

CHAPTER - VII

THE ROLE OF TRADE UNION IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR

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7.1 Peasants and agricultural workers in our country are not enjoying the benefits as are enjoying their counterparts in the organised sector. Since independence lot of social security measures have been taken by the Government for industrial workers from time to time. Keeping pace with the needs of peasants, sharecroppers and agricultural workers West Bengal State Government has also passed several legislations such as West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953, West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 and Minimum Wages Act etc. But mere passing of legislations are not sufficient enough to safeguard the interest of peasants and workers. A healthy and strong trade union movement in the agriculture sector is necessary to ensure the rights and privileges of peasants and workers on the one hand and to sustain agricultural productivity on the other hand.

Trade Union is an organisation of workers formed to promote and protect the interests of workers through collective actions. Sidney and Beatrice Webb observed that "Trade Union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment"¹. Selig Perlman also found that trade union is essentially pragmatic and struggles constantly for the betterment of the economic conditions and relationships through broad schemes of social and economic reforms². To V.V. Giri, "trade union is such an organisation which is created voluntarily on the basis of collective strength to secure

the interest of workers³. The Marxists view trade union as the instrument for establishing the rights of the labour class people from all exploitations and oppressions of the capitalist class⁴.

We have already noted that the trade union movement got much strength in organised sector. But in the unorganised sector, where agricultural worker sometimes acts as a land-owner, the position of trade union becomes peculiar. Prior to 1972 little or no attention was given by the trade unions to the vast workers operating in the unorganised sector. In unorganised agriculture sector there exists parties other than agricultural workers, who are directly or indirectly controlling the interests of peasants and agricultural workers. The parties are:

- i) Moneylenders (Mahajans): purchasing crops from the farmers at lower prices and supplying credits to them at higher rates.
- ii) Government: regulating prices of agricultural commodities.
- iii) Development Agencies: implementing Government policies at different levels, and
- iv) Banks : financing credits to farmers.

The aims and objects of these parties are different as well as conflicting. They try to exploit the farmers and labourers in varied techniques. But due to lack of organisation the farmers and labourers find difficult to fight against the evils of these chain agents. Thus, the trade union movement in agriculture sector assumes a great deal of importance.

7.2 ROLE OF TRADE UNION IN THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

The Agriculture sector comprises with a vast human group of large, small and marginal farmers, sharecroppers and agriculture workers. They have limited power with divergent interest relationships. Other peculiarities of this group of people are:

- i) the agricultural workers are numerous and their economic condition is very poor.
- ii) they are illiterate.
- iii) they are for a long time, being sweated by the moneylenders.
- iv) they are mostly suffering from lack of finance and price rises.
- v) there is no scope of bank credit for the vast majority group of landless labourers.

- vi) there exists a number of developmental agencies for uplifting the economic condition of agricultural workers.

Under the above set-up, peasants and workers' Trade Unions can perform the following functions:

- i) Organise the scattered peasants and agriculture workers into a common platform.
- ii) Educate them about Government policies; bank facilities and various programmes of developmental agencies.
- iii) Fight jointly against the exploitation of moneylenders.
- iv) Take leadership in forming co-operatives.
- v) Jointly organise co-operative marketing societies for marketing their farm products.
- vi) Move jointly against Government's any anti-farmer-worker policy.
- vii) Organise movement for greater protection of farmers' and workers interests.
- viii) Establish co-ordination with the peasant organisations of other districts and states.
- ix) Ensure minimum wages to agricultural workers as prescribed by the Minimum Wages Act.

But to organise trade union movement in the agriculture sector is very difficult and sometimes become in vain. The problems that one faced in organising Trade Union in the agriculture sector are:

- i) Scattered distribution of peasants and agricultural workers making communication difficulties;
- ii) Heterogeneity of work, and lack of common interest;
- iii) Large-scale illiteracy of farmers and agricultural workers;
- iv) Non-enforcement of labour laws in agriculture sector;
- v) Lack of time on the part of agricultural workers to involve in trade union activities;
- vi) Lack of work culture and
- vii) Lack of proper leadership.

73. TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN THE DISTRICT OF WEST DINAJPUR
WITH REFERENCE TO THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR:

Undivided Dinajpur district was a very stronghold of peasant movement. Before independence, the British Government did not allow any trade union activities amongst the peasants.

Although in 1936 "Sara Bharat Krishak Sabha" (All India Peasants' Council) was established in Lucknow and in 1937 the 'Pradeshik Krishak Sabha' (Provincial Peasants' Council) was also established in Patrasaher of Bankura District, there are several evidences of peasant movements in undivided Dinajpur district of which mention may be made of 'Tebhaga Movement' and 'Bargadari Movement'.

