their annual returns for that year. This membership remains unverified by the Ministry of Labour and Employment till to date.

have reported a significant rise in their membership levels from 2008 to 2013. For instance, Communist Party of India affiliated to AITUC has recorded a fourfold rise in its national membership during this period. Thus, if the aggregate union membership in 2013 was estimated to be around 100 million workers, then the five major national union federations by themselves account for nearly 80% of this gross membership. The National Front of Indian Trade Unions reports its membership to be 15.59 million (<https://nfitu.org/strength/>). Other national but smaller union federations too have reported substantial union membership levels in 2013. For instance, the United Trade Union Centre (4.7 million workers), Trade Union Co-ordination Centre (1.6 million workers), Self-Employed Women's Association (1.4 million workers), All India Central Council of Trade Unions (2.5 million workers) and Confederation of Free Trade Unions of India (1.8 million workers).

The trade union membership figures reported by the national union federations for 2013 are until to date unverified by the Ministry of Labour and Employment. We interviewed senior officials from the ministry who confirmed that the verification process has been suspended until further notice due to objections raised by some national unions about the verification process. Table 2 shows our calculations of worker population and trade union membership from 1993–1994 to 2011–2012 from NSS samples and figures adjusted to the total census population. Our calculations suggest that aggregate trade union membership in India has indeed increased from about 55.4 million in 1993–1994 to 73.5 million in 2011–2012. Thus, our estimates of union membership growth though lower than those claimed by the union federations broadly support their claims and show a rising trajectory.

It is important to note however that the NSS data only allow us to estimate Net Union Density and not Gross Union Density. Consequently, it only includes those union members that are employed. As rightly pointed out by Eurofound (n.d.), 'Gross trade union density rates, on the other hand, consider all union members, irrespective of whether they are active in the labour market. As such, net and gross trade union density rates provide different information: while the net union density rate constitutes a more accurate approach in terms of the actual power and representation of trade unions in the workforce, the gross union density rate provides information about trade unions' representation in society'. Thus, it may well be that the NSS data underestimate the societal presence and political influence of trade unions in India. Anti-union strategies of management to prevent workers from joining unions with threats of retaliation and violence are also likely to underplay union membership below the actual

**TABLE 2** Trade union members, NSS sample and estimated number adjusted to census population

Year	Month of estimation	Worker estimated population	Worker NSS sample	TU member NSS sample	% of TU members out of total workers	Trade unions estimated membership
2011–12	Jan 2012	471,999,365	172,281	26,834	15.58	73,517,283
2009–10	Jan 2010	462,592,214	173,334	27,472	15.85	73,317,026
2004–05	Jan 2005	457,643,438	244,848	33,986	13.88	63,522,961
1999–00	Jan 2000	398,414,949	210,133	28,159	13.40	53,389,837
1993–94	Jan 1994	374,429,486	202,978	30,025	14.79	55,386,521

Source: Calculated by authors from various rounds of NSS employment–unemployment unit-level data.

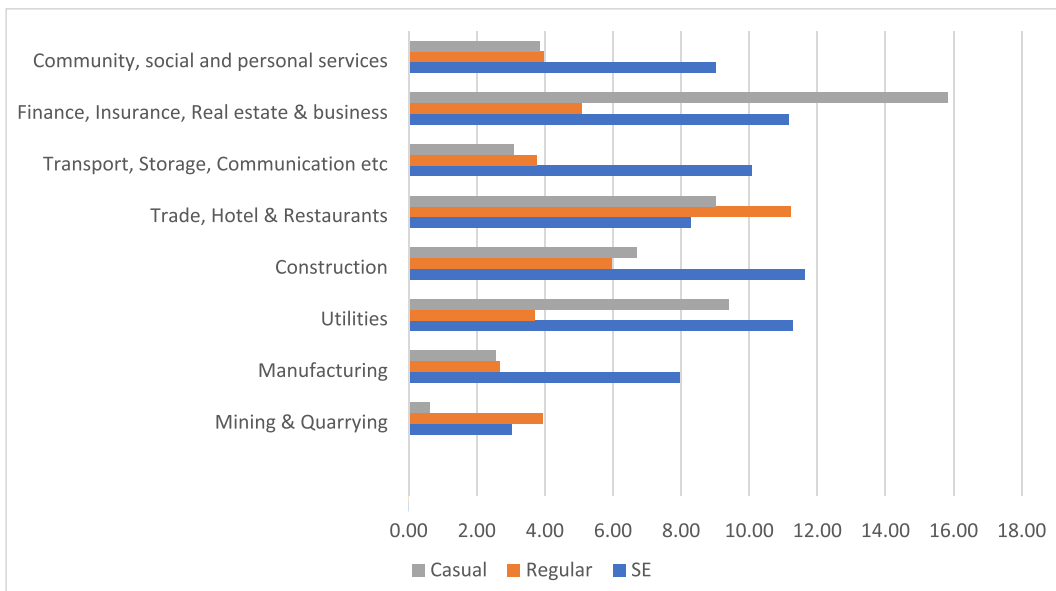
societal support for unions in India (International Trade Union Confederation [ITUC], 2020). During interviews, this was pointed out by a number of senior trade union officials from the HMS, CITU, AITUC and INTUC. They highlighted the fact that large-scale redundancies in the public and private sectors under false pretext of ‘voluntary retirement schemes’ had dented aggregate union membership in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, several unions made concerted efforts to retain union membership of workers who were essentially forced to ‘retire’. These members were supported through subsidized access to medical care, financial support through union funds in case of family emergencies, educational support for children of union members, help with retraining and securing grants or subsidized loans through various government schemes. These interventions had helped Indian trade unions to retain membership of a large number of workers who had lost their jobs during economic reforms. Union officials also highlighted the political influence they had over federal governments with respect to social security and retraining provisions for displaced workers (see Gordon, 2015).

