



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Labour, Trade Union and Tea Industry: Contextualizing Indian Plantation System

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Abstract

The present study tries to examine the correlation between labour, trade union and tea industry in India with particular reference to Darjeeling Tea Industry. In order to understand, complexities between labour, trade union and tea industry in Darjeeling hills, it requires to be discussed the origin of tea industry. As far as the origin of tea industry in Darjeeling hills is concerned, during early 1850s the first experimental tea plantation started. By 1856, experimental tea plantation was transformed into full-fledged commercial industry in Darjeeling hills. Owing to increasing demand of tea, the planters require more labour forces. However, since the beginning of tea industry in Darjeeling, one can understand that the living conditions of workers are said to be poor. As we shall see, the origin of trade union in tea industry began during 1940s to mobilize the workers voice. Thus, this study tries to examine the existing socio-economic conditions of tea garden workers and how trade unions are active to mobilize the workers' voice.

Keywords: Labour, Trade Union, Tea Industry, Plantation and Darjeeling.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Darjeeling is an integral part of eastern Himalayas which is famous for its tea worldwide. The world-famous Darjeeling tea was first introduced by the East India Company immediately after the “Grant of Deed”[1] of 1835 (Pradhan, 1991/2009: 159, Dhakal, 2016/17, 93). As early as 1835, when Mr Garden, a botanist, returned from China with tea seeds and seedlings and was distributed for experimentation in the hilly regions of the country including Darjeeling. Following, Dr Campbell, the then superintendent of Darjeeling,

started the experimental cultivation near *Alubari* and *Jalpahar* areas of Darjeeling at an elevation of 7000 ft. The result was quite satisfactory (Hunter, 1974: 96, O’Malley, 1907: 72). It was seen that the plant was suited to the altitude, the climate and the soil (Rai, 2009: 75). His lead was followed by others such as Mr Crommelin, at *Lebong*[2] situated at lower altitude opened experimental nursery. It was further realized that lower altitude was better suitable for tea cultivation (O’Malley, 1907: 72-73). Similarly, Mr Martin started tea plantation at a lower altitude at *Pankhabari* and *Kurseong*. By 1956, the experimental cultivation was transformed into a full-fledged

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industry (Rai *op. cit.*, 76). Since then tea industry in Darjeeling has been continuously producing tea. At present there are 87[3] tea gardens producing over 9 to 12 million kg of tea annually covering over 17,500 hectares. The industry has employed over 53,000 people engaged permanently and 15,000 on a seasonal basis[4].

In this context, one can understand that the Darjeeling tea industry is mainstay of livelihood. Roughly speaking, around 70 percent of people of tea gardens of Darjeeling directly or indirectly depend upon tea industry. However, what it can be said that the conditions of majority of people who rely on tea gardens are poor. As we shall see, Plantation Labour Act 1951 was enacted to regulate the plantation system and to facilitate basic facilities to the plantation labours. The condition of tea garden workers of Darjeeling hills was still worst due to non-implementation of the provisions of PLA.

2 | ORIGIN OF TRADE UNION IN DARJEELING TEA INDUSTRY

As far as the origin of trade union is concerned in Darjeeling tea industry, what it needs to be understood that 1945 was the starting point when the first trade union known as Darjeeling Tea Garden Workers' Union was formed under the leadership of Sushil Chatterjee, Ratanlal Brahmin, Ganeshlal Subba, B.B. Hamal and B.B. Chhetri. However, Griffith regards the whole controversy began when CPI stood for West Bengal Legislative Assembly Election 1946 from labour constituency[5]. Here Griffith failed to explain the scenario which was started earlier. Prior to starting of trade union movement any sort of freedom movement, prolonged management by the British planters under the British Raj, critically long period of the Second World War and its harmful effects on the economy, the depression of 1930s, the passing of the Trade Union Act, 1926 granting

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right to organize trade unions (Sarkar and Lama, 1986: 14). All these did not have any effect on the tea plantation workers in Darjeeling till 1945-46, in terms of motivation and consciousness for collective efforts for improving living conditions. Moreover, Darjeeling planters has always been a sturdy individualist and the independent tradition of the old proprietary gardens still remained where conditions were seemed less favorable to labour (*ibid.*, 15). These can be the reason why under timely leadership of CPI, workers in many gardens became conscious of their legitimate rights. The historical role of the CPI in this regard is duly recognized by the leaders of other trade unions, affiliated to the Congress or the Gorkha League.

