

**Chapter – 6**

**TRADE UNIONS AND WOMEN TEA  
PLANTATIONS WORKERS**

## **Chapter – 6**

# **TRADE UNIONS AND WOMEN TEA PLANTATION WORKERS**

The role of trade unions in the affairs of the garden is one of the important aspects of the tea industry. The main objectives of such union are to improve the socio-economic conditions of the employees, to see that they are not exploited by the Management as also to mobilize the workers for collective action so that these objectives may be achieved. Though the number of women in trade unions forms a small percentage of the total number of working women, yet it is important to study their struggle and their participation in trade union activity.

In this chapter we shall focus on the origin and growth of trade unions in the Tea plantation of Darjeeling hills and in this context, we have tried to show the role played by women in various labour movements organized by different trade unions. The delineation of these trade unions have been done in a chronological order. The origin of trade union activities and women's role in trade union movement of Badamtam tea garden have been discussed in detail. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to study or examine the scope and the actual degree of participation of women in the trade unions. We have also dealt with the factors helping or preventing the women from playing a more effective role in Trade unions. Though women form more than half of the labour force in tea plantations their participation in trade union activities has been low. Based on field data we have tried to examine the reasons for their low level of participation.

### **6.1 Origin and Growth of Trade Unions in Tea Plantation of Darjeeling Himalayas :**

During the pre-Independence days workers were denied to form trade unions for proper channelization of the interests of the workers. They were illiterate, ignorant, and isolated from their place of origin. They were weak and

powerless against the planters. The diversity among the early migrants or workers, such as their ethnic or cultural heterogeneity, speaking different dialects, professing different religions, their division into work gangs under different *Sardars*, their settlement into respective caste or community *dhuras* or *gaons*, the strict control exercise by their own foreman and an excessive contractualization of mutual relations among coolies formed an important barrier to joint action against employers. Planters would not allow outside organizers entering the gardens and at the same time, did not encourage workers in forming their own association. In contrast, the planters were organized into Darjeeling Branch Indian Tea Association (DBITA) since 1873. The British planters even maintained their own army The North Bengal Mounted Rifles with its headquarters at Darjeeling, which was disbanded on August 14, 1947. The British planters maintained this NBMR mainly to keep law and order in the tea gardens and to prevent the workers from forming any associations, which would go against the interest of planters. Through this army planters became successful to prevent any organized movement or agitation by the garden workers. During the time of labour shortage mainly before Independence period this army kept strong vigilance on the movement of workers from one garden to another. (O'Malley: 1907)

The trade union movement was virtually non-existent in the hill areas during the British period. The activities of the trade union, which has its beginning just before independence assumed real meaning and significance after independence. The constitution of free India guaranteed the right to organize and forms association (Art.19).

The idea of organizing labour union in Hill tea gardens was conspicuous by its absence till 1945. It was in 1946, that for the first time, we find labourers uniting together to press the demand for better working conditions. In free India the workers of the tea garden areas were given a right to voice their grievances not as a mark of charity but as a basic right. This encouraged the growth of the trade union. (Dasgupta: 1989)

The 1952 general election offered the trade unions to make inroads into the gardens. The trade union leaders used the opportunity to hold mass meeting in the labour lines and prospect of gaining support in election led to the growth of multiplicity of trade unions with political overtones. The leaders initiated the labourers into several struggles for more wages and for betterment of their condition. (Griffiths: 1972) The various trade unions formed since then is discussed below.

The origin of hill areas trade unions namely the DTGWU, the DDCKMU, the DDCKSS, the NUPW, the HPWU, the JSPWU have been initiated and their growth and development influenced by different political parties, the CPI, CPI(M), Gorkha League, the Indian National Congress, GNLFF, Jana Shakti, respectively. All trade unions mentioned above are mainly concerned with the Darjeeling tea industry. Each group acts as an important pressure group in formulating labour relations policy. For the Darjeeling tea industry as a whole and at the each garden level, their activities have political aspects, besides engaging themselves in an on going struggle with the managements for improving the working and living conditions of tea plantation workers.

In the following section, formation of different unions in the tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalaya have been dealt in a chronological order.

## **6.2 Trade Unions in The Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Himalaya :**

### **(i) Darjeeling Tea Garden Workers Union (Affiliated to All India Trade Union Congress)**

The date 15<sup>th</sup> September 1945 is of historical importance as this day witnessed the formation of the first trade union in the hill gardens namely Darjeeling Tea Garden Workers' Union affiliated to the Communist Party of India. Late Sushil Chatterjee, a veteran trade union leader of the CPI was chiefly responsible for historical organization of Tea Plantation Workers. This trade union had Ratanlal Brahmin and Debaprasad Ghosh as the first President and Secretary respectively (Lama and Sarkar: 1986). This union played a dominant role in hill gardens during the later part of 1940 and 1950s particularly during the

long term and widespread workers agitations in Moondakhottee and Margaret's Hope tea gardens. This union did commendable work under the able leadership of Ratanlal Brahmin, Ganeshlal Subba, B.B. Hamal, D.B. Chhetri etc.

