

# EVOLUTION OF TEA INDUSTRY AND LABOUR RELATIONS IN DARJEELING TERAI

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Plantation industries, especially the cultivation and manufacturing of tea, occupy an important role to the growth of the national economy in India. The Indian tea industry accounts for about 40 to 50 per cent of the total tea exports in the world and for more than 10 per cent of India's exchange earnings.

The cultivation of tea in India is located mainly in two geographical areas: (i) the tableland of Assam with its two contiguous districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri in West Bengal; (ii) the elevated region over the Malabar coast in South India. Assam and West Bengal contribute about 75 per cent of the total tea production in India.

The development of the tea industry in Assam, its early history and contemporary situation, have been discussed by many authors.<sup>1</sup> However, relatively less is known about the development of the tea industry in Darjeeling terai. This paper is mainly aimed at assessing the historical evolution and the existing situation of tea plantation in terai. The emphasis is on labour relations in the tea industry of terai. This is because the labourers are directly involved in the process of production and are one of the important forces of production in the labour-intensive plantation industry.

Europe, including Great Britain, used to receive its entire amount of tea from China before tea culture started in India in 1835. The monopoly of the tea trade of the East India Company with China came to an end in 1833 and this deprived them of a source of huge revenue. To compensate for this heavy loss the Directors of Company began to take increasing interest in the experimentation of tea cultivation. The annexation of Assam to British Indian territory in 1826 gave them a further fillip in this direction.

The East India Company consequently started vigorous experiments with tea plantation in various pockets of India. A committee, instituted to enquire into the possibility of introducing tea culture in India, concluded in its Report in 1834, that there was good reason to believe that some parts of Company's territories did provide such features of climate and soil which could warrant the successful introduction of tea plantation for commercial viability (Paul 1982).

After the annexation of Assam in 1826 and the successful experimentation of tea culture, the colonialists annexed the terai region from Sikkim in 1850. The terai region of North Bengal is situated in the foot hills of Darjeeling where the two international borders of Bangladesh and Nepal touch its southern and western parts respectively.

Tea from India arrived at London market when the industrial activity of England was passing through a boom period. Thus, many private traders and entrepreneurs hurriedly formed a number of companies in London and Calcutta to participate in tea cultivation in the terai for commercial adventure. The whole of the hill area and a greater part of the terai at that time was under forest. Experimental plantations had been started in this region in 1862 and the subsequent gardens had been established by 1866.<sup>2</sup> The growth of the tea industry in the terai of Darjeeling district in the earlier periods can be seen from Table 1. The data on the terai about the early development of plantation are not available.

TABLE I  
Growth of Tea Plantation in Darjeeling District

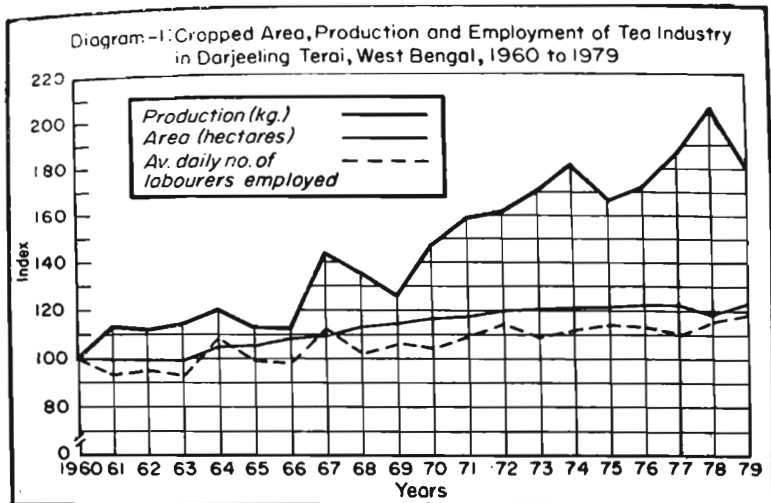
Description	Years			
	1866	1872	1873	1874
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
No. of tea gardens	39	74	87	113
Land under tea (in acreage)	10,392	14,503	15,695	18,888
Production (in lbs)	433,715	2,938,626	2,956,710	3,927,911
No. of labourers employed	NA	12,361	14,019	19,424

Source : Hunter 1974, p. 165.