As mentioned earlier, the year 1945 is of historical importance as this day witnessed the formation of trade union in Darjeeling tea gardens. Since then the CPI leaders (Ratanlal Brahmin, Sushil Chatterjee, and others) intensified the efforts in rallying the workers to greater awareness and a sense of social justice. The trade union movement in Darjeeling hill areas was further placed on a solid footing due to dynamic leadership of those veteran political figures (*ibid.*, 16).

In early 1950s, under the leadership of Deo Prakash Rai another trade union known as Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Shramik Sangh was formed. This union was affiliated to regional political party Gorkha League. Further, his leadership added new dimensions to the trade union movement in the hills areas. As we shall see, the 1955 Margaret's Hope Incident and how workers are firmly united under trade unions (DDCKSS and DTGWU) and fought for the common cause of social justice.

3 | MARGARET'S HOPE INCIDENT

The labour movement in the Darjeeling hills gained new dimension with the rise of Margaret's Hope Tea Garden incident. On 8th May 1955, both Darjeeling District Tea Worker's Union of CPI and Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Shramik Sangh of AIGL held meeting with planters and the government. During the meeting, unions submitted 14 point's demand to

owners of tea garden and government (Deb, 2018). Some of the important points of the demands were:- Removal of the Hattabahar system, The labours should be given 3 months wage and bonus, The wage of the tea garden labours of Darjeeling should be equal to the wage of the labours of Dooars i.e. 1 Rupees 11 Anna, The Standing Order should be amended, The office workers of the tea garden should be increased, Provisions of the maternity leave to be implemented, Tea garden workers whose tea gardens were closed in 1952-53 should be provided with some grants, etc.

Both Gorkha League and Communist party held meeting on 9th June 1955 where they decided to move for general strike from 22nd June. Instead of listening to workers voice, surprisingly the government, before the general strike commenced, arrest warrant for the leaders of tea garden union was issued on 20th June. Some of the prominent leaders were arrested like Monoranjan Roy, secretary of Mazdoor Union, Ananda Pathak and L.B. Lama. Some of the leaders were gone underground (Bomjan, 2008). Surprisingly, workers continued the movement.

On 25th June 1955, the workers from adjoining tea gardens of Munda, Dhajae, Ringtong, Balasun, Maharani, etc. arrived at Margaret's Hope and proceed for peaceful procession. It was heard in a nearby garden of Dilaram, the workers were forcefully compelled to work even during the days of the strike. As in Beltaar, police had been stationed to look at the worker's movement and similarly in the Margaret's Hope also for the same purpose. The mass moved towards Beltaar/Dilaram where they were barricaded by the police in Control Dara which led to the dispute between the workers and the police forces. At the insistence of Auckland (Okhlen Sahib), a manager of Margaret's Hope garden, police open fire upon the workers' gathering leading to the death of six workers, among them a young lady, Moulisova Rai was pregnant. Soon, hundreds of workers were arrested on that very day (Deb, *Op.cit*). Many of them got injured in the police fire. This killing of tea garden people were protested by all the people of Darjeeling. After Margaret's Hope incident, there were few changes in tea plantation and its workers. This includes; wages of workers increased to 1 rupee and

11 Anna, the practices of eviction (*Hattabahar*) was abolished and arrest warrant of the leaders of both the unions was removed. Also, after the incident, in 1961, the government of west Bengal set up an Enquiry Committee to examine the labour problems existing on the hills.[6] Moreover, this incident is to be considered as the first historic labour movement in the entire history of Darjeeling tea gardens. Nevertheless, the 1955 movement is watershed in the life and rights of tea plantation workers. This incident witnessed the massive victory through collective efforts of gardens workers.

