

CHAPTER XIII: Summary and Conclusion

The tea industry has its far-reaching influences over the national economy particularly in respect of its export earnings and employment potentials. However, this study is designed to find out the nature of Industrial relations in tea industry in West Bengal with special reference to its tea gardens in Terai regions since independence. For this purpose, the following aspects have been thoroughly analysed; these are - the growth of tea industry, recruitment system, type and growth of employment over the period, condition of women in tea industry, growth in wages, existing labour welfare measures, intensity of industrial conflicts and the changing pattern of trade union movement. However, this chapter summarises the findings of this study.

We have found, that the rate of expansion of area under the cultivation of tea in West Bengal has remained more or less stagnant during the post-independence period. It has grown by only 0.62% annually, on an average, over the period, 1951 to 1990, against 1%, .81% and .70% respectively for Assam, North India and All India. As regards production of tea the State

has also lagged behind than Assam, North India, South India and all India average. During the period, 1951 to 1990 the average annual rate of growth of production in West Bengal estimated at 1.68% against 2.46% for Assam, 2.20% for North India, 3.17% for South India and 2.40% for All India. As regards yield per hectare the state has also lagged behind than the other tea growing regions of India.

Availability of land for extension of tea area in West Bengal having been identified as a major constraint, it would not be out of place to mention that the loss of planted areas in estates bordering rivers due to erosion is no less a significant constraint and demands urgent preventive measures. It is also imperative to establish an irrigation grid through the harnessing of numerous rivers and streams following through the tea growing areas of North Bengal.

We have found that all most all the labourers in the tea plantations, of Dooars, Terai and Darjeeling hills are immigrants and their decendants. Labourers of Terai and Dooars were mainly recruited from the aboriginal areas of Chotonagpur (Bihar). Labourers in Darjeeling hills were recruited from Nepal. Many abuses were caused by the employers in the course of the recruitment of labour. Even in the tea gardens the recruits suffered from several cruelty and hardship, unhygienic condition of living, bad and inadequate food, poor housing condition etc.

There was no specific legislation regarding the recruitment of labourers in tea gardens. The recruitment was done mainly through arkatis who employed dubious means to recruit unsuspecting tribals. By 1861 the British Government began to concern about the policy of recruitment of labour in tea gardens. The first Inland Emigration Act was passed in 1863. This Act and its subsequent amendments gave more protection to the employers than the tea garden labourers. This was in 1921, when several legislations had come into being seeking to protect plantation labour.

The employers encouraged families rather than individual to migrate for to tea gardens. We have found that the percentage of immigrations in Jalpaiguri tea gardens continuously increased at least up to 1921, thereafter the percentage decreased. Thus, after 1921 the industry had come to have a settled labour population who were begetting their successors.

We have observed that in early days the employers favoured the settlement of the retired labourers near the tea gardens, to keep secure the future supply of labour force for the tea industry. Some employers also allotted unused garden land which was in their possession much in excess of their own requirements. As a result the families have settled completely on a tea estate, and they are multiplied. At present in West Bengal tea gardens more than 92 per cent of the workers are resident labour. They all seek jobs in the tea gardens, subsequently the present position of labour supply in tea industry of West

Bengal had revised from shortage to surplus and unemployment in tea gardens appeared in the scene.

In the organization hierarchy of tea industry the level of management and staff are dominated by the outside educated Bengalis. A tribal worker can hardly be promoted to the level of sub-staff. Again this promotion is only available for the male workers and not for the female workers. Thus, the organization hierarchy in tea garden evolves ethnic crisis as well as sexual crisis.

The employment of labour force in the tea gardens of West Bengal increased significantly during the pre-independence period. The labour force increased by 73% during the period 1901 to 1941, against 52.14% increase in the area under the cultivation of tea. The gross employment area elasticity (Eg) is computed at 1.58 for the period 1901 to 1941. Labour per hectare also increased from 2.10 in 1901 to 2.68 in 1941.

But during the post independence period the scenerio of employment has been changed. The labour force in the tea gardens of west Bengal sharply decreased during the period 1952 to 1960. More than 125000 workers were reduced during that period. It is mainly due to the enactment of the plantation labour Act, 1951. Another significant cause of it is that the changing of ownership pattern was taking place during that period. Britishers were selling their gardens to the Indians.

Large number of labourers were retrenched during this course of conversion.