**(ii) Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha (Affiliated to Gorkha League)**

Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha was registered on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1959 as an independent organization and it had membership of 4,644 as on 31.3.1967 (Banerjee: 1973). This union is affiliated to Gorkha League, a regional political party. Late Shiva Kumar Rai, MLA was its first Secretary. The next two Secretaries Late Deo Prakash Rai and J.D.S. Rai gave a new direction to the trade union movement in the hill tea garden and played an important role during the Bonus agitation of 1955. During the whole of seventies, this union did a commendable work under the leadership of J.D.S. Rai and Santosh Gurung. At present, this union is operating under the leadership of Santosh Gurung, Amar Lama, Narayan Chhetri, Rajen Banerjee etc.

**(iii) National Union of Plantation Workers (Affiliated to Indian National Trade Union Congress)**

This union, affiliated to INTUC was formed in 1960 with Mrs. Maitree Bose, a veteran trade union leader and L.M. Pradhan as its first President and General Secretary respectively. This union is sponsored or nursed by the Congress (I). The NUPW in its formative stage had the benefits of leadership from two Congress MPs and P.P. Rai, the then Municipal Commissioner. During the whole of 80s and 90s NUPW was functioning under the leadership of Dawa Norbula, P.T. Lama, M.K. Rai, Ratan Kr. Mothey, Nukul Chhetri etc.

**(iv) Darjeeling Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union (Affiliated to CITU)**

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 break 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., Darjeeling Chia Kaman Mazdoor union was formed.

This union had always made greater and better inroads into the grassroot level. CPI (M) leaders like Tamang Dawa Lama, Anand Pathak, Sangopal Lepcha, R.B. Rai, H.B. RAI, K.B. Subba etc. played a vital role in forming the Mazdoor union in various tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalayas.

From the mid-seventies to the start of GNLF movement in 1985-86, Mazdoor union could establish its union in almost all the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills. However, the emergence of GNLF movement eclipsed its position as the dominant trade union in majority of tea gardens and its activities were confined to four gardens only viz., Maribong, Chongtong, Lingia and Singtam which are incidentally CPI(M) strongholds. With NUPW (INTUC) and other unions like Shramik Sangha virtually becoming non-existent, the control of all other gardens had gone into the hands of the GNLF. (Amrita Bazar Patrika: 1988) During the Movement workers irrespective of union affiliation unitedly fought for the demand of separate State except in few tea gardens mentioned above.

**(v) Himalayan Plantation Workers union (Affiliated to GNLF)**

The GNLF Movement gave birth to a new trade union in the hill areas namely Himalayan Plantation Workers Union (HPWU) affiliated to the GNLF in 1990 with N.K. Kumai (MLA) and K.B. Gurung (Councilor) as its first President and the General Secretary respectively.

At present, out of Seventy-Six tea gardens in the hills, HPWU is playing a dominant role in more than fifty tea gardens. In the rest of the tea gardens though the GNLF was able to form the HPWU garden wing it has not been able to muster the majority support of the workers. HPWU is very active or dominant in the tea gardens which belong to the Sadar Sub-division of Darjeeling district. At present, HPWU is playing a vital role in the affairs of the gardens under the

leadership of N.K. Kumai, K.B. Gurung, P.T. Sherpa, S.K. Chauhan, A.B. Thapa, Saran Dewan, Dipak Gurung, N.K. Thakuri etc.

**(vi) Darjeeling, Terai, Dooars Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union (Affiliated to Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxist – CPRM)**

Darjeeling, Terai, Dooars Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union emerged in 1996 after the split in CPIM leaders in the hill areas which led to the formation of the Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxist in 15<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1996. At present, this union is actively organizing labour unions in various tea gardens under the able leadership of Mr. K.B. Subba and Mr. S.P. Lepcha who are the Secretary and president respectively. Now the DTDCCKMU has its former active CPIM leaders like H.B. Rai, R.B. Rai, D.S. Bomzon, T.N. Rai, A.B. Subba etc.

**(vii) Jan Shakti Plantation Trade Union (Affiliated to Bharatiya Gorkha Jana Shakti)**

The Jana Shakti Plantation Trade Union affiliated to Bharatiya Gorkha Jana Shakti is a new trade union in Darjeeling hills emerged in 1998 with P.K. Syangbo as its first President and other leaders like G.M. Moktan, Ghanashyam Rai, J.N. Moktan, S.K. Rai etc. Now this union is actively involved in organizing labour union in various tea gardens. It has already been able to form garden level unit in many tea gardens like North-Tukvar, Kalej Valley, Pandam, Dhotre, Samrikpani etc.

The growth and importance of various trade unions is closely linked to the importance of respective parties in the political arena. Table – 6.1 shows the present trade unions and their leaders in the tea plantation of Darjeeling Hills.