Some analysts suggest that overall union membership levels in India are likely to be under-reported for at least two reasons. First, the Ministry of Labour and Employment figures indicate that only 21.9% of registered trade unions in India submitted their returns in 2013. Most of these unions are affiliated to national political parties and their labour federations. There are a large number of politically independent (non-affiliated) unions in India who are irregular in submitting their returns to the state agencies. Second, there are estimated to be several hundred unions in India representing sections of the workforce officially classified as the ‘scheduled castes and scheduled tribes’ (SC/ST). These are individuals commonly referred to as ‘Dalits’ who belong to the lower castes among Hindus (the majority religious group in India) and have been historically discriminated against in education and employment. Most of these SC/ST unions are not registered under the Trade Unions Act but under the Societies Registration Act and are officially known as ‘associations’ of SC/ST workers. During interviews, senior Labour Commission officials from six industrialized states confirmed that there are no restrictions on SC/ST workers of any occupational category or industry sectors to register their organization as ‘charities’ under the Societies Registration Act and in fact the state labour commissions are encouraging such caste-based workers organizations to register as trade unions. Although some caste-based organizations of SC/ST workers have registered themselves as trade unions in the construction, garment sector, retail and hospitality industries, their numbers remain small and there is no central register of caste-based trade unions at either the federal or central level. For all purposes though, caste-based workers organizations are involved in collective bargaining

with employers on issues such as recruitment, promotions, transfers, working hours, health and safety, and pay agreements and also represent members on individual disputes often relating to workplace discrimination. For instance, the SC/ST association in the State Bank of India, the largest public sector bank, represents around 80,000 members but is not a registered trade union. It has representation on the joint negotiating committee with other trade unions in the bank (Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, 2017; Ray, 2015; Saravade, 2001).

If indeed there has been a rise in aggregate union membership and density in India during the periods of economic reforms, then it leads us to next obvious questions—Where are these union members? Which industrial sectors have shown a growth in union membership levels? We also looked at the type of employment, that is, regular salaried versus casual employment, to ascertain the profile of union members by the nature of their employment. Finally, we looked at the gender profile and caste profile of union membership to see if Indian trade unions have proactively recruited female workers and those from the lower castes (i.e., SC/ST workers).

Figure 1 shows the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of trade union membership from 1993 to 2012. It shows that union membership has increased across all industry sectors although to varying degrees. Unions appear to have recruited well in sectors such as finance and insurance, trade, hotels and restaurants, construction and utilities. Furthermore, Indian unions have done well by increasing membership among the casual workers on precarious employment contracts in several industrial sectors but notably in ‘finance insurance, real estate and business’ and in the ‘utilities’ sectors. Both these sectors have seen a rising casualization of employment within the private services sector (Ghose, 2016). During interviews, senior union officials from the All India Bank Employees Association and the All India Bank Officers Confederation reported that even the public sector banks have been heavily outsourcing work and



**FIGURE 1** Compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of trade union membership by industry sectors from 1993 to 2012. Casual, casual workers; Regular, regular salaried workers; SE, self-employed [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

relying on contract and casual workers in core banking activities for the past two decades. As one union official put it, 'securing deposits has been outsourced, risk assessment and issuing loans has been outsourced, recovery of those loans has been outsourced, IT operations have been outsourced and almost all ATM machines have been outsourced. Hence we have been aggressively recruiting and organising all these young contract workers who are employed by private contractors and sub-contractors. Their wages are less than a third of regular public sector bank employees with no security, pensions or provident fund provisions'.