The growth of employment and the development of the tea industry in Darjeeling district were by no means steady from its very inception. The tea industry in this region, however, entered a period of depression due mainly not to labour scarcity alone but also to its dependence on world markets for good prices. From the early part of the twentieth century it began to revive, but again during the Second World War production fell partly as a result of the general industrial depression all over the world.<sup>3</sup> After independence the industry again improved and in recent decades it has show no sign of declining at least in the terai (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1 shows that the output and area under tea cultivation reveal a tendency to increase definitely during the period 1960-79, but with inherent fluctuations in production and employment. The chief factors contributing to the fluctuations were international market prices, weather conditions, labour supply etc.

The early history of tea plantations in the terai indicated that the spread of tea gardens during the decades from 1861 to 1900 was entirely due to British enterprise



and the feverish stock exchange activity in the London market. There was a frenzied rush for opening up of tea gardens. This was possible because British trade and manufacture were spreading their tentacles all over the world, and the rapid accumulation of capital in the hands of investors led to further incentives to invest in the profitable tea industry. This, in turn, resulted in the mushroom growth of tea estates and companies. Griffiths (1967) in his context observed that there were a few contemporary Bengalee entrepreneurs who also jumped into the fray in Jalpaiguri district. During this period the colonial government's policy was very much in favour of the expansion of the tea industry. An Act was passed in 1859 whereby not only the waste land but also the fertile agricultural land in the terai were granted to the European and Indian planters. Speculators-cum-investors made a frantic rush to exploit this opportunity and made the best use of this Act. There were also jote-lands<sup>4</sup> transferred by the government for opening up the plantation industry. The conversion of jote-land into tea gardens, was specially permitted by the Board of Revenue of the government of Bengal. The jote-lands were not uniform in quality, and the cost of production was high, particularly in the case of inferior lands. Most of these lands were exclusively controlled by the Bengalee entrepreneurs.<sup>5</sup>

Originally the place was thinly populated with few tribes, such as Mech and Dhimol in upper terai, and Rajbansi and Muslim in lower terai. The development and expansion of the tea industry after 1860 was not possible without importing immigrant tribal and semi-tribal labourers from near and far off places. For example, Oraon, Santal and Mundas from Chotanagpur, Ranchi and Madhya Pradesh were

also inducted. Table 2 shows the composition of tea labourers in terms of their social identity.

TABLE 2  
Number of Plantation Labourers by Tribes in Terai in the 1940's

<i>Tribes</i> (1)	<i>Tea area</i> (2)	<i>Other area</i> (3)	<i>Total</i> (4)
Oraon	2,356	3,731	6,087
Santal	2,900	1,145	4,045
Munda	1,728	1,068	2,796
Total	6,984	5,944	12,928

Source : Dash 1947, pp. 69-70.

An interesting phenomenon in the early day of tea plantation of this region was that the early settlers, such as Meches, Dhimols, Rajbansis, who were peasant cultivators, were reluctant to undertake meagre wage work on plantations. The semi-slave conditions of the plantation labourers in tea cultivation in India was also a great disincentive. This has been narrated by various scholars.<sup>8</sup> The terai region of North Bengal, too, was no exception.