**Table – 6.1**  
**Present Trade Unions in Darjeeling Tea Gardens (1999-2000)**

Name of the Trade Union	Political Party affiliation	Names of Secretary or President
1. National Union of Plantation Workers	Congress (I)	Nakul Chhetri
2. Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha	Gorkha League	Santosh Gurung
3. Himalayan Plantation Workers Union	G.N.L.F.	N.K. Kumai
4. Darjeeling, Terai, Dooars, Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union	C.P.R.M.	K.B. Subba
5. Darjeeling, Terai, Dooars Staff and Sub-staff Association	C.P.R.M.	T.N. Rai
6. Jana Shakti Plantation Trade Union	Bharatiya Gorkha Jana Shakti	P.K. Syangbo

Source : *Labour Office, Darjeeling, 2000.*

It is so interesting to observe from the above table that none of the above functionaries is directly associated with tea garden work. Their function is to influence and mobilize the workers under their guidance. Furthermore, the table clearly reveals the political involvement of the major political parties. They have played a decisive role in the origin, growth and development of trade unions for tea plantation workers. The divisions of the trade union movement in hill areas is along ideological lines. Operational strategies of each of the trade union groups are determined by the political party it represent. These political dimensions of trade unionism in hill areas has both negative as well as positive aspect. Those who are holding top executive posts in central trade unions are, at the same time holding high positions in their respective political parties. They do not encourage the development of worker leadership. There is continued dependence of wage workers on outside leadership. Women in tea gardens who constitute the overwhelming majority of labour force have passive roles to play in the trade unions.

### **6.3 Trade Union Activities in Tea Plantations of Darjeeling Himalaya :**

In the history of labour movement in Darjeeling hills the year 1955 is very important. The first united action of the workers, under the leadership of the

important trade union organizations took place in 1955 over the issue of bonus. The movement was jointly organized by Darjeeling Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union and Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha under the leadership of Ratanlal Brahmin of Mazdoor union and Deo Prakash Rai of Shramik Sangha. The total period of the strike was eighteen days. During this Bonus agitation, in Margaret's Hope Tea Estate Six persons or labourers died in police firing in 25<sup>th</sup> June 1955. Among them two were women.

The final agreement was reached on January 1956 between the bonus sub-committee of the Industrial Committee on Plantations, the labour minister and Commerce and Industry minister. The agreement to give a bonus to plantation workers created a record in the plantation industry, for India became the first country to accept the principle of payment of bonus to plantation workers out of profits. (Bhowmick: 1981).

Inspite of the inter-union rivalry there was a move to have a forum where common issues facing the workers were taken up. Consequently, in 1962 the Coordination Committee of Tea Plantation workers was set up which consisted of representatives from nearly all the major unions. Trade unions of all political shades including INTUC, AITUC and later CITU and Gorkha League were members of this Committee. This committee served as a forum for discussing problems such a wages, bonus and benefits under the plantation labour Act of 1951. The main objective behind the formation of coordination committee was to prevent inter-union rivalry.

The second indefinite general strike took place in 1969. As the employers or the Management refused to concede the demands placed by co-ordination Committee, all the major trade unions (e.g. Darjeeling Chia Kaman Workers Union, Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha, NUPW etc.) gave the call of an indefinite general strike that began on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 1969. The strike Completely paralysed work on the tea estates. Finally, an agreement was reached on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1969. (Sen: 1985)

According to the Memorandum of Agreement, all vacancies in the tea gardens which were caused by either death or retirement of permanent workers were to be filled up. It also provided for recruitment of new workers, their numbers to be determined by the size of the garden. Secondly, *bigha* workers (those employed temporarily during peak seasons) resident within the garden, would be given subsidized rations while non-resident *bigha* workers would be given only cash compensation. Thirdly, wage would be revised after a machinery was set up but extra leaf price would be raised 5.5 paise per kilogram to 7 paise per kilogram. (ITPA: 1975)

There seems to be a decrease in the number of strikes held in the tea gardens, in recent past as the emphasis is on negotiations for achieving their demand.

In the following section we shall try to present the role of women in the union activities from the historical perspective and also try to examine their level of participation in the various union activities in the present context of Darjeeling gardens.

#### **6.4 Participation of Women Plantation Workers in Trade Unions :**

From the very beginning, women workers have been actively involved in the trade union activity. They have participated in agitational activity like strikes organized by the trade unions. In several cases, trade unions have deliberately kept women in the frontline while confronting the managerial staff and police. While adopting the tactics or tool known as '*gherao*' or wrongful confinement, union leaders always kept women in the frontline.

Among the early women activists was *Mailee Chettri*, a Nepali labourer, who worked in Denguajhar Tea Garden – a strong hold of Communist Party, was drawn in the labour movement in 1946. As an activist of the Union (Darjeeling Tea Garden Workers Union) she mobilized men and women labourers, for demonstration march that came to Darjeeling town. When the Communist Party of India was banned in 1948, she went underground and died at an early age. There was Amrita Thapa, a Nepali labourer, who did not get cold feet when her

husband was killed by the employers and mobilized around 350 female members in her garden union that had 600 members. (Sen: 1985).

Soon after the formation of the Darjeeling Tea Garden Workers Union affiliated to All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1946 under the veteran trade union leader Ratanlal Brahman trouble broke out in Moondekote Tea Estate and a lock-out was declared in April 1947 and it remained so until January 1948. During the whole period, sacrifice of female labourers remained legendary. During the two years period of lock-out the women labourers continued as casual labourers on the roadside, carried load but did not surrender even when some of their male labourers were willing to compromise.

