

Trade Unions and Women Workers in Tea Plantations

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Despite forming half the labour force in plantations, women workers have remained marginalised in trade unions of plantation workers. A study of three tea plantations in the Dooars and Terai areas of north Bengal.

THIS paper deals with the involvement of women workers in trade unions. Though women form half the labour force in tea plantations their participation in trade union activities has been low. Based on field data collected from three tea plantations situated in the two tea producing districts in the northern part of West Bengal this paper tries to examine the reasons for their low level of participation. Two of the plantations are in the Jalpaiguri district and one is in the plains of Darjeeling district. The tea growing area in Jalpaiguri district is known as Dooars and the plains of Darjeeling district are known as Terai.

As mentioned above, the participation of women in the plantation labour force has been high. In 1994 the tea plantations in India employed 10,28,694 permanent workers of whom 4,96,505 were women and 4,80,067 were men. Adolescents and children (workers below 18 and below 14 years respectively) totalled 52,122.¹ The figures for West Bengal for the same year were, 2,58,448 workers with 1,27,869 women, 1,18,482 men and 12,097 adolescents and children.² The high proportion of women workers in this industry is contrary to the general trend in the organised sector where the proportion of women workers in the labour force has been declining. We shall try to examine the reasons for this. But before that it is necessary to discuss some of the features of plantation labour in order to examine this problem in a wider context.

FEATURES OF PLANTATION LABOUR

The plantation has a distinct form of production organisation which gives rise to certain specific social relations. Plantations require large tracts of cultivable land and a large labour force. The areas most suited for plantation crops were sparsely populated and hence local labour was not easily available. Thus during the formative years, plantations faced the problem of acute labour shortage. They had to depend on migrant labour whose migration had to be induced by the planters. The cotton plantations in North America, sugar plantations in British Guyana, Fiji and Cuba, rubber plantations in Malaysia and tea plantations in India

and Sri Lanka depended on immigrants as labour. The early plantations in America and the Caribbean were run by slave labour. After the slave trade was banned by Britain and France, indenture became the common mode of recruitment.

Scarcity of labour was only one of the reasons for resorting to the recruitment of slave or indentured labour. In the normal course when there is shortage of labour, wages increase in order to attract more labour. For example, wages of textile labour in Bombay (now Mumbai) increased from Rs 7 and 12 annas per month in 1860-62 to Rs 13 and 12 annas per month in 1863 because the rapidly expanding industry was facing labour shortage.³ During this same period wages of tea plantation workers in Assam remained static at Rs 3 per month despite acute shortage of labour.⁴ Hence there were other reasons for the employment of unfree labour.

Since the plantation industry is labour-intensive, cheap labour is the most important means for increasing profits. Hence employment of indentured or slave labour ensured that the employers could hold a captive labour force which was bound to work on whatever wages were offered.

As a result, almost the entire labour force in the tea plantations in West Bengal comprises immigrants and their descendents. The workers in Dooars and Terai are tribals mainly from central India, namely, Chota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana regions of Bihar and the contiguous tribal areas in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. Oraons constitute roughly half the population and the rest comprises munda, kharia, santhal, lohar, baraik, etc. Around 20 per cent of the labour force consists of immigrants from Nepal who belong to different caste groups. All these workers and their families are now permanently settled in their respective regions and have little contact with their places of origin.

REASONS FOR EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN WORKERS

The permanent settlement of workers in and around the plantations is mainly because recruitment of workers in the early stages was family based. Workers were

encouraged to migrate to the plantations with their families. This served two purposes. First, the planters wanted cheap labour who would be permanently settled in the plantations. This could be achieved by encouraging families to migrate rather than individuals. The entire family – males, females and children – worked on the plantation at wages determined by the planters. Second, family migration ensured that labour could be reproduced which in turn would ease the problem of further recruitment in the future.