As the local settlers were reluctant to participate in the plantation industry the European planters were forced to draw labourers from outside the terai region. They recruited mostly from the poorest and the most ignorant classes. The planters, guided by the 'tea-mania' for profit-motive, rarely showed any sensitivity towards the rights and privileges of the labourers. They thought that the success of the industry would depend on the vertical shift and horizontal mobility of cheap labour. That is why, they recruited labour, not from local areas but from other parts of India, particularly from those regions where surplus labour was in existence, for example, Chotanagpur, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, etc. Moreover, they preferred those labourers who were illiterate, ignorant and unable to organise themselves to demand for better conditions. The tribal folk were found most suitable for this purpose and this we have seen from Table 2. Even child labour was engaged, during this period of 'tea-hysteria', by the planters.

The wages labourers used to get in the terai upto the 1930's are not known. In the nineteen-forties and even in the early nineteen-fifties the daily wage rates of plantation labourers in this region were 4 annas, 3 annas and 1½ annas for male, female and children respectively. They, often had to live in clusters in and around the plantation and on the land of the planter. This kind of living accommodation was, however, detrimental to their working conditions. The reason is that if any worker was recalcitrant, he/she could be evicted with their families. Thus strategic precautions and vigilance on the part of the planters against any concerted action by

the labourers were the prime reasons for this sort of treatment of the labourers. This hindered the betterment of life of plantation labourers.

In order to liberate them from the most oppressive semi-slave conditions, plantation labourers were organised by the communist leaders in the early 1940's. It was in Merryview garden where the first underground union activity was started to organise the labourers for the betterment of their job conditions. Their desperation for concerted action and the hoisting of red flag over the godown of the factory of Merryview garden brought severe oppression on the labourers both from the planters and the colonial government. Many labourers either absconded or were arrested and confined in Darjeeling jail for several years.

After independence, workers' leaders tried again to reorganise the labourers. It was in the early fifties that they came out from underground and formed a union called 'Terai Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union'. In 1954, the boom year for the tea industry in India, the union placed a charter of demands before the plantation owners. These were: (a) construction of *pucca* wall and room for their shelters; (b) supply of firewood to the tea workers; (c) bonus; (d) wages; (e) replantation in the gardens; (f) permanency of labourers and so on. The union leaders believed in peaceful negotiations and tried for a whole year to come to an agreement. Later, they organised a demonstration at Darjeeling. Oppression followed. The hill police fired on the plantation labourers at Darjeeling. As a consequence, the Terai-Dooars-Darjeeling plantation labourers called a strike in the beginning of 1955. The strike, however, was withdrawn at different times for different periods and at different places. But in the terai it continued for nine days.

#### **Split in Union**

Some demands were accepted by the planters after the 1955 strike, but it was followed by a split in the 'Terai Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union'. The split was supported by the Congress and in 1958, they formed another plantation union named 'Rashtriya Cha Mazdoor Congress' (RCMC). The Terai Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union afterwards merged with Darjeeling Hill Union and in 1977-78 took the name of 'Darjeeling District Cha Kaman Mazdoor Union' (DDCKMU).

Historically the region under review was also marked by peasant unrest particularly from the nineteen-fifties. The peasants of this area, as in other parts of Bengal, rose in protest against the prevailing system of sharecropping. They responded to the call for the *tebhaga* struggle against the extortionate fixed rate of rent of 50 per cent of the produce (excluding charges for agricultural inputs, implements and other items which further reduced the tiller's share of the produce. Intense politicalization took place as a result of the tireless and ceaseless efforts of a band of dedicated communist workers who worked among the peasants, including plantation labourers. The peasant-worker alliance, one of the programmes of the party, manifested very clearly in 1967, when the peasant movement, called the Naxalite movement, was intensified. At that time, plantation labourers of the terai also called a strike with their charter of demands for bonus, regularisation of rationing, new

recruitment, etc. The strike continued for 16 days. While other demands were accepted to a great extent, the question of bonus was not settled.

Since 1967 a series of major strikes has rocked the terai. The organised labourers exerted heavy pressure on management through these strikes for a better standard of living. And it was these pressures which brought to the plantation labourer better wages. This can be seen from Table 3.