However, it was from 1955 onwards that unionization of female labourers increased considerably. They participated actively in the 1955 Bonus Agitation. In Margaret's Hope Tea Estate six persons including two women were killed in police firing in 25<sup>th</sup> June, 1955. They were Sobha Rai (22 years) of Ringtang Tea Estate and Amrita Kumari Biswakarma (18 years) of Margaret's Hope Tea Estate. Many female workers were arrested on charges of Sabotage. (Swadhinta: 1955) The improvement of their living standard could be related to the labour movement that has made considerable progress since the 1955 Bonus Agitation. There has been an influx of young women workers in the unions during the 1970s.

The various trade unions have women wing. The CPI dominated Mahila Samiti which grew out of the MARS (Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti) in 1959, continued to work among the working women in cooperation with the NFIW (National Federation of Indian women). After the split in the CPI, the CPI(M) formed Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti in 1971. (Sen: 1985) Its membership leaped from 82,552 in 1974 to 2,36,991 in 1978-79 and to 600,000 in 1981-82.

Recently they have been organized into Gorkha National Women's Organization (GNWO) and Gorkha National Welfare Organization affiliated to GNLF. These organizations extend from State level to village level. At the top,

there is central body or State committee, below it there is District Level Committee and followed by the Valley Committee (comprising of 8 to 12 gardens or bustis) and Garden Level Committee or *Sakha* which has different sub-committees or *Prasakha* Committees in different villages or gaons.

At present, women take keen interest in the activities of all the trade unions of Darjeeling district namely, Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Mazdoor union, Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha, NUPW, Himalayan Plantation Workers Union, DDTCKMU and Janashakti Plantation Trade Union. In all these trade unions, women take a keen interest and are very often active members. The trade unions have secured higher wages, bonus, ration for the labourers. In addition to provisions for housing, recreation and schools, etc. which were made from time to time. The most important point to note in this context is that due to consistent demand from women workers the wage disparity between male and female workers have been abolished by the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976. Maternity benefits were also expanded in 1961. They have fought through various unions for an improvement in their standard of life and condition of work.

In the following section we shall analyse and discuss the nature of women's membership in trade unions, their degree of participation in trade union activity etc. Their membership and participation in trade union have great significance for them particularly because these represent a fundamental shift in their approach to life. It gives a new arena for their activities where they are able to meet and interact with friends in a less formal set-up. It also gives the more active members a forum for developing their leadership qualities.

### **6.5 Women Membership in Trade Unions of Tea Plantations in Darjeeling Himalayas :**

As we have already seen in the previous section that in hill tea gardens of Darjeeling almost all the national trade union federations have their unions. These include AITUC, CITU, INTUC, UTUC. In addition there are a large number of smaller and local or regional trade unions. All these trade unions have

women membership. Our study of the seven tea gardens showed that the women's response to trade unions was high. The following table - will show the nature of trade union membership among the women respondents of various tea gardens under study.

**Table – 6.2**

**Distribution of Respondents According to Membership in Trade Unions**

<b>Nature of Membership</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Committee Member	21	7
Ordinary Member	267	89
No Membership	12	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source : *Field Studies conducted on various tea gardens.*

It is clear from the above table that about 96% of the respondents are members of one or other trade union. Only 4 percent of the respondents are not members of any union. About 7 percent of them hold responsible positions as executive membership of unions. But none had any of the higher positions as president or secretary. Those women who have become executive members of the garden unit trade unions are from Badamtam, Singell and Springside tea gardens. In all the tea gardens under study multiple trade unions are operating which are hostile to one another. Inter-union rivalry (particularly between GNLFF affiliated HPWU and CPRM affiliated DDTCKMU) had led to violence between the supporters of these unions. This had made a section of women workers indifferent towards trade unions hence they preferred not to join any union. But it is true that multiple unions do not necessarily lead to inter-union rivalry in most cases. As we have seen many tea gardens having peaceful co-existence of more than four unions at the garden level. The general feeling of the respondents was that it is tougher for women than for men to engage in trade union activities. However, a few respondents (about 4%) particularly from Badamtam, Singell and Springside were found to take very active part in trade union activities. Another

36 percent of the respondents took part actively in trade union activities but a majority of the respondents (about 57%) appeared to be passive in their participation in unions (see Table 6.3).

**Table – 6.3**

**Distribution of the Respondents According to the Degree of Participation in Trade Union Activity.**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Very actively	10	3.00
Actively	107	35.67
Passively	171	57.00
Not applicable	12	4.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: *Field Studies conducted on various tea gardens.*

**6.6 Reasons for Joining Trade Unions**

**Table – 6.4**

**Reasons for Joining Trade Unions**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>No. of Respondent</b>	<b>%</b>
Better Welfare facilities	55	19.0
Wages and bonus	31	10.7
Job promotion	12	4.1
Fear of victimization	38	13.1
Influence of Male members or relatives (husband, father, son, brother etc.)	142	49.3
Women Independent Choice	10	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: *Field Studies conducted on various Tea Gardens.*

The high rate of membership of trade unions gives the impression that women were actively involved in trade union movement. However, when we came to know the real reasons for joining unions we got a different picture. Out of 288 respondents only 10 women replied that they have joined the unions out of their independent choice but the majority of women replied that they have joined the unions influenced by their male relatives. In the case of married women they became members of the unions their husbands belonged to. Unmarried women were influenced by their father's and brother's decision on the choice of the union. It is clear from the above table that about 19% women have joined unions for better welfare facilities and another 10% to get better wages and bonus. On the other hand, 13% of them have joined unions because of the fear of victimization. It is very interesting to note that 4% of women have become members of unions with the hope to get promotion to sub-staff or supervisory category as the union backing is considered as very important factor at the time of appearing interview for sub-staff category. Out of 300 respondents 12 women 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. When asked about the reasons for not joining any union they replied that they do not like multiplicity of unions in the tea plantations as these unions frequently involve in inter-union rivalry and they do nothing for the workers especially for the women workers.