The 'trade hotels and restaurants' sector shows a substantial union membership growth across all types of employment contracts, that is, self-employed, regular salaried and casual workers. Manufacturing sector on the other hand shows a relatively low growth rate of union membership when compared with other sectors though unions appear to have increased their membership among the self-employed workers within the manufacturing industry. Interviews with union officials revealed that subsidiaries of German, French and Japanese manufacturing companies in engineering, automobile and pharmaceuticals sectors have often used voluntary retirement schemes to reduce their permanent workers and rehire them as 'self-employed' and contract workers on inferior terms and conditions of employment. The unions have actively organized these workers and have increased their membership strength.

## 5.2 | Union membership growth by gender and caste

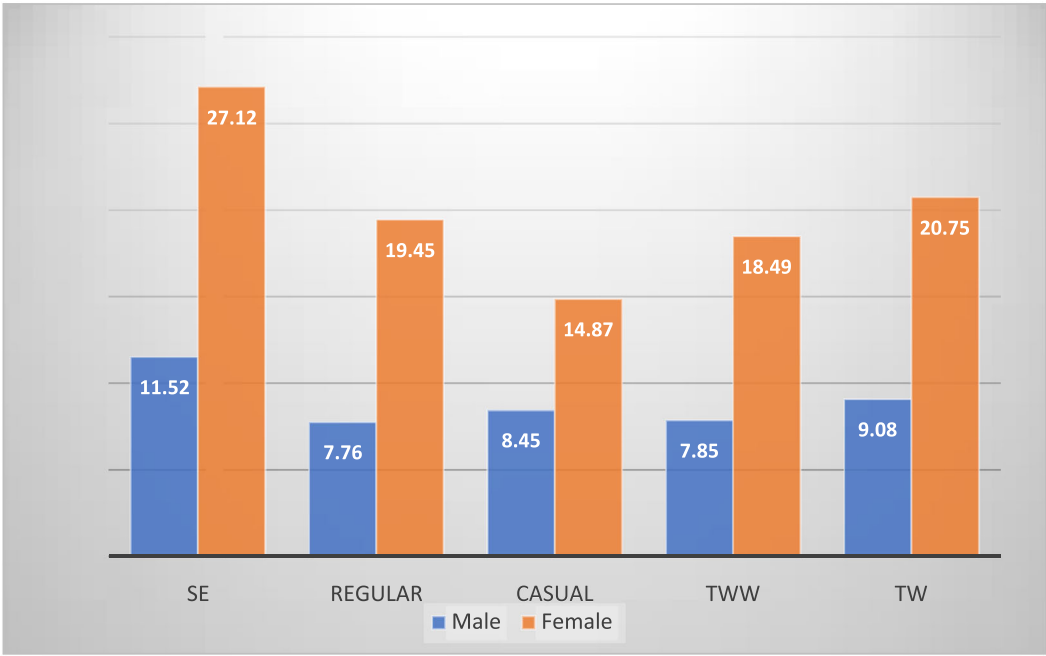
In 2012, aggregate female union membership in India remained low at 23.69% as compared with male union membership at 76.31% (Table 3). However, across all economic sectors barring 'mining', Indian trade unions have recorded an increase in female union membership from 1993 to 2012. The highest recorded increase was in the construction industry where female union membership increased from 6.49% in 1993 to 35.38% in 2012. The construction industry is characterized by high levels of precarity of employment with largely migrant labour employed on construction sites. In that context, the growth in female union membership reflects positively on Indian trade unions. Even within manufacturing sector that is historically known to be a male-dominated sector, female union membership has risen from 12.7% in 1993 to 20.84% in 2012. Private services sectors such as 'trade hotels and restaurants', 'transport storage and communications' and 'finance insurance, real estate and business' have all seen a rise in female union membership. Although the share of male union membership outnumbers that of female union membership across all economic sectors, the CAGR of female union membership is substantially high compared with the CAGR of male union membership from 1993 to 2012 (Figure 2).

Among self-employed workers, the CAGR of female union membership is more than double (27.12%) as compared with male union membership (11.52%). Similar gender differences in union growth rates are noticeable in regular salaried employment and in casual employment. The challenges of organizing female workforce in both the formal and informal sectors of the Indian economy are well documented in the literature. Employer hostility to union organizing and equally, trade union bureaucracies that largely focus on formal macro-level policy dialogue have hindered grass-roots mobilization of women in sectors such as garment factories or home-based work (Hammer, 2010; Jenkins, 2013). There has been a growing realization on part of established unions that traditional 'factory gate' organizing methods do not work when organizing female workers. The national secretary of AITUC reported that their unions now focus more on community organizing beyond the factory gates to mobilize workers and particularly