The period between 1961 to 1990 also did not show any improvement in the employment of labour force in the tea gardens of West Bengal. The labour force increased by 28.50% during the period 1961 to 1990, against 22.34% increase in the area under the cultivation of tea. The gross employment area elasticity (Eg) is computed at 1.253 for the period 1961 to 1990. The ratio of labour per hectare also remained constant during this period and it varied between 2.20 and 2.45. But we have found that the labour force in the Terai tea gardens of West Bengal had grown at a faster rate than that of West Bengal and other tea growing regions of India. It had grown at the rate of 2.68% annually during the period 1961 to 1990 against 0.84% annual rate of growth of West Bengal tea gardens during the same period of time. During the last 11 years (1980 to 1990) the labour force in the Terai tea gardens had grown at the rate of 4.52 annually, on an average, against 1.17%, 1.72%, 1.06% and 1.40% respectively for West Bengal, Assam, South India and All India. The gross employment area elasticity (Eg) of Terai tea gardens computed at 2.233 for the period 1961 to 1990. The labour per hectare in the Terai computed at 2.84, in 1990, which is also higher than that of West Bengal and other tea growing regions of India.

Thus, as regards employment of labourers Terai is much ahead than the average of West Bengal and other tea growing regions of India.

We have found that the concept of land labour ratio in tea industry still remains controversial. After the general strike of 1969, in a settlement, the Co-ordination Committee of Planters' Association (CCPA) agreed to maintain 2.72 workers per hectare. But in fact it exists more as a notion than in reality. At the end of 1990, except Terai in no other tea growing regions of India this agreement has been fulfilled. More than 1,46,000 additional workers could have been employed in all tea gardens of India by the execution of this agreement.

We have calculated the elasticity of employment with respect to average price of tea, production and area under the cultivation of tea. The results show that the employment is more elastic with respect to area of tea than the other factors. Since the ratio of labour per hectare is more or less stagnant throughout the period, there is very little hope to increase the employment in tea industry unless the new area of land is brought under the cultivation of tea.

We have found that in the pre-independence period the temporary employment in tea gardens of West Bengal had more and more given way to permanent tenures. The percentage of casual workers in Jalpaiguri tea gardens decreased from 30.97% in 1901 to 3.46% by 1941, and in Darjeeling tea gardens the same decreased from 40.03% to 2.67% during the same period of time. But in the post independence period particularly during the last few

decades the proportion of casual workers increased significantly. Since there is no published data on casual workers in tea industry and there is also a tendency on the part of the employers to suppress the real figure of casual workers, we have based on some field survey made on the subject in different time. Consulting these survey reports we have found that the percentage of casual workers in Terai tea gardens was 24.4% in 1973, 21.2% in 1981 and 36.8% in 1991. In our field survey in 1994 we have found the presence of 42.49% of casual workers in the total employment. Thus, it may be concluded that the increment in the total employment in tea industry of West Bengal after the seventies had been made much in the form of casual workers than the permanent workers.

Along with casualisation we have also found the presence of child workers in the work-structure of tea industry. The employment of child workers in tea industry is a practice since the pre independence period and it continued even after independence. More than 75,000 child workers were engaged in tea industry of India in 1990. Nearly 95% child labourers are employed in the tea plantations of North-east India. In the tea plantations of West Bengal nearly 6% of the total working force are the child labourers. In Assam they account for more than 10%. During the period 1961 to 1990 the child labourers in West Bengal tea gardens have grown at the rate of 0.33% per year while in the Terai tea gardens they have grown at the rate of 4.03% per year, during the same period of time. We have found a decreasing trend



of the employment of child labourers in all tea gardens of West Bengal since the seventies, but in the Terai tea gardens the employment of child labourers always found increasing tendency throughout the period 1961 to 1990.

By employing children in the work structure the employers get economic benefit. As a child worker is allowed half the wages of adults, but they work more than half of the period of that of adults. Again the employers have to provide subsidised ration to the dependents (up to 18 years of old) of adult workers. So they could save the cost of subsidised ration by employing those dependents as casual workers. On the other hand, due to economic crisis in family the workers send their children to work. The trade union leaders also ignore the aspect of child labourer on the ground of family income. So the children have been employed to fulfil the needs of both workers and employers.

The total labour force in the tea industry of West Bengal increased by 28.50% over the period 1961 to 1990. In Terai tea gardens the labour force increased by 121.21% during the same period of time. When we exclude the proportion of child labourers from the total working forces the above two percentages are changed to 29.84% and 53.92% respectively for West Bengal and Terai tea gardens.

