

CHAPTER I : Introduction

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Tea is one of the major industries in India. India is the world's largest producer and exporter of tea. Every year it produces more than 700 million kg. of tea and exports about 200 million kg. India earns more than one thousand crores of rupees annually from the export of tea. Tea contributes about 3.25% of the total export earnings of India. India contributes about 18% of the world's total exports.

Tea is produced in India in the regions of North and South India. The major tea producing states of North India are Assam, West Bengal and Tripura. In South India tea is produced in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka.

Tea industry also employs the largest number of labourers in India. The industry employs about one million labourers. The tea industry is a large agro-based and labour-intensive industry. It largely depends on manual labour than technological input, consequently harmony in labour relations is an essential pre-requisite for the prosperity and efficiency of tea industry.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The concept of industrial relations in tea plantations has developed after independence. Prior to this, a semi-feudal type of production relation existed in the tea plantations and the relations between the planter and worker was less like that between employer and employee and more like between master and servant. The worker was looked upon as a commodity. The planter was in a dominating situation, he dictated both the wages as well as the conditions of service of the workers resulting in many industrial and social ills such as low wages, unduly long hours of works, poor working conditions and persecution of labour leaders. Besides bullying, flogging and other forms of brutality were quite common for disciplining erring workers. The plight of the workers was miserable, and they had no other ways but to tolerate the tyrannies and naked exploitation of planters, because they had no organization at all and at the same time planters were highly organized and powerful. Trade union leaders had no access to the gardens and they were persecuted and victimized by the planters.

After independence, the Government of India enacted various laws to regulate the relationship between the worker and the planter. The Plantation Labour Act (PLA) 1951 includes several statutory welfare provisions for labour, such as, housing, sanitation, schooling facilities for the children of workers, medical facilities, drinking water, creches etc.

In March 1950 the State Government appointed the Minimum Wages Advisory Committee for Tea Plantations. The recommendations of this committee came into effect in early 1952. This guarantee of a minimum wage provided some economic protection to the workers. Subsequently, other acts were passed granting some facilities to the workers. Some of these acts, such as the payment of Bonus Act, and the Acts providing for Provident Fund and Gratuity, etc. affected the working class in the country. There were other acts too which had been passed earlier like the Industrial Disputes Act 1947 and its standing orders, minimum wage Act of 1948, Factories Act 1948, which provided for some security of workers in general. These were initially ignored by the planters as there was no check on them. The state apparatus to enforce their application did not exist. In early 1950s the State Government set up the Labour Bureau which appointed Assistant Labour Commissioners and Labour Officers to look into the implementation of the acts. Labour Tribunals were also set up to decide disputes.

Thus, we see that after independence the relationship between the worker and the planter became more formalised. The existing master and servant relationship was replaced by employer and employee relationship. The planter started losing the grip over the workers, which they had maintained formerly. The worker here was not wholly dependent on the mercies of the planter. He was given some legal protection. Consequently,

the loosening of the tight grip of the planters on the workers gave more scope to the workers to form associations and Trade Unions gained momentum and became well entrenched among the garden workers.

A new awakening among the garden workers was brought about the entrance of trade unions and the industrial relations took a new turn. Workers began to take retaliatory action to help themselves get a new deal. They began to resort to strike. In their turn, the planters retaliated by declaring lock-outs and the "industrial war" began in tea plantations.

Despite various laws, the intervention of trade unions and measured by the government, industrial relations in the tea gardens of West Bengal have been deteriorating over the years. The present study has examined the changing pattern of industrial relations in the tea industry of West Bengal and the role of trade unions there to, with special reference to the tea gardens of Terai area. For this purpose the study has taken into account, growth of tea industry, recruitment procedures, employment, remuneration, growth of trade union movement in different periods, labour welfare and the industrial conflicts (strikes and lock-outs).

1.2 Scope of Study

We find that the number of industrial conflicts (strikes & lock-outs) in tea industry of West Bengal considerably

decreased since the seventies for the development of negotiation processes. Though the negotiation processes have brought peaceful industrial relations in tea industry but they could not bring healthy industrial relations. So the present study has made an assessment of the causes of unhealthy industrial relations in tea industry of West Bengal with special reference to its tea gardens in the Terai region.

1.3 Brief Review of Literature

There have been several studies of various aspect of tea industry. These are mainly on financial management, and geographical aspects of tea industry. A few studies partially dealt with labour relations. A brief review of those studies are made below :

Dr. Sharit Bhowmik made a study on 'Class Formation in the Plantation System' in 1981. This study attempts to investigate into the different aspects of class formation among tribal workers engaged in the Dooars tea gardens of West Bengal. The study reflects how class consciousness emerged among garden workers. Since the study based on sociological theories, less focus is given to the aspects of industrial relations and greater effort is made to show how social relations of tribal workers changed with the change in organization of production.

The study of Sri Umanand Phukan on 'The Ex-Tea Garden Labour Population in Assam', in 1984, attempts to recall how labourers from different parts of the country entered into the various tea plantations of Assam during the nineteenth century, and how their number naturally grew with the passage of time which ultimately constituted a sizeable segment of the rural population of Assam. It is a socio-economic study of the Labourers of Assam tea plantations. It analyses the historical circumstances under which the immigrant tea garden labourers left their regular employment on the tea plantations and chose to settle in villages.