**TABLE 3** Percentage distribution of trade union membership by gender and sector

	1993–1994			2011–2012		
Sector	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Agriculture	77.01	22.99	100	56.35	43.65	100
Mining and quarrying	90.41	9.59	100	95.76	4.24	100
Manufacturing	87.3	12.7	100	79.16	20.84	100
Utilities	95.79	4.21	100	91.82	8.18	100
Construction	93.51	6.49	100	64.62	35.38	100
Trade, hotel and restaurants	96.51	3.49	100	90.45	9.55	100
Transport, storage, communication etc.	96.76	3.24	100	95.59	4.41	100
Finance, insurance, real estate and business	88.02	11.98	100	84.16	15.84	100
Community, social and personal services	80.08	19.92	100	75.16	24.84	100
Total	86.3	13.7	100	76.31	23.69	100
	$\chi^2(8): 1300^{***}$			$\chi^2(8): 2800^{***}$		

Source: Authors' estimates from NSS 50th and 68th unit-level employment–unemployment survey. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



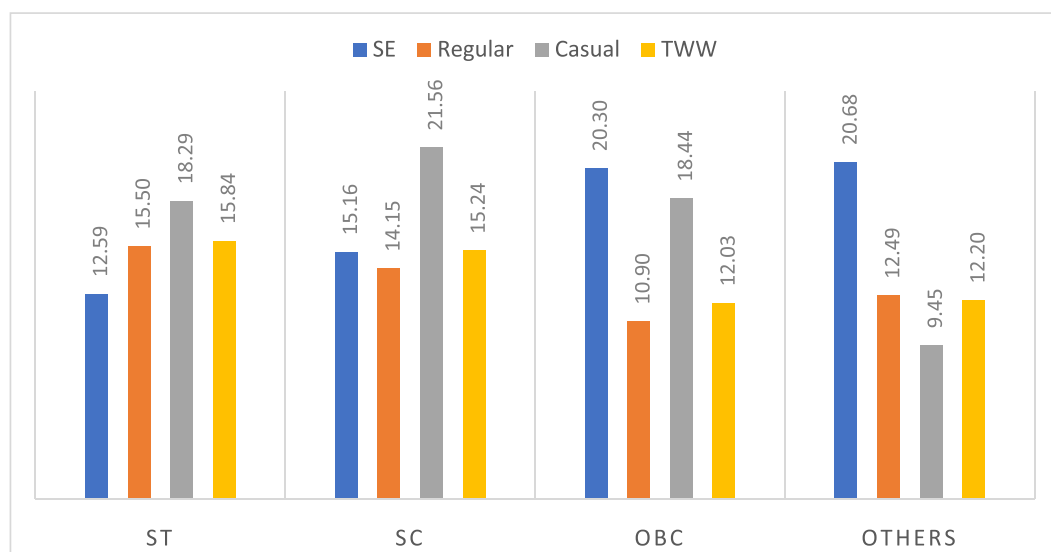
**FIGURE 2** Compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of trade union membership by gender from 1993 to 2012. Source: Estimated by authors from various NSS employment–unemployment unit-level data. Casual, casual worker; Regular, regular salaried worker; SE, self-employed; TW, all categories of worker (SE, casual and regular); TWW, total waged workers (casual and regular worker) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

female workers on issues of wider interest. For instance, unions have engaged in community organization on the issue of public distribution system that offers subsidized food grains and essential items to those below poverty line. Most of the activists and members of these community action groups were women migrant workers employed in the informal sectors. Union activists reported that taking up food rationing as an issue for organizing had dual benefits; first, it affected the entire community and hence generated wider interest among people regardless of their political views or religious affiliations, and second, it helped build confidence in the community action groups that 'change could be achieved' and this confidence was transferable to issues of workers' rights and subsequent unionization.

Unions also collaborated with NGOs to mobilize communities on the issues of access to subsidized finance and government grants for small businesses (Bhatt, 2006; interviews with CFTUI and AITUC union officials, 2018). Unions have also used 'adult education programmes' as a vehicle to conscientize workers about their rights and mobilize them. Thus, a broadening of the organizing agenda and community organization beyond the factory gates appear to have helped union recruitment and in particular unionization of the female workforce.

Our analysis of union membership growth rates (CAGR) by social groups shows that unionization rates among the scheduled castes (SC) is substantially higher in casual employment and those of scheduled tribes (ST) is about the same as the membership growth for other backward classes (OBC). This is particularly noticeable in the construction sector where aggregate union membership of ST workers increased from 3.4% in 1999 to 13.04% in 2012, while those of SC workers increased from 17.79% to 25.61% over the same period (Figure 3).