Tea plantations in West Bengal thus have four categories of workers: male, female, adolescent and children. Male and female workers are those above the age of 18 years. Workers who are more than 14 years old but below 18 years are adolescents and children are those below 14 years. Along with the high rate of female employment, employment of children is another distinct feature of the tea industry. This is legally permitted by the Plantation Labour Act.

The main reason put forth by the employers for the high employment of women is that work in the plantation is to a large extent gender specific. Women are considered more efficient in plucking of tea leaves while men are better in other types of work relating to maintenance of the plantation. Adolescents are engaged for spraying of pesticides and weedicides and children are used for clearing the undergrowth. This is not very convincing because though women are mainly engaging in plucking of leaves, males, adolescents and children too are engaged in this activity along with the other work given to them.

In reality the division of labour among the sexes is more a matter of convention, or more likely a belief, than a scientific reality. The more important reason for the employment of women is because of the family-based employment system in the earlier stages. As mentioned earlier, families migrated to the plantations and all members were engaged in work. This tradition has continued. In fact the employers have used the widespread employment of women as a means of keeping wages depressed.

The concept of a need-based minimum wage was put forth by the 50th Indian Labour Conference in 1957. According to the guidelines set up by the conference, a need-based minimum wage must take into account the minimum needs of food, clothing, fuel and housing of three units of consumption. Subsequently in 1958 the Central Wage Board for the Tea Plantation Industry was formed to decide on the need-based minimum wage for tea plantation workers.

The employers' representatives on the wage board strongly objected to the formula accepted by the Indian Labour Conference. They argued that since employment in the plantations was family-based, three units of consumption was too high as every family had at least two workers. Hence they suggested that only 1.5 units of consumption should be taken for determining the need-based minimum wage. The wage board found this argument baseless and commented: "The family system of employment cannot be considered as unique to the tea plantation industry and even if it had been so it is a matter of consideration whether it is justified for employers to claim benefit of it by way of low wages for male wage earners."⁵ Earlier, in 1930, the Royal Commission on Labour in India had also put forth a similar argument against the low wages paid by the planters.⁶

The employers however obstinately stuck to their concept of wage determination. Finally the wage board had to concede their view as a result of which tea plantation workers are the lowest paid in the organised sector. The fact remains that the planters have used the existence of the high employment of women workers to keep wages low.

PROBLEMS OF WOMEN WORKERS

Women among the tribal plantation workers are comparatively more free than in traditional Hindu society. One can find that the preference for sons which exists in Hindu society is absent among them. Both males and females work outside the house, either in the plantation or in agriculture. In marriage the girl has an equal say as the boy in choice of her spouse. This sort of choice is hardly there in most types of traditional Hindu societies where the girl generally has no say in selection of a spouse. Bride price is also given to the girl's parents. Hence women are not viewed as a liability in their society.

Yet it would be incorrect to assume that women enjoy equal rights with men. Though women have more freedom, tribal society remains male dominated. Women are expected to look after the household

chores which include cooking, fetching water and raising children. These activities prevent them from actively participating in activities outside their work and household which affects their participation in trade unions. At the same time this gives more scope for the males to participate in activities outside their work in the plantation. However, these sacrifices are rarely acknowledged by the males as the woman's role in the household is taken for granted.

The inequality between sexes in the social life is perpetuated in the workplace as well. Till the Equal Remuneration Act was passed in 1975, women workers were paid lower wages than males. Women are kept in the category of daily-rated workers and are never promoted to the supervisory category (known as sub-staff). In the trade unions too one rarely finds women workers in the leadership. There are a few cases where women form the leadership in the plantation unit of a trade union but this is invariably because there are no competent male leaders. Hence one can see that the divide between the sexes is prevalent in all aspects of the workers' lives. This generally impedes the involvement of women in trade unions. We will look into this issue in more detail in the following sections.

WOMEN AND TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP

The trade union movement came to the tea industry in West Bengal at a fairly late stage, in 1946. Workers in this industry were unfamiliar with the methods of collective bargaining for the first 75 years of its existence. However, after the 1950s the trade union movement spread rapidly and at present there is hardly a plantation where workers are not under the influence of one of the several trade unions. In Dooars and Terai almost all the national trade union federations have their unions. These include CITU, INTUC, UTUC, HMS, AITUC. The only exception is the BMS. In addition there are a large number of smaller and local trade unions.