TABLE 3  
Average Daily Wage Rate of Plantation Labourers in the Terai (in Rs.)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1958	1.69	1.56	0.94	Cereals are made
1966	2.07	1.90	1.13	available at
1972	2.94	2.77	1.57	Rs. 15 per
1979	8.04	7.87	4.12	maund

Source: *Tea Statistics*, Tea Board, India, Various Issues.

We find from our recent village-survey data that the wage rates of male and female agricultural labourers in the regions vary from Rs. 3 to Rs. 6.30 and Rs. 2 to Rs. 5.50 respectively [Chattopadhyay and Chatterjee 1984]. It seems to us that the wage rates of tea garden labourers (male or female) are substantially higher than those of agricultural labourers (male or female) at present. The differential movement in wage rates between the labourers in these two sectors can be explained in terms of the relative strengths of labour movement in the region. Tea garden labourers are more organised and conscious about their economic conditions than the agricultural labourers. Table 4 bears adequate testimony to this proposition.

It appears from the above discussion that the form of labour exploitation which prevailed before the nineteen-seventies and was one of the basic propellants of the tea industry, has changed, in the present decades, due to the strength of the tea workers' organisations, on the one hand, and the sympathy and the support of the peasants towards plantation workers, on the other. We can now examine in some details on the basis of some field survey data collected in the year 1982-83 from the terai, the changes that have taken place in the life pattern and living conditions of tea garden labourers.

In this section we shall discuss first the methodology of the survey and then present the results of our field survey analysis.

A socio-economic survey in the rural areas of Siliguri Sub-division has been undertaken by us in recent years to study the structure and change in agrarian rela-

TABLE 4

**Labour Relations in the Tea Industry in the Terai: 1965-81**

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Strikes held</i>	<i>No. of workers Involved</i>	<i>No. of mandays lost</i>	<i>Loss in production (in kg)</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1965	NA	534	534	3,600
1968	11	5,606	11,354	38,913
1969	12	21,645	245,892	1,005,950
1970	19	9,215	9,215	21,413
1971	39	16,084	16,084	30,630
1972	3	1,186	1,186	1,275
1973	11	3,926	3,926	12,342
1974	29	14,207	14,207	30,399
1975	4	2,200	2,200	6,317
1976	5	2,350	2,350	9,935
1977	23	13,225	15,250	62,528
1978	27	20,663	18,015	47,260
1979	2	2,308	2,308	9,600
1980	50	34,476	34,476	101,165
1981	26	11,063	11,063	47,327

Source: *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Indian Tea Association, Calcutta, various issues.*

tions of production in an area where large scale peasant mobilisations and revolt occurred a decade and a half ago. Since the area under investigation, covered by large tracts of forest and tea plantations, is not homogenous in physical and techno-economic terms, one of the aims of our survey was to obtain first hand basic data on tea plantations along with agrarian issues. Our present paper is based on the data of tea garden labourers only.

Our survey on agrarian issues was primarily guided by the consideration of the peasant mobilisation that had taken place in this area in 1967. The selection of tea garden units was also based on the same criterion. Thus, on the basis of some secondary information, regarding the events connected with the movement in the tea gardens in 1967, it was found that Merry-view Tea Estate in Naxalbari P.S. could be identified as a 'movement garden'. All the labourers belonging to this garden were completely enumerated. By taking more or less an equal number of labourer,

purposively chosen, from a non-movement garden, (i.e., Kamala garden in Khoribari P.S.), some comparisons have been made on some aspects of living conditions of tea labourers between the two types of gardens under classification. Data are related to the terms and conditions of employment and their objective conditions of existence in the tea gardens as reported by the labourers themselves.