This is indicative of an inclusive approach towards membership recruitment among Indian trade unions. It may also reflect the sector effect of union recruitment whereby Indian trade



**FIGURE 3** Compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of trade union membership by caste from 1999 to 2012. Source: Authors' calculations from various NSS employment–unemployment unit-level data. Casual, casual worker; OBC, other backward classes; Others, upper castes; Regular, regular salaried worker; SC, scheduled castes; SE, self-employed; ST, scheduled tribes; TWW, total waged workers (casual and regular worker) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

unions have increased their membership of casual workers in sectors such as ‘construction’, which tend to have higher proportion of SC/ST workers employed in informal and casual employment (Kannan, 2018). Although unions have done well in recruiting casual workers within certain industries, at the national level, Indian trade unions still have a mountain to climb in recruiting workers on casual employment contracts who are deprived of job, income and social security. In 2011–2012, only 15.82% of the casual workers in public and private sectors combined were union members and about 27% of casual workers reported the presence of a union at their workplace but were non-members (authors’ calculations from NSS data set).

### 5.3 | Explaining union membership growth in India

In this section, we attempt to triangulate data from various sources to offer some initial explanations of our findings on union revival in India. Data from the Reserve Bank of India indicate a substantial rise in average GDP growth rates over the past two decades (Panagariya, 2019). One could argue that a buoyant economy with rising demand for goods and services offers greater confidence to workers to join unions as the threat of employer reprisals in such an economic climate is likely to be low. Thus, we examined whether GDP growth was associated with a rise in union density (Table 4).

We found that for all time periods included in this study, there was a statistically significant positive relationship between economic growth (net GDP) and net union density. This correlation was evident for workers in all types of employment contracts, that is, regular, casual and self-employed, and for all industries. We acknowledge that economic prosperity by itself is an inadequate explanation of union membership growth but a growing economy with more job opportunities (though not ideal jobs with decent wages and social security) perhaps gives greater confidence to workers in India to join unions. We do not have large scale data on worker attitudes in India towards union joining. Some studies done in the information technology and call centre industries in India do indicate growing willingness among well-educated and skilled workers to join trade unions (Sarkar & Charwood, 2014; Taylor et al., 2009). In December 2014, employees in the information technology and IT-enabled services have registered a trade union called the Forum for IT Employees (FITE) with branches in five federal

**TABLE 4** Correlation between net trade union density and net state domestic product (NSDP) for all industries

Year	Regular salaried worker	Wage worker	All workers
1993–1994	0.291***	0.359***	0.201***
1999–2000	0.569***	0.571***	0.546***
2004–2005	0.792***	0.697***	0.889***
2009–2010	0.861***	0.870***	0.879***
2011–2012	0.872***	0.873***	0.870***

Source: Authors’ estimation based on various rounds of NSS employment and unemployment unit-level data (for TU density) and Handbook of Statistics on the Indian Economy 2018–2019 (for NSDP), published by RBI ([www.rbi.org.in](http://www.rbi.org.in)).

*Note:* The present study used NSDP at constant price base 2011–2012. NSDP figures are in Crore (Cr.) Rupees. ‘Regular worker’ refers to regular salaried workers. ‘Wage worker’ includes casual and regular worker. ‘All workers’ includes self-employed, casual and regular worker.

\*\*\**p*-value < 0.01.

states and have so far raised 157 legal disputes against well-known Multi National Corporations (MNCs) like Infosys, Cap Gemini, TCS, Cognizant and JP Morgan.

We looked at the demographic profile of workers who are union members, and interestingly, the 2011–2012 data show that 47.30% of all union members were graduates. Nearly 38% of workers had technical qualifications, and 52% of all union members across all employment types (regular and casual) and industrial sectors described themselves as ‘high skilled professionals’. It could be that skilled and better educated workers in India have higher aspirations and hence feel a more acute sense of relative deprivation and grievance when employers fail to meet those aspirations and that induces them to join unions (Walker et al., 2002).

Price inflation or cost of living is often associated with worker propensity to join trade unions. We looked at inflation based on the consumer price index (CPI), and it tells a tale. The inflation in 2008 was 8.93%, which was a substantial increase from 5.97% in 2007. It further increased to 13.01% in 2009 but then fell to 7.53% a year later but jumped back to around 10% up until 2012. In 2013, the CPI inflation rate was 10.06% (Reserve Bank of India). We looked at CPI for rural agricultural labour and urban industrial workers for the period 1993 to 2012 and found that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between the rise in cost of living and net trade union density for urban industrial workers ( $r = 0.778$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), for rural agricultural workers ( $r = 0.421$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and for all workers combined ( $r = 0.738$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it is plausible that the rising cost of living drove workers to join unions. National trade union federations in India organized 10 nation-wide general strikes between 2001 and 2012 with millions of workers participating in those strikes. A consistent demand in all of these strikes was for the government to bring down the cost of living. A union official from the Congress Party affiliated to INTUC federation said:

Skyrocketing food prices affects everyone and not just those who support or vote for Congress, BJP or Left parties. Workers from all walks of life are joining us to fight the government's policies on fuel and essential food items. It is our party [Congress] in power but we will force them to improve the food distribution system through rationing. How ironical ... food grains are rotting in the warehouses and rats are eating it while human beings are unable to afford essential food items in the market. (INTUC regional secretary)

Although CPI inflation subsequently fell to 4.79% in 2016, Indian unions organized the largest ever general strike in the country. The Guardian newspaper in the United Kingdom reported the strike as the ‘world's largest ever industrial action’ that cost the Indian economy nearly £2 billion (The Guardian, 2 September 2016). Strikes have been associated with an increase in union membership levels in the United Kingdom and in China as they demonstrate union efficacy and agency to workers (Brown & Kai, 2017; Hodder et al., 2017), and strikes may have enabled trade unions to increase their membership levels in India.

We now turn our attention to ‘union instrumentality’ effect with respect to wage increases. As illustrated in Table 5, from 1993–1994 to 2011–2012, Indian unions have accrued

<sup>1</sup>Note: The present study uses consumer price index (CPI)-AL (agricultural labour) for rural areas and CPI-IW (industrial worker) for urban areas. We have taken 2011–2012 as base year for both CPI-AL and CPI-IW. Forward slicing was used to standardize the data. Source: Authors' estimation based on various rounds of NSS employment and unemployment unit-level data (for union density) and CPI data compiled from the Handbook of Statistics on the Indian Economy 2018–2019, published by the Reserve Bank of India ([www.rbi.org.in](http://www.rbi.org.in)).

TABLE 5 Wage difference by union membership across industries

States	1993–1994				2004–2005				2009–2010				2011–2012			
	Union	Non-union	Difference	p	Union	Non-union	Difference	p	Union	Non-union	Difference	p	Union	Non-union	Difference	p
Agriculture <sup>a</sup>	151	58	93.40	0.00	520	250	269.61	0.00	955	507	447.73	0.00	1544	754	790.51	0.00
Mining and quarrying	527	262	264.60	0.00	2214	510	1704.32	0.00	3045	1351	1694.42	0.00	5801	1650	4150.31	0.00
Manufacturing	429	192	237.56	0.00	1327	568	758.86	0.00	2197	1141	1056.58	0.00	2813	1487	1325.71	0.00
Electricity, gas and water supply	642	361	280.63	0.00	2142	1217	925.53	0.00	3556	2417	1138.22	0.00	4490	2761	1728.76	0.00
Construction	399	188	211.25	0.00	894	450	444.15	0.00	1363	803	559.95	0.00	1875	1149	726.43	0.00
Wholesale and retail	100	97	2.71	0.26	1026	518	507.74	0.00	1437	976	461.40	0.00	2166	1291	874.92	0.00
Transport, storage and communication	429	234	194.85	0.00	1469	663	806.56	0.00	2594	1254	1340.33	0.00	3491	2128	1363.58	0.00
Finance, insurance, rent and business	800	345	455.43	0.00	2640	1548	1091.83	0.00	2826	4127	1301.21	0.00	5678	3481	2196.81	0.00
Community, social and personal services	599	313	286.89	0.00	951	523	427.41	0.00	1962	842	1119.35	0.00	2069	1015	1053.14	0.00

Note: Calculated by authors from NSS rounds 1993–1994 to 2011–2012. Wages are reported in Indian rupees.

<sup>a</sup>Agriculture includes agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing.

significantly higher wages for their members across industries. The only exception being the wholesale and retail sector in 1993–1994 where there was no significant wage difference between union and non-union workers.

Moreover, union wage increases have benefited both regular salaried workers and casual workers. For instance, in 2011–2012, the average weekly wage of a casual non-union worker in the manufacturing sector was Rupees 967.00 whereas a union member employed on casual contract in manufacturing earned on average Rupees 1204.00 per week, which gives a union wage mark-up of around 24.5%. The wage difference is significantly higher for regular salaried workers in the manufacturing sector. The average weekly wage of a union regular salaried worker in manufacturing was Rupees 3086.00 while that of a non-union regular salaried worker was Rupees 1764.00, thus giving a wage mark-up of about 75% (authors' calculations from NSS data set 2011–2012). Overall, these findings suggest that rising cost of living that may have caused a strong sense of grievance among workers and the ability of unions to secure higher wages for their members may have enabled Indian trade unions to recruit more members.

Theoretically however, union wage increases can work both ways. On one hand, they may entice workers to join unions and hence increase membership levels, but on the other hand, union wage increases may result in job cuts by employers and consequent loss of union membership. The latter possibility is less likely in the Indian scenario. First, unlike in the Western economies, the total labour cost including the wage bill in India is a very small proportion (usually in single digits) of the total operational costs even in the formal sector enterprises (Sen & Dasgupta, 2009). Second, labour productivity in India between 1999–2000 and 2011–2012 has far outweighed the increase in real wages (Ghose, 2016).

