

History and Growth of Trade Union Movement in Tea Industry after Independence and Prior to Globalization with Special Reference to Dooars Region in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

After attaining Independence in 1947, the character of the Indian state changed. The new Government's attitude towards the working class was more favourable than that of the earlier colonial regime. The scenario changed to some extent in the post-Independence period when Trade Unions were allowed to organize tea plantation workers. In this present study I have made an attempt to focus light on History and Growth of Trade Union Movement in Tea Industry after Independence and Prior to Globalization with Special Reference to Dooars Region in West Bengal.

Keywords: Independence, Colonial Regime, Trade Unions, Tea Industry, Globalization, Dooars Region

INTRODUCTION

After attaining Independence in 1947, the character of the Indian state changed. The new Government's attitude towards the working class was more favourable than that of the earlier colonial regime. The scenario changed to some extent in the post-Independence period when Trade Unions were allowed to organize tea plantation workers. At present we find that the rate of unionization is fairly high as compared to other industries. In Assam, where the largest number of tea plantation labourers is employed, there is one major union which represents the workers, the Assam Cha Mazdur Sangha. This union is affiliated to the Indian national trade Union congress (INTUC) and is regarded as the recognized trade union.

Emergence of Trade Union after Independence

First, the Trade union movement in Dooars gardens was initiated and organized by outsiders hailing from Bengal-Assam Rail Road Workers Union. Bhowmik (1981) observed that the workers of the Dooars showed signs of collective action only after the trade union organizers of the Bengal-Assam Rail Road Worker's Union under an attempt to organize them in early 1946.

It can be accepted that there was a trade union movement in Dooars gardens having both the workers and management from similar socio-economic and cultural background of the

country. The top leadership of the Dooars gardens was in the hands of Bengal Community and Bengali Leaders at the central committees of the union.

The aftermath of Independence was not good for unions. The hope of workers to secure better facilities and wages from the national Government were not realized. There was large-scale unrest and strikes and lockouts multiplied. The disunity in the trade union ranks was aggravated by the starting of three central labour organizations, namely, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in 1947, the Hind Mazdur Sabha (HMS) in 1948 and the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) in 1949.

In the early 1950's under leadership of Deo Prakash Rai, another union known as 'Darjeeling District Chai Kaman shramik Sangh' was formed. The union was affiliated to the local party known as Gorkha League.

In 1995 both the unions cooperated for the restoration of 14 points demands of the workers and jointly called a strike. This strike became successful as workers got some favour from the management for the first time.

In the early 1960's, under the leadership of Dr. Maitree Bose, another union known as National Union of Plantation Workers was formed.

The spectacular feature of all the three trade unions had respective political affiliation. For instance, NUPW (INTUC), Darjeeling District Chai Kaman Mazdur Union (CITU) and Darjeeling District Chai Kaman Shramik Sangh (Gorkah Leauge) had their respective philosophy. Each union played the role of pressure creator on the living conditions of the plantation workers .Thereafter in 1989, another trade union known as 'Himalayan Plantation Union' emerged for the plantation workers ¹.

West Bengal, on the other hand, has a large number of trade unions operating among the workers. A study on unionization in this history (Bhowmik 1992: 11-39) showed that almost all workers were members of one or more of the existing trade union. Almost all the national trade union federations have their unions operating in this state. The union affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU) has the largest membership, followed by the union affiliated to the INTUC.

Despite the existence of multiple unions in the State, plantation workers have tried to form a common front to take up issues on an industry wide level. In 1962, the major trade unions came together to form the Co-ordination Committee of Tea Plantation Workers (CCTPW).This committee is an important forum for tackling issues such as wages, bonus etc. Unions affiliated to CITU, INTUC, AITUC, UTUC (United Trade Union Congress), Hind Mazdur Kissan Panchayat (HMKP) are among its constituent members ².

The smaller unions have formed their own joint forum known as Committee for Defence of Plantation Worker's Rights (CDPWR).

In Tamilnadu and Kerala too, there are a number of trade unions among the plantation workers .There are 22 unions among tea plantation labour in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala AITUC, INTUC and CITU are the main union.

The employers have their own association to put forth their interests in Assam and West Bengal, the Indian Tea Association (ITA), which is the oldest association of tea planters, is

an important body. Other associations are Indian Tea Planters Association, Terai Indian Tea Planters Association, and Darjeeling Planters Association. In Assam, there are associations such as the Bharatiya Cha Parishad, Tea Association of India, Assam Tea Planters Association etc.

In South India most tea planters are members of United Planters Association of South India (UPASI).

Quite surprisingly, the tea plantation industry is considered to be the largest organized industry in India employing the largest workforce. The workers are unionized. In West Bengal, there are 32 recognized unions.

In Assam, the Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangh (ACMS) is representing the workers for the last 50 years, and is the only recognized union, though there are some more registered unions, some of them even affiliated to the central trade unions.