Thus, as regards employment of labourers the Terai tea gardens had shown a higher rate than all tea growing regions of

India due to employment of more number of casual workers and child workers in the working structure.

We have observed that during the pre-independence period the wages of the tea garden workers were extremely low. In 1948, the total cash wages of a male worker in Terai was 1 Rupee, 1 anna and 6 paise (including Basic hazira, Doubli and Dearness allowance). After independence, The Government of West Bengal set up Minimum Wages Advisory Committee for tea Plantations in March, 1950. In 1952, the Committee fixed the minimum wage of a male worker in the Terai at Rs. 1.16 per day. In 1959 it increased to Rs. 1.81. The Central Govt. appointed the Central Wage Board for tea plantation industry in December 1960. The Board took 6 years and 3 months time to declare its final recommendation. However, during this tenure the Board declared two interim increments. By the final recommendation of the Wage Board the daily wage of a male worker increased to Rs. 2.10 in April, 1966. Between 1966 to 1973, wage increased at a very slow rate either through the recommendations of bipartite meetings or through the demand of the trade unions. By June 1973 the daily wage of a male worker in the Terai increased to Rs. 2.94.

The CCTPW submitted 19 point charter of demands including the revision of wage in June, 1973 and gave a threat of continuous strike w.e.f 6th August 1973 if the demands are not fulfilled. For the revision of wages the Govt. of West Bengal

set up the Second Minimum Wage Fixing Committee in July 1973. A few increments were granted by the committee during its four years term. But it could not come to any decision regarding the new rate of wage of the workers. Ultimately in May 1975, a consensus was reached. Accordingly, the committee granted a yearly increment of 45 paise per day in the daily wage of an adult worker for the next two years w.e.f July, 1975. Finally the committee recommended that the wage of all daily rated workers would be increased by one rupee annually w.e.f July, 1975. Thus, by June, 1979 the daily wage rate of an adult male worker in the Terai stood at Rs. 6.24. Since then the rates of wages of a daily rated worker in West Bengal tea industry have been fixed by tripartite agreements. The term of every tripartite agreement is three years. Till July 1994 six tripartite agreements have been made on the wage issue. They are in June 1977, May 1980, August 1983, June 1987, August 1990 and in July 1994. The tripartite agreement of August 1990 expired in June 1993, but the next agreement was signed in July 1994. The CCTPW demanded for the monthly rated wages for the tea garden workers, but the employers rejected the demand and agreed to increase the rates of daily wages by Rs. 7/- for the next three years, w.e.f April 1994. During the first two years the wage of a daily rated worker will be increased by Rs. 2.50 annually and in the third year by Rs. 2.00. It was also agreed that the workers will be provided 'Compensatory Settlement Money' for the period December 1993 to 31st March 1994. After this agreement the daily wage of an adult worker in Terai stood at Rs. 21.74 in July

1994.

Analysing the trends of wages we have found that money wage rate of the workers of Terai increased at a very slow rate. Between the period 1952 to 1994 the daily wage of a male worker increased by Rs. 20.58 i.e., 49 paise annually, on an average. Money wage increased at some what faster rate only after 1977. Between the period 1952 to 1977, the daily wage of a male worker increased by 12 paise annually, on an average. But the same increased by 97 paise annually, on an average, during the period 1977 to 1994. But during this period the Consumer Price Index (C.P.I) for plantation workers increased at a very faster rate. As a result the extra increment to money wage could not increase the real wage rate satisfactory.

In spite of organized trade union for the last 40 years the money wage rate of a tea garden worker less than that of an agricultural labour in north east India. Since the beginning of tripartite wage agreement we have found that the employers actually accepted less than half of the wage rate demanded by the CCTPW. The surplus population in tea garden becomes the main obstacle for the trade unions in wage negotiation. Due to backwardness of the areas no other employment opportunity is generated in the vicinity of the tea gardens. Education among the children of the workers also did not expand. As such they are depended upon the employment of tea industry generation after generation. This situation gave wide scope to the employers

to employ more number of casual workers and child workers in the work structure. In tea gardens most of the casual workers are related to the permanent workers; permanent workers are beneficial as their family income increases. Thus, when the trade unions demand for higher rate of wages for the workers, the employers give threat to reduce the number of casual workers. The reduction of casual workers will directly affect the permanent labour force as their family income will reduce.