Finally, we look at how union leaders in India have 'framed' issues that may have helped unions to mobilize workers and generate wider public support for unions (Balasubramanian & Sarkar, 2017; Kelly, 2018). Trade unions in India are now offering a compelling counter-narrative to the conventional state and employer 'speak' of globalization. For instance, the national secretary of the communist trade union federation (CITU) argued that the state policy of private sector investment based on indiscriminate loans being given to large businesses through public sector banks under political pressure has resulted in an escalation of bad loans on the books of these banks. Consequently, public sector banks are now forced to cut jobs, freeze recruitment and wages and cause hardship to their employees and customers who were not responsible for these bad loans in the first place. Likewise, the deregulation of the energy sector has resulted in increased cost of electricity and energy for consumers and has resulted in closures of small- and medium-scale enterprises, which are unable to sustain large energy bills. Firm closures have in turn fuelled unemployment in the economy.

The Federation of Medical and Sales Representatives Association of India (FMRAI, n.d.), which represents medical sales representatives in the pharmaceutical industry, is also a case in point. Over the past decade, the FMRAI too has broadened its agenda to raise issues like corruption and nexus between pharma companies and doctors, unaffordable costs of branded medicines and surgical products like cardiac stents, which can cost several thousand US dollars in India ([www.fmrai.org](http://www.fmrai.org)). These issues have resonated well with the general public earning the union public sympathy and support. In April 2017, the Central Government of India declared its legislative proposal to force doctors to prescribe generic drugs (interviews with FAMRI union officials; *The Economic Times*, 2017). This counter-narrative is also reflected in the charter of demands put forward by national trade union federations to the government prior to the nation-wide general strikes. The demands are not restricted to wages and bonuses for formal sector workers but encompass wider concerns of the working population such as rising fuel

costs, food price inflation, poor public healthcare provisions and demand for social security for unorganized workers in the informal sector of the economy. This counter-narrative enables workers to attribute blame to a specific agency, that is, the state, rather than to the amorphous forces of globalization, and this is likely to have facilitated mass mobilization and membership recruitment.

## 6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we examined union membership growth in India over nearly two decades of neo-liberal economic reforms. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first such attempt. Our initial findings from NSS data analysis suggest that Indian trade unions have increased their membership across most sectors of the economy. In certain industries such as construction, finance and insurance, wholesale and retail, Indian trade unions have made significant inroads in recruiting casual workers. At the national level however, unionization among casual workers remains low. Although overall female representation in union membership in India is low, it is encouraging to see that the growth rate (CAGR) of female union membership is substantially higher compared with male union membership and unions appear to be better recruiting the scheduled castes and tribes (SC/ST) workers employed in both regular salaried and casual employment. An expanding economy as reflected in the GDP growth since the 1990s appears to have provided a conducive environment for Indian unions to recruit new members. It may be that price inflation during periods of economic growth coupled with unions' ability to organize general strikes with millions of workers participating in those strikes and their ability to secure higher wages for unionized workers across industries may all have contributed towards rise in union membership and density.

The mobilization strategies used by unions are also noteworthy. First, Indian unions have broadened their agenda by prominently including issues such as cost of living, public distribution system, energy prices, bad loans on the books of nationalized banks and public health in their agendas. These issues have wider appeal beyond factory gates and have facilitated mass mobilization and recruitment. These are also vital electoral issues that no political party can ignore. Similar union mobilization strategies have been reported in Western Europe, which have been effective in securing government concessions (Johnston et al., 2016). Mass mobilization and strike activities were both associated with a rise in union membership in the United Kingdom and in China (Brown & Kai, 2017; Hodder et al., 2017; Pringle, 2011). The same factors may have contributed towards the rise in union membership in India given that several general strikes were organized by national union federations since the early 1990s (Shyam Sundar, 2020).

From a comparative political perspective, it would be helpful to make some cross references with other BRICS economies. There is a shared trajectory of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movement in India and South Africa. In both countries, trade unions have historically played a prominent role in the liberation movement. In the post-colonial independent India, trade unions shared a close relationship with the ruling political parties. This close alliance resulted in pro-labour law framework in India. In South Africa too, the labour movement's engagement with the African National Congress (ANC) resulted in the passage of the Labour Relations Act of 1995, which offered institutional security to trade unions (Southall, 2020). However, as Peters (2014) argues, although institutions do matter, it is the actors within those institutions and the interests of those actors that matter more.