Yet, there is not a single tea plantation where the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) is fully implemented. The wage agreements reflect more the domination and power of the tea industry associations. The workers are never considered to be skilled except a handful who works in the tea processing factories. They remain unskilled as ever with no promotional avenues open to them. Every worker, permanent or temporary, young or old, inexperienced or experienced, receives the same wage and is classified as daily wage workers.

There is no question of computing dearness allowance or variable dearness allowance according to the scale of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). They do not receive Sunday wage. For them Sunday is an unpaid holiday.

Arrears due after every wage agreement are seldom paid. The collective bargaining process in the tea industry does not reflect the other necessary aspirations of the tea workers. The agreements are conspicuously silent on housing, healthcare, educational and other facilities³.

The last ten years of wage agreements show that the tea employers have not conceded any major demand of the trade unions. The tea associations have not agreed to the CPI-linked variable DA, minimum wage calculation according to the prescribed norms of treating a family as three consumption units, establishment of central hospitals, clearing the huge backlog of providing houses to the workers, providing adequate drinking water, drainage and electricity facilities to all the gardens, clearing provident fund dues, early gratuity to the retired workers and regularization of all temporary workers. Nearly 40 per cent of the workers in the tea plantations of West Bengal and Assam are today temporary and casual workers and their numbers are further increasing.

This means that these workers are not covered under and protected by the PLA. The tea industry thus is reaping all the benefits without investing a single paisa on a large section of its workforce.

Major struggles and strikes are few. In 1969, there was a 21-day strike in the plantations demanding regularization of temporary workers.

Not much was conceded by the industry other than absorbing about 10,000 temporary workers. In the year 1999, the tea workers in West Bengal struck work for 10 days. An agreement was drawn up regarding regularization of the temporary workforce, establishment

of central hospitals and revamping the healthcare structure in the tea gardens. Nothing has been done so far.

The strike was withdrawn only when the agreement was drawn up and signed at the intervention of Mr. Jyoti Basu, the chief minister of West Bengal.

The agreements in West Bengal are tripartite in nature, whereas it is bipartite in Assam where the Government is not a party. The long-term understanding with the INTUC-affiliated ACMS has given the Assam employers a clear domination and stranglehold over the industry⁴.

Officially, there is no labour unrest, industrial relations is peaceful and ACMS, understandably, 'co-operates with the industry'. In West Bengal, any demand by the workers and the unions, termed unfair by the industry, is either flatly rejected, or is repeatedly discussed by the tea industry in a series of consultations, a delaying tactic mainly, until the unions are fed up and ask the Government to intervene. All the agreements that have been drawn up at the intervention of the State Government, have favoured the employers and not the workers.

Like the aftermath of strike and the eventual agreement, there is a lot of resentment amongst the workers, but the very threat to their survival forces them to keep quiet and accept the verdict. For a tea plantation worker, whose forefathers were indentured immigrants, and were born and brought up inside the tea gardens, dismissal means not only the loss of livelihood but a threat to their general existence. With no familial connection with their original homeland, they have nowhere to go, nowhere to work, once they are turned out of their gardens. They are forced to choose a life of meek acceptance.

It is therefore very clear that, beyond a point even the phenomenon of an hundred per cent unionization does not matter much. A trade union exists much more at a micro level, at the plantation unit level, where their existence helps the tea workers, otherwise secluded and isolated from the mainstream, at least, to address their daily needs.

The trade unions have been their only link with the outside world. At a more macro level, the trade unions have contributed much less. One reason could be the absence of leaders from the working community itself. The trade unions in West Bengal are mostly controlled by the Bengali Bhadrakol who does not even work in the tea gardens. Very few of the central office bearers are from the tea industry or from the workers themselves.

At the plantation level, leaders are mostly from the sub-staff, who belong to the same ethnic groups as the workers, but are supervisors by occupation. Going by the hierarchical set-up of the tea plantations, they command a large group of workers from their own ethnic group and are in-charge of them. Due to the internal organizational set-up of the plantations and ethnic solidarity, these sub-staff command a very strong loyalty of the workers under them. It is quite possible that this organizational dynamics has been very consciously incorporated into the organizational dynamics of the labour unions.

So, the trade unions have to only make an effort to initiate the people from the sub-staff level into their organizations. The workers will follow suit.

In Assam, ACMS works under a strong political stranglehold of the Congress (I). But, the leaders are from the tea community, again, the sub-staff. The same phenomenon is observed

in other trade unions also. Of course, the Assamese here do not aspire to be the leaders of the tea plantation unions.

The unions are not representative of the women workers. Women, as a whole, are the backbone of the plantation economy and social life. The majority of the workers are women. Any change in the organization of work and economy in a plantation affects them first and foremost. Similarly, the women also remain the potential agents for any change likely to come in an enclave economy like that of the plantations⁵.

