

Conflict Management and Workers Conditions in the Context of Contributions of Gandhi, Braverman and Graeber

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Abstract—Conflict Management is a challenge and an opportunity for organizations and also for countries. When conflicts are properly managed group outcomes will improve. Workers' conditions play a crucial role in improving organizational outcomes through efficient conflict resolution. Economists report the phenomenon of increasing inequality of income distribution on the one hand and increase in unemployment on the other hand. Real wages and median household income are either stagnant or falling in most of the countries. There is 'degradation of work' and it spreads in many sectors of the economy due to improved technology and advanced management techniques. There is informalisation of workforce. Good jobs are disappearing and workers are forced to take up bad jobs which involve low wages, insecurity of employment and no social security provisions. These are major potential causes for conflicts in organizations. The present paper attempts to find conflict management solution in the context of the views of few social thinkers. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, Gandhi's views on economics and ethics are discussed with special reference to 'appropriate technology' concept of E.F.Schumacher. In the second part Braverman's views on degradation of work with reference to certain Marxian concepts are discussed. Graeber's analysis of "pointless jobs" in the 21st century capitalism and implication of 'creative capitalism' for conflict management are discussed in the third part. In the conclusion, a few recommendations for better group outcomes and suggestions for further research in this exciting area of study are given.

Keywords— workers' condition, conflict management, economics and ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inescapable and indisputable fact of an individual's physical and mental existence. In social context the dimension and depth of conflict become more intense and complex. Conflict management is a challenge and an opportunity at all levels of activity. An efficient conflict resolution would lead to improved group outcomes. Workers' economic and social conditions play a crucial role in reducing conflicts at organizational and national levels. There are several theories of conflict management. The present paper takes into account the views of Gandhi, Braverman, and Graeber on conflict resolution through improving workers' conditions. The views of the three social thinkers are explained and analyzed in parts one, two and three of the paper respectively.

Advancements in technology and improvements in management techniques have been successful in value creation and value capture in modern organizations. However value sharing is not happening. There are increasing income inequalities, disappearing jobs, stagnant real wages and falling median household income in several developing and as well as developed countries. Economists and other social scientists mention the phenomenon of "Great Decoupling" in recent times. They point out that automation and augmentation are the two major processes which cause this phenomenon. Great Decoupling may be defined as a ongoing trend of mismatches among a few key indicators of progress of an economy. For example, four key major indicators, namely, per capita GDP, labour productivity, number of good jobs (jobs with reasonable compensation, job guarantee and social security provisions) and median household income. It is reported that during the first

three decades after the end of World War II, all the four indicators of progress mentioned above increased more or less simultaneously in the USA and other developed countries. However, since 1980's when per capita GDP and labour productivity displayed decent rates of annual growth, the median household income either stagnated or slightly fell. Real wages also showed similar trends. The growth of well paid jobs with job guarantee and social security protection showed decrease. This disturbing and destabilizing trend is called 'Great Decoupling'. It is a reflection of failure of 'trickle down economics' (Brynjolfsson, Erik and McAfee, Andrew 2014). This trend has caused labour's share of GDP to fall in most of the countries. Corporates spend a large part of their investment towards R & D efforts to develop technologies which assist automation and augmentation (Reich, Robert 2015). Both the processes displace labour at an increasing rate. Conflict management will become increasingly challenging when workers' conditions decline. This is the case at organizational, national and even global levels. The views of three social thinkers are discussed in the following three parts to know the dimensions of the issue and find possible solutions.

II. MAHATMA GANDHI ON WORKERS' CONDITIONS AND PROGRESS OF THE ECONOMY AND SOCIETY.

Mahatma Gandhi's strong belief was that economics was based on ethics as much as ethics on economics. Good political economy was built on highest ethical standards. In his view modern technologies undermined ethical economy and encouraged corporates to produce great private wealth. Large scale mechanization not only displaced traditional occupations but also destroyed traditions themselves. Wealth and truth had always been in conflict with each other (Gandhi 1941). He was not against modernization but only against a kind of modernization which undermined productive work and people's welfare, destroyed traditions and physical environment and glorified greed and increased private riches (Gandhi 1959). He saw millions of workers replaced by new technologies and workers were treated as "things" not as persons. He favored moral economy. He opposed large scale industrialization. In his view workers' conditions declined because of evil effects of industrialization, modernization and urbanization.