The structure of a tea garden consists of four categories of employees, viz., management, staff, substaff, and worker or coolie. The terms and conditions of employment of each category of worker in the tea gardens have been comprehensively delineated by Bhowmik [1981]. So, we do not want to repeat them. It is, however, clear from our study that the workers or coolies in the tea gardens constitute a category distinct from the rest not only in terms of their numbers but also of their working conditions. They have to do all the physical labour in the garden, that is, plucking leaves, hoeing and clearing the soil of undergrowth, pruning the bushes in winter and so on. The present paper is based on the data of this category of tea garden employees only.

Our analysis cover 243 labourers in the movement garden and 207 labourers in

TABLE 5

Distribution of Tea Garden Labourers by Caste and Community Affiliation  
in Movement and Non-movement Gardens

<i>Labourer's caste/ community</i> (1)	<i>Movement garden</i> (2)	<i>Non-movement garden</i> (3)	<i>Total</i> (4)
Oraon	83 } }(40.74%)	105 } }(61.84%)	188 } }(50.44%)
Munda	16 J	23 J	39 J
Malpahari	17 J	— J	17 J
Barik Rajgore	15 } 16 } (20.58%)	3 } — } (8.21%)	18 } 16 } (14.89%)
Lohar	2 J	14 J	16 J
Kayastha	15	—	15
Goala	13	1	14
Muslim	16	—	16
Nepali	—	19	19
Others	43	28	71
Undefined	7	14	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>450</b>



non-movement garden. The patterns revealed by the data might not justify generalisation from the statistical point of view, but the insights obtained through the analysis will provide sufficient stimulation in this emerging area of research. It might be mentioned that the present study is a part of the larger study that is under way at the moment.

We shall first discuss the composition of plantation labourers in terms of some socio-economic attributes, such as caste community, family, education, occupation and land holding, etc. Table 5 gives the distribution of labourers according to their caste and community affiliation for 'movement' and 'non-movement' gardens.

Table 5 shows that the majority of labourers both in the movement and non-movement gardens belong to the *Oraon* community. There are two types of tribes, namely, cultivating tribes (*Oraon*, *Munda*, etc.) and non-cultivating tribes (*Malpahari*, *Baraik*, *Rajgore*, *Lohar*, etc.) engaged in tea plantations. It appears that about 41 per cent of tea labourers in the movement garden and about 62 per cent in the non-movement garden belong to the cultivating tribe community. They form the majority in the plantation labour force. Historically, their immigration from such places as Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Chotanagpur and neighbouring regions seems to have been prompted by the needs of the plantation owners to have a labour force at a relatively cheap rate and without much problems. This was possible mainly because natural calamities and land alienation, through land tenurial policies, turned the labourers into pools of unemployment. Thus landless labourers became tempting targets for the planters who were desperately seeking cheap labour.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is clear from our data that the tribal labourers (whether cultivating or non-cultivating) dominate the tea labour market and the incidence of people of other caste/communities is exceedingly meagre in number. The main reason behind this phenomenon was that the tribal labourers were relatively more illiterate, ignorant and culturally different and were unable to organise themselves for concerted

TABLE 6

**Distribution of Labourers According to Their Levels of Education in Movement and Non-Movement Gardens**

<i>Levels of education</i> (1)	<i>Movement garden</i> (2)	<i>Non-movement garden</i> (3)	<i>Total</i> (4)
Primary (upto std. IV)	36	43	79
Secondary (Above std. IV)	41	39	80
Nil	163	125	288
Not available	3	—	3
Total	243	207	450

action. This became an important consideration for the planters to draw them into plantation industry at cheap rates.

After a period of about 35 years since independence, the literacy levels of the tea labourers have not improved satisfactorily. This can be seen from Table 6.

Table 6 shows that the majority of labours (67 per cent in the movement garden and 60 per cent in the non-movement garden) in the tea gardens are illiterate. Incidence of illiteracy is, however, little higher in the movement garden than in non-movement garden. Inadequacy of educational facilities, resulting in a low level of literacy, thus continues to be a characteristic of the plantation sector. Although the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 recommends free primary education in each garden area, the planters have no genuine desire to spread education, as they think that the low level of literacy of the labourers is essential for the planters' strict control over their orthodoxy and prejudices.