If we look at the structure of labour force of the district, we will find that 45% of the total population belong to farmer and 35% belong to agricultural labour categories⁵. In the agriculture sector the pioneering Trade Union Organisation was "Sara Bharat Krishak Sabha" who took a leading part in organising the marginal and small farmers, bargadars and agricultural workers. In 1947 the 'Krishak Movement' was organised in different parts of Raiganj and Balurghat Sub-Divisions. It is known that in 1952 the farmers started agitation against the levy on paddy. The levy was imposed only on the small and medium farmers instead of the big Jotedars and as a result, the poor peasants of Kaigram, Khanpur, Gopalbati, Motherganj Hat, Najirpur Hat, Balurghat, Patiram, Itahar, Madhuban, Bhikahar, Marnai and Daralhat villages launched strong movements against the Government.

In 1954 the Peasants organisations confined their activities in taking preventive measures against the natural calamities. In 1959 the historic 'food movement' was started in different parts of the State. Keeping pace with that movement the farmers of the district also started movement in Kaliaganj and Gangarampur Blocks. In the mid 1960, the farmers of this district started agitations in Balurghat, Gangarampur, kaliaganj for meeting their demands for land.

In 1961, a large number of peasant-workers contested the panchayat election and won in different places. The formation of Village Panchayats by representatives of peasants organisations made a major break through in the history of peasant movement in the district. During 1962 most of the Peasant Workers and leaders were arrested. The Sara Bharat Krishak Sabha started movement for releasing them at different places.

In 1967, the First Left Front Government was formed in West Bengal. During that period, a slogan had been raised in different parts of the district to insist the 'bargadars' (sharecroppers) to capture the 'vest' and 'Benami' land and cultivate them. Meanwhile several Krishak Organisations were formed in Chopra and Islampur Blocks. The Communist Party took a leading role in organising the rural agricultural labourers and ultimately it culminated into 'bargadar' movement. The bargadars or sharecroppers started demanding

not only the right to cultivate the land but also the right to share the produce between owner and bargadar in 25:75 ratio. Under this movement a large number of sharecroppers started their names registered as 'bargadar' officially.

During this period a movement of the peasants of Naxalbari village of Darjeeling district, popularly, known as 'Naxalite Movement' started with a view to establish the right of bargadars who were traditionally cultivating in the lands of their owners. The movement took a violent character in different parts of North Bengal and the poor peasants so far oppressed and exploited by their land owners got much inspiration from this movement. The impact of 'Naxalite Movement' has been prevailing in the district even today. For example, the poor peasants of backward villages such as Chalkbaliram, Fulbari, Daspara, Banshihari, Karandighi, Itahar, Northern portion of Raiganj, Chalan and Safanagar etc. are still on the movement to achieve their desired targets.

In 1970, the Krishak Organisations established a number of "Dharmagolas" for the farmers in Balurghat, Kumerganj, Hili, Itahar, Chopra, Kaliaganj, Islampur, Tapan and Banshihari Blocks. The members used to deposit their share of paddy in those 'golas' regularly. The main objects of the 'Dharmagolas' are :-

- i) To give loans to the needy member for their children's medical treatment.
- ii) To give loans to the farmers for the purchase of seeds and fertilisers.
- iii) To give loans to the farmers during the harvesting period.

The actual position of 'Dharmagolas' in the district between 1970 and 1994 is given in the following table :

TABLE NO. 7.1

Dharma Gola's position in the district between 1970 and 1994

Blocks	1970	1994
Balurghat	7	1
Kumarganj	2	Nil
Hili	2	Nil
Itahar	4	1
Kaliaganj	6	1
Banshihari	4	1
Tapan	4	1
Chopra	3	Nil
Islampur	4	1

Source : Survey and Panchayat Offices - 1994

From the above table we see that the number of Dharmagola has been decreased from 36 in 1970 to 6 in 1994. In 1994, 6 out of 9 Blocks had Dharmagola of one each only and 3 Blocks had no Dharmagola at all. It was due to the growth of large number of Primary Agricultural Co-operative Societies (PACS) in rural areas. Another interesting feature is that the existing 'Dharmagolas' are surviving in tribal areas only.