The study on 'Economics of Tea Industry in India' of R.C. Awasthi, in 1975, is a study of gamut problems in the tea industry. With other matters like finance, supplies, transport, marketing etc, the study has also gone through the matters relating to labour in one chapter. The study partially dealt with labour relations. Important indices of industrial relations such as industrial disputes, role of Government and unions have not taken place significantly in the study. Moreover the entire study is based on the tea gardens of Assam.

'The History of Indian Tea Industry' of Sir Percival Griffiths, in 1967, is completely a study of the historical growth of Indian tea industry. While describing the evolution passage of the growth of tea industry in India, the study also describes origin of plantation labourers, recruitment system

and the state of planters' oppression on which the workers had to undergo during the pre-independence period. The study has not separately discussed the labour relations in tea plantations.

"Tea Gardens of West Bengal" of Tushar Kanti Ghosh in 1987, is a study on the land management policies of tea gardens. The study covers the history of tea industry in West Bengal, land management policies, rules, regulations etc. The study made a correlation between the problems of sick and closed gardens with the improper land management policies.

A number of thesis on tea industry has been submitted by scholars in North Bengal University for Ph.D degree. Here also the scholars have not provided full effort on labour relations. Most of the studies related to Financial management, sickness and historic growth of tea industry. However, the thesis of Dr. Mita Bhadra on 'Life and Labour of Plantation Women Workers' has provided focus on the Labourers of tea Plantations. It is again a sociological study on women which deals with the life and labour of women workers in a tea plantation of Darjeeling district in West Bengal. It reflects the changes in the status and roles of women employed in the tea industry.

The thesis of Dr. Kanchan Sarkar on "study of trade union organization among the tea workers in Terai and Dooars regions", has discussed the trade union movement in tea industry in different period. But the study does not provide the reaction of employers with the growth of trade union

movement in tea industry. Moreover the study does not present statistically the trends of conflicts (strikes & lock-outs) in tea industry.

So far there has been very little effort to study in depth the labour relations in the tea gardens of West Bengal. The existing research works on the labourers of tea industry have been made by the scholars of sociology and social anthropology. They have given much emphasis on the changing social relations of workers than industrial relations. But these studies have helped us to frame out the objectives of the present study.

1.4 Period of Study

Our study covers a period of 40 years, 1951 to 1990 to get a representative picture of changing pattern of industrial relations in the tea industry of West Bengal.

1.5 Sources of Data

We have used both primary and secondary data. Secondary data have been collected from different sources, viz. Reports on annual general meetings of Terai Planters' Association (TPA), Reports on annual general meetings of Terai Branch of Indian Tea Association (TBITA), Tea Statistics - Published by Tea Board, Calcutta. Tea Statistics - Published by J. Thomas & Pvt. Company Ltd., Calcutta, Labour in West Bengal, Published by the Ministry of Labour, Govt. of West Bengal.

Besides the above a number of leading journals of tea, viz. Tea Journal, Calcutta, Assam Review & Tea News, Calcutta etc. have also been consulted for secondary data.

Primary data have been collected through field survey in the three tea gardens of Terai, viz., Mohurgong & Gulma, Kiran Chandra and Sanyasisthan Tea Estate during the period March, 1994 to June, 1994.

1.5 Research Methodology

The present study is an empirical investigation of a macro-nature to interpret the labour relations in tea plantations of West Bengal with special reference to its tea gardens of Terai region. For this purpose both secondary and primary data have been used. The broad inference is also drawn from analysis of discussions with the trade union leaders, management personnel, government officials and the labourers. Data have been analysed by different methods, like compound growth rate, elasticity, arithmetic mean, correlation regression etc.

1.7 Limitation of Data

The secondary data was mainly collected from Tea Statistics of Tea Board and Labour Statistics of the Govt. of West Bengal. The data on labour employed in Tea industry of West Bengal

regionwise presented in Tea Statistics since 1961. Thus, in Chapter IV, we could not show the employment in Terai tea gardens during the period 1950 to 1960. Tea Statistics also does not present the exact number of casual workers in tea industry. It only presents outside temporary workers. But there are large number of resident casual workers are employed in tea gardens. Thus, in Chapter V, to estimate the proportion of permanent and casual workers in tea industry; we have based on the results of some surveys made by the scholars time to time.

In order to estimate the intensity of industrial conflicts (strikes & lock-outs) in tea industry over the period we have based on 'Labour in West Bengal', published by the Ministry of Labour, Govt. of West Bengal. But unfortunately the Directorate Of Labour, Calcutta and National Library, Calcutta have not maintained the 'Labour in West Bengal' of the periods 1950 to 1970. So, in Chapter XI, we have presented the trends of conflicts (strikes & lock-outs) in tea industry for the period 1972 to 1990. The labour management conflicts in tea industry during the fifties and sixties have been analysed in Chapter VIII. Interpretations have been made from the proceedings of annual general meetings of Terai Planters' Association (T.P.A) and Terai Branch of Indian Tea Association (TBITA).

'Labour in West Bengal' also does not present the data on industrial conflicts in tea industry of West Bengal separately for Dooars, Terai and Darjeeling Hills. It presents the figures of conflicts (strikes & lock-outs) in West Bengal Tea Industry. As such, in Chapter XI, we could not present the position of strikes and lock-outs in the Terai tea gardens. Data on labour absenteeism in 'Labour in West Bengal' is also available only since 1974.