Gandhi's concerns about "labor saving production" are shared by Hannah Arendt. She sees the modern market system is preoccupied with economic exploitation of resources and economic calculations have penetrated in to most aspects of social life (Arendt, Hannah 1958). One aspect of modernization that disturbs both Gandhi and Arendt is its eagerness to commodify everything possible. The market mechanisms has entered into many aspects of social life. It has "reduced holy places to unholy places"(Gandhi 1998). In Gandhi's view "western nations are groaning under the heel of the monster-god of materialism". And India was fast in following them in this aspect. Human beings are more valuable than profit making processes for both Gandhi and Arendt. E.F. Schumacher extends this view these concerns of Gandhi and challenges the modern belief that "bigger is better" and replace it with the statement "small is beautiful" (Schumacher, E.F 1973). He says that "one of the most fateful errors of our age is the belief that the problem of production has been solved". He favors Buddhist economics rather than orthodox western economics which focuses mainly on materialism. He recommends "reduction of needs" to promote "peace and permanence". He emphasizes social aspects of technology. Schumacher's great contribution is the concept of intermediate technology for the development of less developed countries. He defines intermediate technology as a "£ 100 – technology". Schumacher calls the indigenous technology of less developed countries a "£ 1 – technology" and modern technology of the western countries "£ 1000 – technology". In his view £ 1000 – technology from the west destroys the £ 1 – technology and leaves the poor people of less developed countries in worse condition than before. It destroys traditional social and economic structure of these countries and also physical environment.

He recommends intermediate technology based on the principle “small is beautiful”. Prof. C.K. Chakraborty extended these views through his writings and lectures. His famous observation is “the crisis in business is spiritual.....we need a fundamental shift from the current reductionist, fragmentist, materialistic paradigm to one that recognizes relationships, commonness and spirit is the right approach.” In his view economics and business should be based on ethics and values. (Chakraborty, SK 1999). In the Gandhian paradigm workers’ conditions, conflict management and progress of the economy have to be based on ethical and moral standards.

III. BRAVERMAN’S VIEWS ON ‘DEGRADATION OF WORK’

Extending Marx’s analysis of 19th century industrial organizations, Braverman showed how the 20th century organizations created a large number of jobs which required very little or no conceptualization and on the other hand a few elite managerial jobs that required a lot of conceptualization and display of power. The separation of conceptualization and execution is described by Braverman as ‘degradation of work’. It means good jobs are few and bad ones are plenty. Automation grows at different levels and at different degrees. Capital progressively degrades work and workers with the assistance of the elite among workers represented by the managerial class. This undermines team dynamics among other damages.

Marx developed his analysis of 19th century industrial capitalism on the basis of dialectical materialism, economic interpretation of history and theory of surplus value. In volume I of Marx’s *Capital* (1867) one finds his outrage and anguish at exploitation of the working class. The worker works six hours for himself and the remaining 6 hours for his employer during his twelve-hour work day. The unpaid labor explains the ever increasing capitalist accumulation. Insightful Marxian concepts like commodity fetishism, immiseration and alienation provide other dimensions of antagonistic conditions of production and distribution of value in capitalist societies. Braverman in his book “*Labor and Monopoly Capital – the Degradation of Work in the 20th century*” (1974) extends Marx’s analysis to explain the plight of workers in modern organizations. Capitalists create degrading jobs and take efforts (with the active help of management theorists and practitioners) to hide the fact that they are doing so, all in the interest of increasing profits and accumulating capital. Team work dynamics in organizations is one of the ploys they use in their mission of degrading work. They create illusion with the help of sophisticated concepts. Braverman says, “They (reforms, concepts) are characterized by studied preference of worker “participation” – to have the illusion of making decisions by choosing among fixed alternatives designed by a management which deliberately leaves insignificant matters open to choice. One can best compare this style of management with the marketing strategy followed by those who, having discovered that housewives recently prepared baking mixes and feel guilty when using them, arranged for the removal of the powdered egg and restore to the consumer the thrill of baking a fresh egg into the mix, thereby creating an “image” of skilled baking, wholesome products, etc.” (1974, p.38-39).