#### **Pattern of Families Size**

Coming now to the pattern of family size vis-a-vis the number of workers in the family of plantation labourers, we observe that the average family size is five (i.e., ego + 4). On an average two members (ego + 1) of each family are employed in the same tea garden. This is true both for movement and non-movement gardens. The occupation of family members other than the tea labourer is insignificant. The planters want to separate the workers from the outside world, so they prefer to offer jobs to the members of the same family and thereby discourage them from going outside the garden for other suitable occupations.

Tea garden labourers, by and large, do not like to live within a complex family. They generally form small households with one or two workers. The basic reason for this type of household formation is that the planters always regard the household as the basic unit. The facilities or benefits accrued to the labourers, forming a part of their wages, are given to the household and not to the individual worker. Thus, in order to get more benefits from the planters, they prefer to nuclearize their households and it does not generally exceed two heads.

Historically, one of the most important features of plantation industry was that the number of children on the plantations was proportionately larger than that in factories or mines. The lack of educational facilities was one of the fundamental reasons for children being employed in plantations, as in agriculture. Our data, however, do not corroborate this view at least at present. This can be seen from Table 7.

Table 7 shows that except for two workers in the movement garden, no worker below 15 years age was engaged. Interestingly, instead, the tea gardens allow the aged workers to continue to work. However, the middle-aged persons constitute the main labour force in the both types of garden. Possibly, the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 which recommended free primary education for all children, must have discouraged the planters from employing child labour in the gardens. The employment of child labour has gradually been replaced by the re-employment of aged workers in the gardens. And this has restricted fresh employment opportunities in the tea gardens in the terai.

TABLE 7

**Distribution of Tea Garden Labourers by Age-group in Movement and Non-movement Gardens.**

<i>Age-group</i>	<i>Movement garden</i>	<i>Non-movement garden</i>	<i>Total</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Below 15 years	2	—	2
15-25	24	31	55
26-35	73	66	139
36-45	65	37	102
46-55	54	60	114
Above 55	25	16	38
<b>All</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>450</b>

In contrast to the agricultural sector, the plantation labourers are more dependent upon their employers. There are mainly three aspects of dependence, namely, allotment of homestead, allotment of rent free cultivable land, and engagement of other members of the labourer's family by the same employer. Such dependence helps both the planters and the labourers. The system of dependence is such that the labourer gets his minimum means of subsistence and the employer's need for secured labour supply at a cheap rate is fulfilled. Thus, it is a sort of a symbiotic relationship. That is why, the planters keep some portion of land away from plantations and distribute them among the labourers of the garden. Per capita availability of land does not generally exceed one acre. The amount of land is so small that in most cases the workers are unable to make profitable cultivation. They, therefore, try to buy some additional land at different points of time from peasants to achieve self sufficiency and to make the land viable for cultivation. Of course, this is possible only for those workers who are affluent. They are very few. It is evident from Table 8 that the majority of labourers (i.e., about 88 per cent in the movement garden and 75 per cent in the non-movement gardens) are either tiny holders or completely landless.

TABLE 8

**Distribution of Labourers by the Size-class of Land Holdings in the Movement and Non-movement Gardens**

<i>Holding size groups (in acre)</i>	<i>Movement garden</i>	<i>Non-movement garden</i>	<i>Total</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Landless	9	69	78
Upto 1 acre	205	86	291
1 — 2	14	29	43
2 — 3	9	11	20
Above 3	6	12	18
<b>All</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>450</b>

It is also interesting to note from the same table that the incidence of landlessness (i.e., workers who could not receive rent-free land from the planter) is much higher in the non-movement garden than the movement garden. And, in contrast, relatively more affluent labourers (possessing more than 1 acre of cultivable land) belong to the non-movement garden.