The above discussion shows that despite forming more than half of the working force in the tea plantation women workers have remained marginalized in the trade unions.

The plantation Labour Act (1951) lays down a number of provisions which would directly help to improve their status but 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 crèches at the work place implies that the elder daughter, instead of going to school, have to take care of the younger siblings at home, scarcity as well as lack of proper drinking water facility 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. Thus they have little time to devote for trade union activities.

Several studies (Mathur: 1992) in India have explored the reasons for low rate or women's participation in trade union activities. Mathur has attributed the low rate of women's participation in trade union activity to apathy on the part of women and he had explained this apathy as due to women being more uneducated and illiterate than men, owing to the bonds of religious and social tradition and to the pressure of domestic responsibilities. (Mathur and Mathur: 1992) Since these reasons are very commonly put forward to explain why women are less active in trade unions than men, it is worthwhile exploring the ideological presuppositions which underlie them. To begin with, illiteracy as a factor inhibiting trade union membership is a contentious one. If its negative effects were strong, there ought to have been maximum unionization and militancy among white-collar women workers such is not however the case. As to the bonds of religion and social traditions, it is true that women because of their role in the family and in the socialization of children do internalize such traditions to a greater degree than men. However, men are not free from such traditions either and if their inhibitions can be broken down by a strong trade union movement, so can those of women that women workers are still bound by such traditions only points to the lesser degree to which the trade union movement has mobilized them. The majority of studies point to domestic responsibilities as constraints to effective participation of women in union activity. Domestic responsibilities certainly inhibit women's participation in union activity, but the effort should be directed at questioning this sexual division of labour. There has, however, been no attempt at such a questioning either by the trade union movement or by any studies of this movement. Women's household responsibilities are often cited as a reason for low trade union participation but never questioned. This is an issue that needs to be addressed by trade unions especially in the context of overwhelming majority of women in tea plantations. It is true that no trade union

organization has seriously taken up the job of preparing a cadre of women leaders. Our study also revealed the fact that about 90 percent of the women workers are ignorant about legislative provisions meant for their welfare. The union leaders do not take any interest to educate their women members about their rights. So the disinterested on the part of trade unions is mainly responsible for the low level of their participation in trade union activities.

The low level of women's participation in trade union activities might lead one to believe that the trade unionism in tea gardens is totally male-dominated where women have to accept the decisions already taken by their male leaders. But this is not entirely correct. As we have already seen many cases of violence or mass movement of trade unions where women took the leading role. All these instances show that women do have the potential for leadership, which needs to be developed. It is further observed that the trade unions leaders are very much interested to increase the wage-rate, bonus and other benefits for the labour. But they do not care much about educating the labourers particularly the women making them politically conscious so that they could change their present position for a better one. Trade unionism does make them more sensitive for taking the share of responsibility of the industry. As a result the labourers make no such positive contribution towards the betterment of the industry. As we all know that the harmonious industrial relations always play a vital role in augmenting production and productivity in tea industry, which is labour-intensive. In this connection it may be mentioned here that the Govt. of India has formed an organization, namely the Central Board for Workers Education (Sponsored by the Ministry of Labour, Govt. of India) which has its branch office at Siliguri also but the result so far have not been at all impressive. But we hope it can play a vital role in educating the workers including women making them responsible workers who could positively contribute for the better future of tea industry.

After a general discussion on the role of trade unions in Darjeeling tea gardens and women's role in various trade union activities, now we shall focus our attention on the women's role in Trade Union Movement of Badamtam Tea

Garden. A detail discussion on the origin and growth of Trade Union activities in Badamtam Tea Garden is also presented. Out of seven tea gardens under study, the researcher has selected this particular garden for intensive case study of movement as it was not possible to have detail discussion of union activities of all the seven tea gardens. We shall first discuss the origin and activities of the trade unions after which our attempt would be to examine the role of women in such unions.

### **6.7 Women and Trade Union Movement in Badamtam Tea Garden - A Case Study :**

In this tea garden, trade union was formed only during the later part of 1960s when the workers were organized into labour union.