Trade Unions in the agriculture sector started organised in West Dinajpur since 1971. The membership of different trade unions in agriculture front were as follows:

TABLE NO. 7. 2

Membership of Trade Unions in West
Dinajpur in 1994-95

Name of the Trade Union	Sponsoring political party	Total No. of Members
1. Sara Bharat Krishak Sabha	CPI(M)	251853
2. Kishan Congress	Cong(I)	43630
3. Agragami Krishak Sabha	All India Forward Bloc	128479
4. Sanjukta Kishan Sabha	RSP	129594
5. Biplabi Krishak Front and Ganatantra Morcha	CPI(ML)	28925

Source : Different Political Party Offices,
West Dinajpur District.

TABLE NO. 7.3

Distribution of Trade Union-wise Membership in
1994-95 in different Blocks of West Dinajpur

Name of Blocks	SBKS	KC	AKS	SKS	BKF & GM
1. Balurghat	18867	3675	4705	24973	530
2. Hilli	7675	2372	3250	5141	105
3. Kumarganj	20416	2542	3560	9861	2260
4. Gangarampur	16684	4645	10832	10176	2500
5. Tapan	11532	1340	6445	20105	2750
6. Banshihari	19083	2415	4550	3740	3200
7. Kushmandi	11000	4560	5752	12727	1250
8. Itahar	18820	3362	4534	12456	2450
9. Kaliaganj	21397	4830	4742	8824	2200
10. Hemtabad	4533	1255	4534	2367	580
11. Raiganj	13000	2470	8560	5646	6680
12. Karandighi	8023	2542	12332	1785	1020
13. Goalpokher-I	11000	1472	18435	1478	750
14. Goalpokher-II	15413	1410	25548	2012	250
15. Islampur	9260	2465	6450	3768	2150
16. Chopra	25100	2275	4250	4535	250

Source : Records of Trade Union Organisations.

From the above table (No. 7.2) we see that of the various peasants organisations in the district, the Sara Bharat Krishak Sabha has the largest number of members. The Sanjukta Kishan Sabha and Agragami Krishak Sabha occupies the second and the third position respectively. It is further observed that most of the members of SBKS, SKS and AKS comes from Chopra, Balurghat and Goalpukhar II Blocks respectively (Table No. 7.3).

Although these Trade Unions started movements since 1986-87 for the purpose of securing long-term credits for the farmers. 'Sara Bharat Krishak Sabha' led by CPI(M) plays the most important role. SBKS has been able to achieve the following in the agriculture front:

- i) Increasing the wage rates of agricultural labourers.
- ii) Removing rural indebtedness substantially.
- iii) Ensuring the employment of agricultural labourers throughout the year.
- iv) Introducing scientific methods of cultivation.
- v) Providing better marketing facilities.
- vi) Introducing fish production in scientific way.
- vii) Ensuring remunerative prices to the agricultural labourers.
- viii) Launching literacy drive.

Recently, the following demands have been included in SBKS's programme of movement:

- i) to form co-operative societies among the peasants and agricultural workers.
- ii) to find out the concealed land of big landlords beyond their ceiling, declare them 'vest' and to distribute these vested lands among the landless people.
- iii) to retain subsidy on fertilisers.
- iv) to supply pesticides and high quality seeds at proper time in cheaper rates, and
- v) to maintain equal wages for equal works both in respect of male and female workers.

Of late, a tendency has been growing among the 'Patta holders' (holders of vested land) of the state to dispose off their lands to the wealthy farmers (Jotedars) due to lack of fund and abject poverty. Ram Narayan Goswami, the General Secretary of SBKS describes it as 'Ultra-barga', i.e. re-snatching of lands of 'patta holders' by the 'Jotedars'. This has adversely affected the objective of 'operation barga' programme of the State Government. In view of this situation, SBKS has started its movement to check such illegal transfer of vested lands in the district⁶.

The evils of caste, creed and communalism have so far adversely affected the growth of healthier peasants movement in the district. To remove these evils 'co-operative' ideals should be infused among the peasants more and more. In the co-operative sector, the peasants organisation can select the farmers for training, move them to the Banks for short, medium and long-term loans and create pressure on the apex body of co-operatives for regular supply of loans, establish branches and retail outlets etc. Thus, we can say that a healthy Trade Union movement in the peasants and workers front is an essential pre-requisite for the sound and speedier growth of agriculture in the district.

7.4 SUMMARY

The study in this chapter brings us the following:

- * Trade Union has a unique role in mobilising the potential of workers in the unorganised sector.
- * Peasants Unions in the district at present are very weak. They should be organised well for the betterment of their socio-economic condition.
- * "Sara Bharat Krishak Sabha" led by CPI(M) plays the most important role in the peasant movement in the district.
- * It is a matter of satisfaction that the State Government is attaching great importance to the peasants and workers organisations for securing their demands.

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