If we now distribute the labourers according to the types of tenure, we find that the incidence of letting out land is much higher in the movement garden than the non-movement garden. This can be seen from Table 9 below.

TABLE 9

**Types of Land Tenure Among the Garden Labourers in the Movement and Non-movement Gardens**

<i>Types of tenure</i>	<i>Movement garden</i>	<i>Non-movement garden</i>	<i>Total</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Owner cultivator	134	134	268
Share receiver (Letting out land)	97	4	101
Partly owner and partly share receiver	3	—	3
Landless	9	69	78
<b>All</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>450</b>

Higher incidence of letting out land in the movement garden is understandable, because about 85 per cent of total labourers in this garden possess only one acre or less than one acre of land which is far below the limit of a viable family holding. They, therefore, do forego the risk of self cultivation. Consequently, they lease out the land to the cultivating peasants and earn some rent from it for subsistence.

It appears from the data that plantation labourers, i.e., the category of worker or coolie, cannot be considered as a 'homogenous group'. Since land is also one of the main assets, labourers can be differentiated into a number of groups in terms of possession of land holding. The data analysed separately for the two types of gardens give two distinct pictures of differentiation.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the movement garden, more than two groups (landless, tiny holders, and small holders) can be identified whereas in the non-movement garden mainly two groups (viz, landless and small holders) are in existence. We can conclude that differentiation among the labourers is the product of the planter's strategy of free distribution of land to the workers, so that they can be easily manipulated. The high order of differentiation is the result of the higher level of discriminatory power of the planters over the terms of survival of the labourers.

Although distribution of rent-free land by the planters to the labourers has helped to improve the living conditions of a section, it has, however, weakened their bargaining power. Thus the daily wage rates of plantation labourers have increased very insignificantly upto the first half of the seventies. Money wage rates at present, although very high compared to the previous years, however, lag behind the changes in prices of cereals and inflationary trends. That means real wage rates of tea plantation labourers are declining.

Our historical data shows that the trade union movement has entered this area recently. Our field survey data also corroborate this view (Table 10). Due to the lack of an organised labour movement, particularly before (1970, the wage rates of plantation labourers were low.

TABLE 10

**Distribution of Labourers According to the Year of joining the Trade Unions**

<i>Period of Joining</i>	<i>Movement DDCKMU</i>	<i>garden RCMC</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>No-movement DDCKMU</i>	<i>Garden WBTEA</i>	<i>Total</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Before 1950	16 (64%)	9	25	16 (61%)	10	26
1950-60	34 (58%)	25	59	24 (44%)	21	45
1961-70	33 (58%)	24	57	24 (44%)	18	42
1971 and on- wards	62 (66%)	32	94	84 (89%)	10	94
NA	4	4	8	—	—	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>149 (61%)</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>148 (71%)</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>207</b>

WBTEA : West Bengal Tea Employers Association. Figures in bracket indicate year-wise percentage.

Table 10 shows that about 40 per cent of the total labourers in the movement garden and about 45 per cent in the non-movement garden have joined the trade unions during the present decades. All the labourers in the gardens under study are now under the umbrella of different trade unions. There are mainly two unions — DDCKMU, affiliated to the CPI(M), and CCMC/WBTEA, affiliated to the political party Cong(I). The CPI(M) led union, DDCKMU, shows a higher strength of membership than the Cong(I) led unions, particularly in the present decades. It may be due to the fact that the CPI(M), being the largest constituent in the Left Front Government, tried to organise them and increase its strength among the tea plantation workers. The workers, who are illiterate and ignorant, depend heavily on trade unions for ventilating their grievances and meeting their demands. The majority of them, particularly in the non-movement garden, feel that the ruling party led trade union is an appropriate platform for fulfilling their demands. With this kind of

ideological set up, they change their union affiliation as and whenever the need arises. They have a shallow ideological orientation and in fact, they do not have a traditional loyalty to their respective unions. Such politico-ideological inadequacy is not at all conducive to any kind of collective movement for the betterment of all plantation workers. Moreover, the differentiation within the labourers, due to the employer's manipulative strategy, gives rise to an inherently complicated and contradictory set of relations among different sections of the labourers, on the one hand, and the employers and employees' relations, on the other. In this complex situation, the type of union activities described above can go well with little interest of the working class, than otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