The influence of the All India Gorkha League, a regional political party was perceptible even in 1950s, however, it was not formally organized in the tea garden. A small incident agitated the minds of workers which eventually led to the formation of the worker's union. The death of a pet dog of the garden manager Mr. Colension in 1961 created a furore and the two employees (Kishore Bahadur and Akaley Rai) were charge-sheeted. The incident created a feeling of helplessness among the workers and the Gorkha League was approached for help. As per the advice of the party, they filed a suit against the Manager and the judgement was given in favour of the workers. This incidence had a far reaching effect on the tea garden workers. They realized the need to organize themselves to oppose such cases of oppression and exploitation by the employers. Consequently, the garden level unit of the Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha affiliated to the All India Gorkha League came into existence in 1969 with the help of Gorkha League leaders like late Deoprakash Rai, C.K. Khaling, B.B. Ghatraj, J.D.S. Rai etc. Mr. S.S. Rai, N.B. Rai, Loktey Tamang, D.B. Pradhan, I.B. Subba were the leaders of Shramik Sangha at garden level at the initial stage of its formation. These persons took active part in organizing the labour unions and making the people aware of rights and duties.

It is worth mentioning here that the formation of trade union have resulted in better interest articulation and aggregation. They could not set aside the demands made on them and consequently started providing some facilities like firewood, free medical facilities, ration at concessional rates etc.

The Shramik Sangha played an important role in the agitation of 1973. In this year, the Management, through a notification attempted to reduce the facilities provided to the workers. For instance, reduction in the quantity of firewood, medicine, hospital diet (milk supplied to the patient was stopped), sick attendants etc. The implementation of this rule agitated the minds of the workers so much that they did not hesitate to gherao the Management and some office staff whom they thought sided with the Management. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1973 the garden level leaders and ordinary members were charge sheeted on the grounds of indiscipline and violation of industrial peace and harmony. They were suspended from the garden work for more than three years i.e. till Aug. 1977. The local leaders who were suspended were S.S. Rai and Loktey Tamang and other active ordinary members like Fuldhøj Kami, M.B. Pradhan, Pirthi Narayan Pradhan, Kishore Bahadur Pradhan, Budun Kumar Rai, Bal Bahadur Rai, Jarlal Rai, Sambiray Rai, Chengba Tamang, Dawa Tamang, Dhan Kishore Tamang, Dhanraj Tamang, Amrit Tamang, Dal Bahadur Kami, Smt. Sanja Rai, Smt. Manmaya Rai, Smt. Budhimaya Rai and Mahendra Rawat.

The net effect of such action of the Management were two-fold: 1) the workers became leaderless and lost the direction of the Movement. 2) the fear of losing their work became too strong to mobilize them further. During the later half of 70s, the Trade Union had been suffering from a great set back due to the emergence of national emergency on the one hand, and intra-union rivalries on the other. In the absence of strong trade union at garden level, the Indian National Congress under the leadership of P.P. Rai, Madan Thapa, T. Manen, P.S. Lama etc. tried to make an inroad in the garden and organize NUPW but failed to attract the workers. The dissolution of the garden level unit of Shramik Sangha in 1977 helped to emerge another trade union known as Darjeeling Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union with its affiliation to the CITU. The CPI (M) leaders like Tamang Dawa

Lama, S.P. Lepcha, Anand Pathak, R.B. Rai played an important role in the formation of local unit of Mazdoor union in this tea garden. After the formation of Mazdoor union in 1977, the membership of the workers increased manifold within a couple of years. This union had a number of active women leaders who could organized separate women's organization, known as Mahila Samiti affiliated to CPI (M). From the year 1977-78 till the start of Gorkhaland agitation by GNLFF in the year 1984-85, Mazdoor Union played the dominant role in the affairs of tea garden under the leadership of Mr. R.B. Rai, Shamsheer Pradhan, Maniraj Subba, Budhiraj Rai, K.R. Pradhan, R.K. Rai, etc. During the Gorkhaland agitation, no Union could work for the plantation workers.

In the year 1986, Gorkha National Liberation Front's garden level unit i.e., *Shakha* Committee was formed with the joint initiative of few office staff, school teacher, ex-armymen of the garden and some workers. Within a short period of time, leaders became successful to unite the workers to fight for the separate state of "Gorkhaland". The local leaders like R.B. Rai, B. Rai, M.B. Pradhan, D.S. Rai, N.T. Lama, Bishnu Rai, S.D.Rai, A. Thapa took very active part to mobilize the garden people. During these periods workers forgot their problems and demands against the employers. About 95 per cent of garden resident became united under the GNLFF banner. The rest 5 per cent who were the staunch supporters of CPI (M) could not surrender to new leaders and did not give their support for the demand of Gorkhaland. Their Union i.e., Mazdoor Union was weakened due to GNLFF movement. There were few others who were also the staunch supporter of CPI (M) but became the active leaders of the GNLFF. They could convince the common workers that the party-politics and fight for 'Gorkhaland' were the two different things and with the achievement of the latter, they could again start their respective trade unions, affiliated with different political parties. There were few leaders who did not support the movement at the initial stage but were forced to surrender their registers, files, flags and stamps etc. Finally, they left the garden under duress and few settled down in Siliguri town of North Bengal. The movement saw the collapse of Mazdoor union in the garden though the old party leaders are trying off and on unsuccessfully though to

start their union again. During these whole periods from 1985 to 1991-92 there was not a single trade union functioning in the garden and all affairs relating to the workers were settled by the garden level unit of GNLF leaders.