The economic reforms policies followed by successive governments in India since 1991 resulted in marginalization of trade unions from political decision-making fora (Venkata Ratnam, 2003). Unions suffered significant losses in their membership and density in the first wave of economic reforms, and the relationship between political parties and their affiliated unions came under severe stress. Burgess (2004) argues that it is during periods of neo-liberal economic reforms, union leaders must decide as to whether they wish to align with their political masters or stand by their membership whose interests are hurt by state policies. In India, unions realized that they could no longer rely on political patronage to secure union recognition deals or favourable collective bargaining outcomes. As a result, unions shifted their efforts from political lobbying to mass mobilization against the state. The multi-party and federal democratic political system in India provide opportunities for unions to influence the ruling establishment through mass mobilization. Opposition parties keen to secure electoral mileage often join forces with national union federations to organize rallies and public protests against the ruling party. Such opportunities are largely absent in a single-party authoritarian political system in China where independent union organizing is banned and despite its rise in membership, the national union federation ACFTU is effectively a mouthpiece of the ruling communist party (Liu, 2020).

Similar to the Indian labour movement, the Russian trade unions attempted to take an independent stand on issues of worker rights in the post-Soviet neo-liberal era. However, President Yelstin's attack on unions in the early 1990s by freezing their bank accounts, depriving them control on social security funds and so forth resulted in hasty retreat by unions into state mandated subservient form of social partnership, which has continued in the Putin regime (Ashwin & Kozina, 2020). Although tripartite structures of social partnership exist in India, partnership has largely been a minority occupation with most national union federations and their local affiliates resorting to mobilization and mass protests (Badigannavar, 2017; Shyam Sundar, 2010). The contemporary developments in the Brazilian employment relations suggest that trade unions benefited most during the Presidency of Lula Da Silva and to a lesser extent his successor Dilma Rousseff. The change of regime to the right-wing Brazilian Democratic Movement Party in 2016 and its enactment of the Brazilian Labour Reform Act (2017) have resulted in a considerable undermining of the pro-labour institutional framework that Brazilian unions had enjoyed (Anner & Veigai, 2020).

In India from 1993 to 2012, the Congress Party-led UPA government did not implement any major labour law reforms in the country. Nevertheless, the government attempted to weaken the labour movement by stealth by its gradual withdrawal from implementing labour laws; enlisting the judiciary to interpret labour laws in pro-employer direction (Singh, 2008); and using anti-terrorism laws and criminal procedure codes to arrest union leaders, curtail mass mobilization and exclude businesses operating from Special Economic Zones from the purview of almost all labour laws (Badigannavar, 2013; Desai, 2009). The present BJP government has taken a more aggressive stance towards labour law reforms. It has consolidated 44 labour laws into four codes regulating industrial relations, wages, occupational safety and health, and social security. Policy analysts and trade union leaders have argued that these reforms will curtail the power of unions to effectively represent workers at the enterprise levels and to engage in strike actions (Shyam Sundar, 2020). Although the full impact of the labour reforms is yet unknown, they do not appear to restrict the ability of unions to engage in general strikes. Indeed, since the passage of these reforms in September 2020, national union federations have organized general strikes in protest of the reforms and against state policies of divestment in the public sector, ongoing deregulation of the electricity, utilities and banking sectors, demand of income support

for poor households, rights of women workers employed on state-funded community health programmes and state expenditure on public health and social security (citucentre.org). General strikes are often associated with a rise in union membership, and hence, one would expect that these strikes will enable Indian trade unions to maintain and increase their membership strength.

The Industrial Relations (IR) Code 2020 for the first time allows trade unions to recruit minor workers aged 14 years. The 2011 population census documents 10 million child workers in India. This provides an opportunity for Indian trade unions to address the issue of child labour, which often goes hand in hand with caste discrimination, human trafficking and modern slavery in the Indian society (Badigannavar et al., 2020). The IR Code also requires unions at the enterprise to maintain their membership levels at 10% of the workforce or 100 workers whichever is lower and notify the state authorities if the union membership falls below this threshold. This indicates a potential risk of derecognition by employers if the union falls short of the membership threshold. In 2012, 27% of casual workers were employed in an enterprise with union presence but were not themselves members of the union. A targeted effort to recruit casual workers would help unions to maintain and increase their membership levels and offer greater protection to these vulnerable groups of workers.

In this paper, we have mapped the terrain of union membership growth in India using the NSS data sets and interviews with key stakeholders over nearly two decades of economic reforms. These are initial findings that we hope will contribute to the debate on union revival particularly in the Global South. Future research would benefit from primary surveys of union and non-union workers in India that capture individual-level determinants of union membership. In-depth qualitative studies that examine the party–union links and their impact on union revival would add further richness to our understanding of union revival in India in a comparative context.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest with any party.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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