Thus, in order to make the wage negotiation more favourable to the workers all efforts to be made to remove the surplus population from the tea garden areas. To overcome this problem the tea garden regions are to be developed for generating other employment opportunities. In this juncture we may suggest to connect the tea garden areas with the nearest Panchayat. Primary education among the children of the workers is to be expanded. The adolescents are to be imparted some technical skills so they can seek employment outside the tea garden areas. In this connection we may suggest to extend the training scheme of Nehru Rozgar Yozona amongst the children of the tea garden workers. At present the scheme is only available for the poorer section of municipal and Panchayat areas.

More than 48% of the total working force in West Bengal tea gardens are the female workers. Employing women in tea was more profitable for the employer for many years since the Equal Remuneration Act, Maternity Benefit Act, provision of creche etc.

were not applied. We have found that the ratio of female workers in per 1000 males showed a decreasing trend since the eighties. This is perhaps due to the implementation of Equal Remuneration Act, Maternity Benefit Act etc. Though these Acts were passed before the eighties, but in tea gardens the employers started to give effect of the Acts from the eighties.

In tea gardens the women are the subject of exploitation for a long period of time. Till the end of colonial era cases of rape; forcible seduction, buying and selling of women and decoying young women by various artifices were rampant. After independence though their sexual assaultation had been stopped, but they were exploited in different forms. Even after the enactment of the Equal Remuneration Act in 1975, they were given less wages at least up to 1983. Though it is obligatory on the part of the employers to provide creches for the children of the women, the employers are deliberately ignoring the aspect of creches in many gardens. Consequently, they have to strapp their babies to their backs along with 25 kg/30 kg plucked tea.

In tea industry the literacy rate of women is much less than that of males. In our field survey we have found that only 19% females are literate. We have also found that inequality between men and women has been fully carried over into the trade union organization. In the leadership structure of trade union the male workers always dominate. But if a procession or a demonstration is staged the women are placed at the front. In

organization hierarchy she does not get promotion to the sub-staff position along with male tribal workers. Neither the trade unions nor the government raise voice against such exploitation of women in the tea gardens.

In order to improve the social status of women it is needed to change the reproductive burdens under which women toil presently. Creches are a facility which can relieve women temporarily from their continuous preoccupation with child care. Enforcing of other statutory rights like adequate sanitation and water supply in the plantation living areas will also lighten the domestic burdens of women. This will enable them not only to participate more actively in their workplace and trade unions, but will also help them to overcome inherent handicaps like illiteracy over time.

There are three possible agencies whose intervention can bring the change of women's position, namely, management, government and trade union.

The plantation managements intervene only to those issues which improve their profits. Hence, they are unlikely to take any initiative to improve the status of women workers unless they find there is a correlation between the status of women and their productivity.

The government is the single most important agency which can bring about change in the position of women by enacting the various laws. But the main drawback on the part of the

government is the effective enforcement of these laws due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of adequate political will. But the importance of such legislation is that it creates a political space in which labour unions can legitimately agitate for their legal rights.

Trade unions can play a vital role in enforcing implementation of legislation by building pressure from below. So far they have successfully raised the issues concerning improvement of wage and bonuses, but the women's issues have been conspicuously absent from the agenda of the trade unions. Essentially the patriarchal perspectives of trade unions may be at least partially responsible for this neglect.

Thus, the only way in which permanent change can come about is through organized activity by the women themselves. This implies that women need to organize themselves along gender lines so that their concerns are adequately addressed. Educating themselves regarding their rights and creating mutual support facilities would be as important as pressuring managements and government for equality. Once their unity is manifest, trade unions will have to come to terms with the demands and concerns of woman labourers.

We have observed that the communists were the first to introduce trade unionism in tea gardens in around 1946. The railway workers played an important role in organizing tea garden workers in the Dooars. The Tebhaga movement in North



Bengal deeply influenced the tea garden workers in Jalpaiguri. The demand for a larger share of the crop was seen as a necessary adjunct of the movement for concessions from plantation companies. The strike of 1955 affected gardens in the Dooars as well as in the Terai and though the strike was called off by the unions, it compelled the owners to pay a bonus for the first time in the history of tea gardens. In August, 1969, however, the strike was almost total in West Bengal. After 1969, no organized movement took place in tea industry.