**Table – 6.5**

**The Executive Members of the GNLF Garden Level Committee (Sakha Committee) in Badamtam Tea Garden during 1986-1992.**

1986 – 1989			1989 - 1992		
Name of the leaders	Caste/Ethnic background	Portfolio	Name of the Leaders	Caste/Ethnic background	Portfolio
Man Bahadur	Pradhan (Newar)	President	Nor Bahadur	Rai	President
Bisnu Kumar	Rai	Vice-president	Ratna Kr.	Rai	Vice-president
Rai Bahadur	Rai	Vice-President	Krishnaram	Pradhan	Vice-President
Bijay	Rai	General	Asoke Kr.	Mukhia (Sunuwar)	General
Subhadhan	Rai	Secretary	Deoprakash	Pradhan	Secretary.
Yong Dorjee	Lama	Joint Secretary	Haridas	Pradhan	Joint Secretary
		Cashier	Yong Dorjee	Lama	Cashier

Source : *Tea Garden Office.*

The above table gives the picture of garden level unit of GNLF leaders during the period between 1986 to 1992, who acted as a mediator between the workers and Management and acted like a labour union solving the problems of workers. This system continued till April, 1992. In May 26<sup>th</sup> 1992 a garden level unit of Himalayan Plantation Workers Union (HPWU) affiliated to GNLF was formed with the following executive members.

**Table – 6.6**

**The Executive Members of Himalayan Plantation Workers Union in Badamtam Tea Garden (1992).**

President	Desh Bahadur Rai (Sub-Staff)
Vice-president	Krishna Ram Pradhan (Co-Operative Salesmen)
General Secretary	Sanjay Mani Pradhan (Office Staff)
Joint Secretary	Ratna Kr. Rai (School Staff)
Cashier	Mrs. Sashikala Rai (Medical Staff)

Source : *Tea Garden Office (Badamtan).*

It is clear from the above table that the executive committee of HPWU incorporated representatives from all the sections of tea garden including one woman as cashier. As there were no rival unions since both Shramik Sangha and Mazdoor union became virtually non-existent in the garden, HPWU could function very smoothly solving various day-to-day problems in the garden. Recently, in 1998, another union known as Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union had been emerged under the political patronage of Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxist (CPRM) – the splinter from State Communist Party of India (Marxist). At present, HPWU and DTDCMKMU are the two rival trade unions in this garden with almost equal number of union membership.

In the following section we shall analyse women's role in trade union movement in this tea garden.

As it is already mentioned that in this tea garden, Shramik Sangha affiliated to Gorkha League was the first and the oldest trade union, which was started during the later parts of 1960s. Although there was no separate women cell in the union, women have actively participated in its activities and along with men folk they took active part in *gheraos* and demonstration against the Management. For instance, in 1973, among the twenty active members of the Shramik Sangh who were charge-sheeted there were three women who played a leading role during the confrontation between management and workers. For more than three years beginning from August 1973 till June 1977 they remained suspended from work. These three women were Smt. Sanja Rai, Manmaya Rai and Budhimaya Rai. All of them were employed as factory women workers at that time. After three and half years they were allowed to resume their work in the garden.

As soon as the Mazdoor Union (affiliated to CITU) was formed in the garden during the later part of the 1970s, they realized the importance of women

in the trade union movement and these leaders along with the few active women supporters took the initiative in the formation of Mahila Samiti affiliated to CPI (M). These garden level women leaders unified the women workers and led them in meetings processions and gheraos jointly organized by Mahila Samiti and Mazdoor Union. Few women like Vishma Sharma, Shyam Kumari Rai and Chandramati Thapa assumed the garden level leadership and played an active role in trade union movement.

During the later part of 1970s and early 80s when the Mazdoor Union was playing a dominant role in this garden, these women leaders raised their voice against the denial of women to promotion from worker to sub-staff (Supervisory Staff) category and demanded that such promotional facilities should be extended to women workers provided they fulfill the condition of required qualifications like education and seniority. They approached the Management to stop the discrimination in matters of promotion and job mobility which was illegal and unjust to women. They repeatedly put their demands before the Management and gave assurance to them that if women were given such a promotional facilities they could equal the ability of men workers. Finally, these local women leaders of Mahila Samiti became successful in achieving their demands. These same women who were the leaders of Mahila Samiti and who fought actively in raising their demands got the chance to become first women sub-staff (Daffadars) in this garden as they fulfilled the requisite qualification. It was the great achievement for women who have been employed only in the *coolie* or worker category for more than a century in Darjeeling tea gardens. The five women workers who have been promoted to sub-staff category on 01.08.1981 were Vishma Sharma, Shyam Kumari Rai, Chandramati Thapa, Manrupa Gurung, and Parvita Sharma. Later on, two more women have been promoted to sub-staff category. They were Dhamber Kumari Sunuwar and Shila Mani Rai. No examination was conducted for the first five women who have been appointed for the first time in 1981. It was through their union support they got the chance to become sub-staff as they were the active members of both the union and Mahila Samiti.

Later on, however, it became a practice or regular feature of the tea garden to recruit the women to sub-staff category but the recruitment is made through written examination and interview, she should also be medically fit for the job. Participation in the union activities hardly affects the promotion pattern.