The high degree of unionisation includes women workers. A survey conducted by the Labour Bureau in the late 1970s⁷ showed that women constituted 52 per cent of the total trade union membership in the sampled plantations. Our study of the three plantations covered showed a similar trend. These plantations were studied in 1992.

The three tea plantations covered were Lalfa in Terai, Angrabhasha in the eastern part of Dooars and Kurty in its western part. The total number of respondents was 157. Purposive sampling was done so that respondents from different age groups, major ethnic groups and trade unions could be covered. In the following sections we will deal with the level of literacy of the

women workers, membership in the trade unions, awareness of their unions, participation in union activities, reasons for joining and changing unions and the prospects of development of leadership.

LEVEL OF LITERACY

It was found that the level of literacy of the women was very low. Whereas the literacy rate for women in West Bengal was 47.15 per cent according to the 1991 Census, the literacy rate for the 157 women covered was a mere 11 per cent. Of the 17 women who were literate, eight could only sign their names, four had studied up to the primary level and five had studied a few years beyond the primary level. The general literacy level of tea plantation workers in Dooars and Terai was low, well below the state as well as the respective district averages, but the level of the women workers was less than half that of the men. This was despite the fact that the Plantation Labour Act made it mandatory for all tea plantations to provide for primary education to the children of the workers.⁸

There were a number of reasons for the low level of literacy among the tea plantation workers. As the plantations were usually isolated and communications were not very good, the only source of education for most of the workers' children was the primary school in the plantation. These schools were badly maintained in most of the plantations. They did not have adequate rooms or teachers. Moreover, since most of the primary school teachers resided outside their plantations they were irregular in their attendance. The general apathy of the employers and the government towards the educational needs of the workers and their families was mainly responsible for this situation.

Along with the above reasons, the lower literacy levels of the women was caused by the additional burden of taking care of the needs of the family. In many cases the girls did not go to school or had to drop out because they had to take care of the younger children. This again was due to another violation of the Plantation Labour Act. The Act provides for creches in all plantations employing 30 or more women but this was hardly enforced. With the result, younger girls had little time for school before they started working on the plantation or elsewhere in the vicinity. The low literacy level of the women limited their involvement in the trade union movement.

MEMBERSHIP IN UNIONS

While literacy was low we found that the women's response to trade unions was high. Only three of the respondents were not members of a trade union. Of the rest,

146 were members of one union while eight were members of more than one union. Those having multiple union membership and the three who were not members of any union belonged to the same plantation, Kurti. There were three unions operating there which were hostile to one another. Inter-union rivalry had led to violence between the supporters of these unions. This had made a section of the workers indifferent towards trade unions hence they preferred not to join any union. Some of the other workers became members of more than one union in order to please the different factions.

The situation in Kurti was not common. Multiple unions did not necessarily lead to inter-union rivalry in most cases. In the other two plantations too the workers were divided into two unions. At the same time they were members of a single union and all the workers were unionised. Indifference towards trade unions or membership in more than one union happened when unions were hostile to each other and they resorted to physical coercion.

REASONS FOR JOINING UNIONS

The high rate of membership of unions gives the impression that women were actively involved in the trade union movement. However, when we probed the reasons for joining unions we got a different picture. We found that the most common reason for joining a union was because the husband or the father of the woman was a member of that union. In the case of married women they became members of the unions their husbands belonged to. Unmarried women were influenced by their fathers' decision on the choice of the union. These reasons were given by 90 per cent of the sample. The other 10 per cent were influenced by the decisions of sons, brothers or male relatives. In fact we did not come across a single case where the choice of joining a particular union was determined by the woman's independent choice.

A little less than half the sample had changed unions. Of the 157 women covered in the study, 74 (47 per cent) had changed unions. These included the three women who were not members of any union. They had become union members in the past but they decided not to join any union as they felt that none of the unions were any good.