4 | THE NATIONAL UNION OF PLANTATION WORKERS

During 1960s period was the period of the National Union of Plantation Workers. The background behind the formation of NUPW was connected with 1951-52 general elections. The Congress Party lagged far behind the Communist Party of India and Gorkha League in the hill areas with regard to organisation of workers. As the tea garden workers constitute nearly 60% of the total labour force in the hill areas, this weakness was reflected largely in the general elections of 1951-52. In the early 1960s Mrs. Maitrayee Bose, a veteran leader of the Indian National Trade Union Congress took the initiative to organise a labour cell on the Darjeeling hills. Ultimately, a branch unit of the INTUC (NUPW) was established with Mrs. Maitrayee Bose and Laxuman Pradhan as the President and General Secretary respectively. The NUPW in its formative stage was helped by Punya Prakash Rai, some local congress M.Ps. and the then Municipal Commissioners. The union built up its image slowly and gained popularity. The NUPW challenged the competency of management of Rungneet Tea Estate against its lockout. The union threatened to open garden forcibly. The Government had to interfere. Owing to the intervention of the Labour Minister the lockout was lifted (Sharma, 2003: 123). Similarly, the concerned trade union raised the issue of non-payment of wages of workers in Fagu Tea Estate in 1962-63.

5 | TRADE UNION IN 1970S

The Darjeeling Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union[7] was formed in 1971. Consequently, this union has, as believed, always made greater and better inroads into the grass root level. Thus, this has played an important role in forming the Mazdoor union in various tea gardens of Darjeeling hills including some parts of terai and dooadrs.

The split of CPI into two factions (CPI and CPI(M)) and the formation of Darjeeling Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union, there was confusion among the plantation workers. The division of trade unions along the ideological ground got momentum. Consequently, the fragmentation of unions helped the fragmentation of workers into different groups which led to blur the development of worker leadership in the gardens. This caused inter-union rivalries which caused the lives of many workers in the gardens. On the other hand, this helped the management to follow the divide and rule policy in the industry. This has in fact made the collective bargaining for the workers weak. Such kind of events in the gardens started losing the confidence of leaders and workers started deviating from the trade union activities. So, in this juncture, workers started looking for different alternatives for the survival. Again in 1985, the Gorkhaland agitation under the leadership of Subash Ghising reached far and wide corner of tea estates of Darjeeling Himalaya. Thus, after the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988, another trade union known as *Himalayan Plantation Workers Union* was formed in 1989 backed by GNLF for the common cause of plantation workers.

Gradually, in 2007 such incident happened when the sudden demise of GNLF of Subash Ghising and rise of Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM)[8] under the leadership of Bimal Gurung, another new dimension has come up in the lives of the tea garden workers. As a result of this, new trade union known as *Darjeeling Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union* (DTDPLU) was formed and aimed at demanding separate tripartite talks (Employer, Employee and Trade Union) for the revision of tea worker's wages.

6 | TRADE UNION IN DARJEELING TEA INDUSTRY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

As mentioned earlier, since early 1940s there was a seed for trade union in Darjeeling tea plantation. Interestingly, it was CPI who took initiative to mobilise workers across Darjeeling tea industry under the leadership of Ratanlal Brahmin and many others communist leader. Moreover, the role played by Gorkha League for awakening workers in tea plantation of Darjeeling one cannot aside. Thereafter, as one can see the gradual proliferation of trade union in Darjeeling tea gardens. However, the life of tea gardens workers one can understand that the poor living across Darjeeling tea gardens.

The manifestoes of all the trade unions like Himalayan Plantations Worker's Union (GNLF), Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union (CPRM), Darjeeling District Chia Shramik Sangh (Gorkha League) and Darjeeling, Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union (GJM) and many others reveal the fact that tea garden workers in the Himalayan region feel deprived of the welfare measures enshrined in the government legislation such as Plantation Labour Act 1951. However, the most pertinent issue to be understood that the lives of tea garden workers are less developed despite having large numbers of trade unions. Thus, it is important to examine the issues and challenges pertaining to trade union activities in Darjeeling tea gardens.

The working of trade union is required to apply multifaceted approach as the problems are multiple in existences. However, looking at the present situation of tea gardens workers, trade is no longer far sighted in their approach to address the issues. Thus, trade union movement should be endorsed to meet the needs of changing scenario of tea gardens and its workers.