We have tried to explain some of the historical trends in labour conditions and relations in tea plantation in the terai area of Darjeeling district. We can now examine some aspects of labour relations in this region and attempt to relate them to the contemporary situation in the light of the results obtained from our field-survey data.

We have already seen that historically, the tea plantations were marked by the predominance of foreign European capitalists who wanted to maximise profits and develop the tea industry by inducting cheap labour. The labourers who belonged to the tribal community, became tempting targets of the planters for fulfilling their basic needs. The pervasiveness of a single community in the labour market of tea plantations, historically a unique feature of this region, by and large, still persists.

Historical evidence shows that planters took full advantage of the ignorance and illiteracy of the labourers and placed them in an unequal relationship of dependence. The law of the land also benefited the planters in this regard. Thus, the working conditions of the labourers were totally determined by the employers. The very concept of wage payment could get submerged under a nebulous concept of assurance of family subsistence by the planters. This itself helped insulate the labourers from the outside world, including cultural and industrial centres. This put severe constraints on the organised activities on the part of plantation labourers.

Of course, the kind of dominance and exploitation the planters used to exercise have, however, undergone changes in the contemporary period. It is true that the class of planters, who are typical capitalists, still do not remain satisfied only with the ground rent but try to increase their surplus through exploitation of surplus labour as well. They, also engage in the oppressive variety of extra-economic coercion whenever necessary. Thus, the production relations in the tea plantation industry is such that it does still allow the planter a higher degree of exploitative capacity that is based on the planter's traditional property right to land. This does usually imply serfdom of the plantation labourers in one tacit form or the other.

The Government of India since independence has tried to rectify the situation partly, through various legislations. It is also the outcome of trade union movements by the labourers in recent years.

We can see that the change that has taken place, and is taking place now, has given a direction both for the government and trade union leaders for the betterment of the lot of the labourers. The government has been forced to find a framework for the development of the workers. The different labour laws enacted<sup>9</sup> have given some security to the workers. For example, the Plantation Labour Act makes some useful recommendations in this regard. However, its provisions are to be tested through their implementation by the employers. Their reluctance to recognise the provisions of the Act is a matter that demands consideration.

The most important contribution of the trade union movements is that the workers are now conscious of their rights and demands. They have been able to get a higher share in wages as well as have some other basic amenities of life. The whole problem is that the labour movement has been restricted only to the economic sphere and has not been extended to the growth of cohesion and sharpening of class consciousness among the workers. Thereby, it has adversely affected their efforts to improve their conditions for future existence.

#### Notes

1. See Bose (1954), Griffiths (1967), Awasthi (1975), Chaudhuri (1978).
2. Plantation areas were exploited by large capitalists or departmental agencies. The concentration of economic power of this class was reinforced by the Act X of 1859 and Act VII of 1879. According to these Acts, the 30-year lease was transferable and inheritable but these leaseholders had no right to sublet.
3. See Chaudhuri (1978).
4. "Jote" means village. The land which was available for paddy cultivation is called "Joteland". "Joteland" was under the control of *jotedar*.
5. See Griffiths (1967).
6. See Das (1931), Bose (1954), Bhowmick (1981).
7. For an extensive discussion of the point see Bhowmick (1981).
8. By differentiation we mean that there is no single homogenous group of labourers with respect to the way they maintain their livelihood, which may be taken as a 'representative' type.
9. Amongst the legislations affecting the tea garden workers, the most important is the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. This Act made some provision for the welfare (e.g., housing, education etc.) of the plantation workers.

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