The main reason for change of unions was again determined by the choice of their fathers or their husbands. In other words when the male workers changed unions the females followed.

Participation in the activities of the union is a means of determining the involvement

of workers in trade unions. The activities of trade unions in the plantations include meetings in the plantations which are addressed by the union leaders, negotiations with the management or conciliations with the Assistant Labour Commissioner and rallies and demonstrations.

Our findings showed that only 17 of the women, representing only 11 per cent of the sample, regularly attended union meetings and participated in the other activities. Around 65 per cent of them were occasional participants and the rest never took part.

When negotiations or conciliatory proceedings were held the local union leader was accompanied by a group of workers of the plantation. The women hardly ever took part in these negotiations. Of the 17 regular participants in union activities only five had attended these meetings. All of them told us that they merely observed the proceedings and had never given their opinions.

FUTURE OF WOMEN WORKERS

The above discussion shows that despite forming half the labour force in the plantations women workers have remained marginalised in the trade unions. There are a number of reasons for this situation. The social status of women and their low level of literacy keep them in their inferior status. The inferior status of women in society is further reinforced by their inferior status at work where they are rarely promoted to the sub-staff.

The isolation of the tea plantation implies that the means for development of the social and political consciousness of the women workers must be generated from within the plantation system. This is why the state has, through its legislations, attempted to provide the basic facilities for this process. The Plantation Labour Act lays down that plantations must have primary schools, creches, water supply in the labour lines and recreational facilities for the workers. Unfortunately, most of these provisions are not enforced and the women workers are deprived of whatever little scope they have of improving their conditions. Lack of educational facilities keeps them illiterate, the absence of proper creches at the workplace implies that the elder daughters, instead of going to school, have to take care of the children in the household, lack of piped water in the labour lines puts an additional burden on the women as they have to fetch water from distant water sources. With the result the women have to devote all their available time to work and to the household. They thus have little time for

trade union activities or for other activities related to their social development.

The choice of joining a trade union and the low level of participation in trade unions activities, discussed earlier, might lead one to believe that women workers are totally submissive to the dictates of the males. This is not entirely correct. They can be more militant than the men when provoked. In many mass movements of trade unions, women have taken the lead.

We have observed in many cases where violence erupted with the management, it was the women who took the lead and the men followed them. There were instances when a particular manager behaved rudely with the workers or hurled abuse on them, or when the workload was increased suddenly, or some pending problems were not redressed. In such cases the workers often reacted spontaneously, with a sudden spurt of aggression. The manager could be beaten up or gheraoed for hours under the blazing sun or even tied up and paraded around the plantation. In most of these cases the women made the first move and the men joined in.

The above instances show that women do have the potential for leadership which needs to be developed. Their dependence on males for issues relating to trade unions activities is mainly because of the low level of political consciousness. Such a situation can be changed if initiatives are taken by the trade unions or other agencies to develop the political consciousness of the women. A point which needs to be stressed about tribal society in the plantations is that though it is male dominated, it is not oppressive towards women. Men do not need to assert their domination over women in order to prove their masculinity. This attitude can be conducive for the development of women if opportunities are provided.

Notes

- 1 Tea Board, *Tea Statistics 1994-95*, Calcutta, 1994, p 143.
- 2 Ibid, p 144.
- 3 Bose, Sanat, *Capital and Labour in the Tea Industry*, AITUC Publication, Mumbai, 1954, p 75.
- 4 Ibid, p 75.
- 5 Government of India, *Report of the Central Wage Board for Tea Plantation Industry*, Delhi, 1966, p 68.
- 6 Government of India, *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Delhi, 1931, p 311.
- 7 Labour Bureau, *Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Workers in Plantations*, Shimla, 1980, p xiii.
- 8 The issue of schooling and literacy is discussed in greater detail in S K Bhowmik, V Xaxa and M Kalam, *Tea Plantation Labour in India*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, New Delhi, 1996.