Lack of professional touch and comprehensive approach is another point in which trade unions need to work. This in larger way makes the functioning of trade union irrelevant. What it requires now the responsibility of trade unions' leaders have to be aware and to study every aspects of industry such as productivity, wage rate, profit and loss, administration, drawbacks in management, so and so forth

(Mitra, 2010: 60). Moreover, the trade unions leaders need to study the impact of external factors such as trade policy, government policy, and that needs to be applied in the working and functioning of trade unions. Therefore, it is pertinent to contend that the professional touch needs to be maintained in trade union activities.

As Besky (2013) highlights that the tea industry has maximum number of trade unions than any other organised sector in India (Besky, 2013). However, one can see how trade union is working. One problem that one can understand is their functionality is operated by political parties. The interference of political parties to their relative gain is also adversely affecting the functioning of trade union movements across Darjeeling hills (Mitra, Op.cit: 60).

Another problems associated with the functioning of trade union is lacking democratic values. It seems that such practices affect the process of mass mobilisation of members. Around 50 percent of women participants are remained silent in trade union activities. As discussed with various women workers of Darjeeling tea gardens, what it seems to know is that their participation is limited in membership, rallies and demonstration. For mobilising women workers in trade union movement, it requires democratic practices. For making true sense of democratic practices in terms of functioning of trade union, it requires larger amount of women participation in decision making procedure. It opens larger platform to mobilise women workers in tea gardens.

One tends to know some remedial measures need to be originated from various corners for the purpose of widening the role of trade union. Further, the depth and width of trade union needs to be increased for the purpose of addressing problems of tea gardens workers.

7 | CONCLUSION

In general, one can understand that the several factors have acted and reacted behind paving the way for such conditions across the lives of three tea garden workers. As already mentioned, what we understand from the above discussion about the living conditions

of tea garden workers of those gardens by and large is considerably poor. There is a need to improve them properly.

However, one must be informed that the plantation is at present a profitable industry and in this respect very little of the affluence that one sees in the lifestyles of the managers and other executives connected with the tea industry is visible where the workers are concerned. Further, what we understood the main problem with this industry is that the relations between employers and workers are feudal in nature. It is also pertinent to argue that under these circumstances the employers by and large refuse to recognize workers as assets. This is perhaps why these people are denied their basic needs, such as proper wages, housing, education, health and recreational facilities.

8 | REFERENCES

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- [2] The area is situated 8 KM away from Darjeeling main town and situated at a lower altitude.
- [3] It is based on available information during field visit of Darjeeling tea gardens that 87 tea gardens working in the hilly region of Darjeeling but in reality there are some gardens which are in the verge of extinction and some of them are already closed. Peshok Tea Estate, Kalej Valley Tea Estate, etc are closed gardens.
- [4] During main plucking season (March to October) *biga* workers employed and they are paid on the basis of how much they plucked tea leaf every day. In some gardens the seasonal workers are paid all the benefits that the permanent workers are getting.

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[5] During that period, in Darjeeling there were two constituencies namely; labour constituency and general constituency. From labour constituency, Ratanlal Brahmin contested for election where he secured larger victory from labour constituency.

[6] For details please refer Government of West Bengal Enquiry Committee report of 1961.

[7] At the time when Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Workers' Union was emerging as a major force in the hill gardens under the leadership of Ratanlal Brahmin, there came a split in the Communist movement, resulting in the formation of Communist Party of India (Marxist) i.e. CPI(M) in 1964. In 1971 a section of the AITUC members backing the CPI (M) decided to remain away from the AITUC and formed a separate organization known as the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU). The Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Workers' Union also split and a rival CITU affiliated union, i.e., Dajeeling Chia Kaman Mazdoor union was formed.

[8] The incident had happened when Prashant Tamang, a local Darjeeling boy serving as a constable in Calcutta police participated and reached the finals of the television reality show "Indian Idol" in 2007, people kept supporting and voting for him in unprecedented numbers. When further financial and moral support was sought from Ghising, he surprisingly denied turning him instantly into a pariah. The vacuum left by Ghising was soon seized by Bimal Gurung in which he provided both financial and moral support for Tamang. After Prashant Tamang was crowned the Indian Idol, Bimal Gurung swiftly formed his own political outfit, "Gorkha Janmukti Morcha" in 2007.

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