Another remarkable contribution of Mahila Samiti was the creation of crèche house to look after the infants of the working mother. They were the first one to raise their voice for the demand of crèche house which is provided in the PLA, 1951 but it was not established in the garden till 1980.

As mentioned earlier during the whole period between 1985 to 1991 there was not a single trade union functioning in this tea garden and all the activities of trade union were carried out by the garden level unit of GNLF Committee. During this period, Gorkha National Women's Organisation (GNWO), affiliated to GNLF was formed which gave active support to GNLF Committee which acted as a labour union in the absence of any trade unions. Table below shows the executive members of the garden level (Sakha Committee) unit of GNWO in Badamtam during 1986 – 1992.

**Table – 6.7**

**Women Leaders of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNWO) in  
Badamtam during 1986 – 1992**

1986 – 1989			1989 – 1992		
Name of the Executive Members	Caste/Ethnic Background	Portfolio	Name	Caste/Ethnic Background	Portfolio
Shaym Kumari	Rai	President	Pushpalata	Gurung	President
Lalita	Subba (Limbu)	Vice-President	Sita	Rai	Vice-President
Reetu	Rai	General	Bindu	Rai	General
Sunita	Pradhan (Newar)	Secretary	Kalpana	Subba (Limbu)	Secretary
Anita	Pradhan (Newar)	Joint Secretary	Anita	Pradhan (Newar)	Joint Secretary
Luxmi	Pradhan (Newar)	Joint Secretary	Nila	Tamang	Joint Secretary
		Cashier	Devika	Gurung	Cashier

Source: *Tea Garden Office (Badamtam)*.

From the above study, it can be concluded that women workers of this tea garden are aware of the advantages of unionsation of workers. It has raised the

level of their political consciousness. They have participated actively in various agitations. However, they seldom rise above the level of floor workers. All the executive positions in various unions are still male dominated. Only in the women wing of different political parties do they exercise effective power.

## Findings

From earlier discussion it is evident that women labourers have been quite active in trade union activities and have often participated in strikes, *gheraos* and in other agitational activities. This has been possible mainly due to two reasons – (a) Spread of education among the women labourers. This is a result of the PLA 1951 that made it compulsory for the management to provide primary education to the labourers irrespective of sex. (b) Growth of political consciousness effected through a general spread of trade union activities yet it is true that there are very few women in the top leadership of the trade union movement. Excepting a few cases, most of the important trade union leaders are male. Women are mostly found in the floor level leadership only in the women wing of different political parties, do they exercise effective power. Their role in the decision-making process of the union has still remained at the peripheral level. This is one of the main reasons why there has never been any pressure on the management to fulfil the specific issue of women workers. One could offer at least two or three possible reasons for this State of affairs.

- a) The working women are concerned with dual problems of the work-place as well as of home. Women, even when they work outside the home along with men, are responsible for household chores and childcare. Their idea of childcare and housework take priority over their work outside. They do not have enough time to go through a political career after doing all the household chores and work in the garden. The general feeling is that they are indispensable in their home and to their children while someone else can always take over the charge of trade unions.
- b) Traditionally, the top leadership in the tea gardens is important local politicians without any direct connection with the garden. It is assumed that they can argue on behalf of the labourers, read the balance sheet and raise questions. Added to this is the traditional attitude that men, as the chief bread-winners, are entitled to the best jobs. In the tea plantation, for

more than hundred years women have been employed only in the worker or *coolie* category and hence, they still look up to men for leadership. As a result the phenomenon of male domination in trade union still persists along with the underplaying of the special issues of women.

Male domination in the trade unions is reflected in the nature of the demands that these trade unions raise. The plantation labour Act (1951) lays down a number of welfare measures that the plantation managements are obliged to provide. Among these are permanent housing for the workers, hygienic sanitation, water supply arrangements, provision of crèches for infants, labour canteen etc. Many of the aspects relating to particular gender interests of women labourer are thus covered by the provision in the Act. However, in most plantations these provisions are rarely complied with though trade unions raise issues relating to housing or water supply in their negotiations with the management, it has been seen that the demand for a crèche is never raised. There has not been any instances when crèches have been one of the issues for a strike.

Since industrial relations have become complex, trade union movement to be effective requires a mature leadership and women need to be properly represented in the trade unions. For this female labourers need to come forward with a greater involvement in the movements. For example, female labourers could form cells or committees in each garden to formulate their specific demands e.g., maternity benefits, crèches, labour canteen, light jobs for expecting mothers etc. and these committees could force the male dominated unions to include such demands in the common charter of demands when movements are undertaken. In other words, the problem specific to women workers could be tackled through the formation of separate women's cells within existing trade unions to push for the taking up of women's work place issues, for example, abolition of sex-biased grading, exclusion of women from better jobs, for crèche allowance, maternity benefits etc. and for a full participation of women in the decision-making process of the union as well as for a change in the structure and functioning of unions to make this possible.

To sum up, one could say that women, however peripheral their involvement in trade unions may be, have been considerably influenced by these movements. Despite several odds in forms of their preoccupation with household duties, they joined the unions and continued to take part in meeting and demonstrations designed to improve their standards of living. Thus, the female labourers working for years with male labourers in the same industry have become an integral part of the trade union movement.