Braverman emphasizes the degradation of work as a fact of monopoly capitalism and its extreme achievement in creating an illusion that capitalism is about enhancing human freedom and progress when the reality is the opposite. He, unfortunately, did not live long enough to see further degradation of work and marginalization of workers in the midst of fancy concepts and theories in the 21st century industrial capitalism. The relative decline in the workers’ economic, social, and psychological conditions would have increased conflict situations and the need for conflict resolution. There should have been increase in the membership of trade

unions and increase in workers' activities. This did not happen. The worker is made not to think seriously about what capitalism has done to his work and himself. He is "persuaded" to watch TV on his mobile phone, send and receive insignificant messages, read "fake news" on the screen and listen to discourses by populist nationalist political leaders. In the process he is made to avoid thinking about degradation of his work. Marxian economists and sociologists have been writing on these dubious achievements of modern capitalism. One significant insight has come from an anthropologist which deserves elaboration and reflection.

IV. GRAEBER ON WORKERS' CONDITIONS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS CONCEPT OF POINTLESS JOBS.

David Graeber, an American anthropologist and activist writes on psychological conditions of workers in the 21st century organizations. Economists observe that real wages are either stagnant or slightly falling in most of the countries. Jobs with good compensations, security of employment and social security provisions are disappearing largely due to advancements in modern technology. Cloud computing, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IOT) are the major forces of the modern technology which transforms the economy and society. Workers are made more efficient through application of technology and labour productivity increases. However, technology and economics do not make the working class more prosperous. Economists say this is the crux of the problem. Graeber shifts the focus from economics to psychology to explain the precarious nature of workers' condition.

Analysis of workers' condition and conflict management has to take into consideration the emergence of "unproductive" work and "unproductive" business in modern capitalist system (Baumol, W 2017). In the modern system of organization and production a large number of jobs are created and the economic contribution of workers who take up these jobs to total value creation is almost nothing. Baumol calls such an arrangement bad capitalism and he says that its structure and processes are quite different from those of conventional good capitalism explained in text books and discussed in classrooms of B schools. Graeber in his recent book "*Bullshit Jobs*" (2018) explains how a large number of trained and skilled people are made to work in well paid jobs which are entirely pointless or useless to the economy and society. He says more than half of societal works is pointless. Both the employer and the employee pretend that the work is useful. Such pointless jobs grow along with the growth of economy.

Graeber gives a long list of such pointless jobs which he calls 'bullshit jobs'. A few of them are HR consultants, PR researchers, financial strategists, communication coordinators and corporate lawyers. Modern capitalism creates whole new industries like financial services and customer relationship consultancy to keep engaging growing number of trained and skilled workers. There is a high degree of economic and psychological violence involved in this arrangement. Really useful workers like teachers, nurses, garbage collectors and mechanics are paid less when those who hold 'bullshit jobs' are paid relatively more. The modern economy will not suffer significantly if these 'bullshit jobs' disappear. On the other hand it may benefit if such jobs vanish. Economists explain the problem caused by over financialisation of the modern capitalistic system. This is an economic dimension of the problem caused by the increase in pointless jobs. Graeber explains the psychological damage caused when the worker secretly realizes that his /her job should not exist. Modern capitalism destroys physical environment on the one hand and psychological self-esteem of workers on the other hand in its pursuit of abnormal profit and corporate greed. In this critical context the concept of "creative capitalism" has been proposed. The influential business roundtable (BRT), an association

of the CEOs of nearly 200 of America's most prominent companies have declared that a humane 'creative capitalism' should eventually replace "share holder capitalism" (*Fortune*, 2019). The issue of workers' condition and conflict management would get new perspective in the context of these new developments.

V. CONCLUSION

The main arguments of the paper may be recapitulated. Modern technology and management practices bring vast positive changes in the economy and society. However, there are a few concerns which arise from the fact that when per capita GDP and labour productivity display decent growth rates, the real wage of workers and median household income remain stagnant in most of the countries. These realities throw new challenges to conflict management in the context of declining relative economic conditions of the workers. Braverman, among other Marxian writers, observes the phenomena of marginalization of workers and degradation of work. Graeber observes that really productive work is paid less when compared to "pointless" work in the modern market system. Social thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, Hannah Arendt and Prof. S.K. Chakroborty observe that the solution lies in making business more ethical. Economics and ethics should work together for the health of both. Further research and analysis is highly recommended in this exciting area of study.

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