With the institution of labour laws and the PLA in the tea plantation industry, it is the women who have been the prime target of deprivation and exploitation. Ten years before, they were paid less than the men. They have been subjected to long working hours and heavy workload. Even the pregnant women are not spared from activities like deep hoeing.

The profit-hungry industry has been slowly marginalizing the women. The majority of the temporary workers, today, are women. For them, social welfare benefits under PLA including maternity and medical benefits do not exist. The permanent women workers are also discriminated and are regarded as separate entity from their parents, husbands and thereby are not regarded as dependants.

Their husbands are not entitled to subsidized food grains and medical benefits and these practices are not only perpetrated by tea companies under the Government undertakings or private sector only, the track record of some of the multinational tea giants likes Unilever, Williamson Magor and McLeod Russel is no different. They are all party to the sin of employing forced labour and not allowing a free labour market to develop thus rendering tea labour unfree.

The trade unions in the tea industry are operating under the same hierarchical and organizational set up master-minded and practiced by the planter's right from the colonial days. Beyond a point, logic says that they will never be able to confront the tea industry to struggle for the betterment and uplift of the tea workers. The trade unions have to understand this and have to undergo a major organizational change to survive and be able to discharge their responsibilities towards the tea plantation workers.

Trade unions have to emerge as a much stronger force in a milieu where social responsibilities do not exist. After the Independence of India from the British, a comprehensive labor code for the plantation workers under the Plantation Labor Act was passed by the Indian parliament in 1951. As a result, tea garden workers are more organized and have the right to collective bargaining.

Over 1.5 million workers work in India's tea industry, traditionally one of India's most important and profitable industries. Yet tea gardens are facing closures and lockouts around the country. Why are India's tea plantation workers in so much trouble when tea continues to reign supreme among consumers across the world? Today, tea plantation owners give a litany of woes which have become familiar and ominous to the labor movement across the world - profit margins have dropped competition from Sri Lanka and Kenya is stiff, cost of production is too high and so on. What follows: arbitrary pressure on productivity; reduction in wages; elimination of benefits; closures; lock outs; and de-unionization? The mantra is "cut the cost of production," and invest the huge profits not in compensating labor but in the

marketing end of the industry, in creating and promoting a profusion of brand names, the logic being that the retail end is where the profits lie ⁶.

Number of Unions after Independence

The position of trade unions has vastly improved after Independence, and the growth of such unions in the plantation industry as a whole in different years may be seen from below:

Table 1. Number of Unions Submitting Returns

Year	Number of unions submitting returns	Membership(in thousand)
1956-57	101	267
1958-59	139	497

From the year 1960-61 the number of trade unions along with their membership (in thousand) has been shown separately for tea plantation. The figures in respect of tea plantation for different years shown below:

Table 2. Number of Trade Unions and Membership

Year	Number of trade unions	Membership(thousand)
1960-61	27	155
1961-62	26	151
1962-63	27	87

The following are the important trade unions of the tea plantations workers in the Dooars region are as follows:

- Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union
- Dooars Cha Bagan Workers Union
- Panchim Banga Cha Bagan Sramik Kormochari Union
- National Union of Plantation Workers
- West Bengal Tea Gardens Employees Association
- Tea Association of West Bengal

Bengal Dooars Railway Workers Union (BDRWU) played a major role in the formation of trade union in Dooars tea gardens. The support received from the members of BDRWU proved quite instrumental for the communist in spearheading the trade union movement in the Dooars tea garden. The first tea garden to come under the influence of BDRWU was Haihaipathar (now called Rapali) near Mal. The other tea garden which also came up under the influence of Communist were Denguajhar, Bagrakote and Lakhipara under the able leadership of Mr. Ratanlal Brahman and Debprasad Ghosh, the trade union movement received the proper direction and ultimately in July 1946, Zilla Cha Bagan Mazdur Union was formed with the workers of nearly 13 gardens.

This trade union happens to be the first central trade union for the tea garden workers of Dooars. Ratanlal Brahman and Deb Prasad Ghosh became its first president and secretary respectively; this union was later affiliated to the AITUC.

Thus, the history of trade union movement in Dooars tea gardens gives us the account of the tremendous amount of struggle of the communist who fought against all odds to establish trade union in tea gardens .BDRWU also made an enormous contribution which made the task much easier for the communist. The full fledged support of BDRWU was instrumental in the formation of trade union in the tea gardens of Dooars⁷.

CONCLUSION

The remedial measures for the revival of tea industry are to be originated from various corners. The TU movement has a greater role in the revival and sustainability of the industry. The depth and width of TU should be increased to satisfy the needs of changing times. Certainly, TU has got two roles. On the one hand it has to play its own part in the process of revival of the industry. On the other hand it has to consider livelihood and grievances of workers, especially those in closed or abandoned estates.

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