We have observed that the labour militancy in tea industry rose its peak during the United Front Government regime in 1967 and 1969. Because the U.F. Govt. was at the back of the workers, helping them in their movement against the employers. The police was also kept themselves aloof from the labour agitation. After 1969, the labour militancy considerably reduced due to development of negotiation processes. The negotiations succeeded to regulate the two main economic issues like wages and bonus. But the other economic issues like provident fund, gratuity etc. yet to be regulated. There are number of tea gardens where the employers have been defaulted to deposit the workers' provident fund money.

The CCTPW has not initiated any joint movement on the issues of labour welfare, though there is huge laxity on the part of the employers on the implementation of the provisions of the PLA. We have observed that only 12% tea gardens of West Bengal have

constructed 100% houses of total requirements. The medical aspect is deliberately ignored by the employers. The number of Doctors, Midwives, Nurses, Compounders and Health Assistants are less than one in per 1000 population in the tea gardens of West Bengal. The commitment of the employers as regards other obligatory welfare provisions like creches, sanitation, drinking water, education of the children of the workers etc. is also very poor. The trade unions could not succeed to improve these issues due to weakness of trade union at the garden level. Trade unions at the garden level do not initiate the movement jointly but individually. The different trade unions vie with each other to secure the backing of workers. Accordingly, when a union submits a Charter of Demands before the management on different issues of the workers, the other unions do not support it rather protest against it. So it is needed to form a common forum at the garden level to develop the collective bargaining strength of the trade unions at the garden level. At the same time CCTPW should also take initiative to improve the welfare facilities at the garden level through joint action.

We have observed that there is no uniform and regular upward or downward trend in industrial disputes (strike and lock-out) in tea industry of West Bengal. There is also no correlation existing between the figures relating to the number of work-stoppages, number of workers involved and the mandays lost. During the last 19 years (1972-1990), on an average, about 11 work-stoppages involving around 11852 workers and

resulting in loss of more than 1,23,268 mandays.

We have observed that there is a changing nature of industrial relations in tea industry since 1981. Between the period 1972 to 1980, the mandays lost due to strike was more than that of lock-out. But since 1981 there is a marked increase in the number of mandays lost due to lock-outs in tea industry. Average duration of strike was also becoming shorter since 1981. This proved the unequal strength of the labour management and decline in sustaining power and consequent fall in the bargaining power of the workers of tea industry.

The industrywise distribution of work-stoppage in West Bengal for the period 1981 to 1990, reveals that the annual average incidence of work-stoppages is 4.38 against 28.55% in Engineering industry and 11.25% in Jute industry. Thus, as regards strikes and lock-outs the tea industry is the least dispute prone in West Bengal than the other major industries in the state. But as regards inarticulate disputes like absenteeism the tea industry is much ahead than the other major industries of the state. The tea industry in the state accounts for the highest rate of absenteeism with 16.42% p.a over the period 1974 to 1989, against 15.7%, 14.78% and 12.94% in case of Engineering, Chemical and Cotton industry respectively over the same period of time. Household work and child caring

activities are the main reasons for absenteeism among the women workers. But alcoholism is the prime cause of absenteeism among the male workers.

Finally we have done a field survey in Mohurgong & Gulma Tea Estate, Kiran Chandra Tea Estate and Sanyasisthan Tea Estate of Terai region to study the impact of trade unionism on tea garden areas. We have observed that about 100% of the workers are the members of the trade unions. The CITU has the highest number of members among the respondents followed by the UTUC, RCMC and NUPW. It is found that the workers became the members of the unions more because of getting better facilities than the influence of the leaders. We have observed that the trade unions have failed to regulate the issues like work-schedule, wages, welfare provisions as per P.L.A. ration etc. As the most of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction on these issues. Attitude of the workers towards the management also found hostile. The workers expressed their dissatisfaction on the management. Trade unionism in tea gardens also could not improve the literacy rate of the workers. Trade unions are neglecting the aspect of the education of the children of the workers. We have found that about 55% minor dependents neither go to school nor go to work.

In India, tea becomes an important industry and it is meaningful in many ways in the national economy. India is one of the largest producer and exporter of tea in the world market.

Tea contributes a substantial part in the export led development of India. It becomes the second biggest export earner after the engineering goods industry in the country. This industry is highly labour intensive; about a million workers are directly employed in this industry. But the industrial relations in this industry remains a matter of continual tension and dispute prone due to the non-implementation of the statutory obligations by the owners of the tea industry. Besides the role of the trade unions, government should come forward with utmost sincerity to convince the owners for immediate implementation of the statutory obligations so that the country's tea industry may run smoothly.