

## CHAPTER VIII

TRADE UNION & SOCIAL CHANGE

We have already mentioned that the workers of tea gardens of Terai and Dooars regions were mostly tribals of Chotonagpur - Santhalpargana region. A significant number of tea workers of these regions also were Nepalise or Nepali speaking people. As most of the workers were adivasis of Chotonagpur - Santhal Pargana region, this chapter deals only with the social life of the adivasi workers, role of union in their social life and the impact of it.

The adivasi workers of Chotonagpur - Santhal Pargana origin were not a homogeneous group. They were divided into different tribes such as Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Baraik, Mahali, Lohar etc. A clear hierarchy existed among these tribes. The Oraon, Munda, Kheria etc. were traditionally cultivating tribes and formed a common status group, whereas the Baraik, Mahali, Lohar etc. were artisan tribes, formed another status group. The former claimed themselves superior to the latter. This hierarchy also reflected in their social life.

Besides having different occupation and different social status in the social hierarchy, the languages or dialects of these tribes are also different. The Oraons speak Kurukh, a language/dialect belongs to the Dravidian family. The language/dialect of the Mundas is Mundari which belongs to the austro-asiatic section of the austric language family. The other tribes, such as Kharia, Turi, Mahali etc. speak dialects of Mundari.

There are more similarities and dissimilarities among these tribes before migration to the tea gardens. But after migrating to the tea gardens their economic activities have been homogeneous, settlement patterns have been mixed, communications with the outside world have been developed, they are now more educated and they have come under a new type of political organization - the trade union.

We will now try to find out how trade unions involve changes in their way of life, which mean social adjustments and adaptations.

Here we have tried to see the changes in their religious institutions, social institutions, political institutions, material culture and so on.

#### RELIGION :

The adivasis mainly belonged to two religions - Samsar and Christian. The Christians were either Roman Catholics or Protestants. The Samsar religion was based on animistic beliefs. At the same time they have borrowed from their Hindu neighbours some Hindu rituals, ceremonies etc. They also gave up practicing some of their traditional festivals like Sarhul, Baha, Megha etc. Among their traditional festivals they now observe Fagua, Gaonpuja, Jitia, Karma etc. With the change of economy the rituals once practiced by them in agricultural operations, hunting and in their dormitories, were no longer necessary. Instead of these,

they worshipped different Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Durga, Kali, Saraswati, Biswakarma etc.

The Christians observed their own religious festivals like Good Friday, Christmas etc.

So far our observations went, there was no superior-inferior feelings among the above two religious groups.

In the traditional tribal society Totem was very important ritualistic belief. Each tribe was subdivided into number of clan. The clan was exogamous and totemic in nature. Each clan bore the name of either a bird or an animal or a tree etc. The tribal people believed that they have descended from that bird, animal or the tree. The clan totems were not worshiped by the tribal workers of the tea gardens but they maintained totemic restrictions in the form of not doing any harm to the totemic objects. The rule of clan exogamy were not followed rigidly by the tribal people.

#### PURITY & POLLUTION :

The concept of purity and pollution still exist among the tribal workers. In the days of yore, the Oraon, Munda, Kheria, Santhal - the people of upper status group would not dine with the members of other status group-Baraik, Mahali, Lohar etc. Even the concept of pollution was observed in case of water also. If an Oraon, Munda, Kheria Santhal or anyone of this common status group was carrying water and if it was touched by a person of another status group or even his shadow

fell on the person carrying the water, the person would throw away the water. If the pot was earthen, he would break it and if it were of metal it would be heated till red hot to purify it. Food, cooked or uncooked also was considered polluted had it been touched by anyone of the so called lower status group. The conception of pollution was so rigid that if a person of lower status group entered the house of a person of higher status group, the house had to be purified by smearing with a mixture of cowdung, turmeric powder and a bit of copper (an old coin).

However, now-a-days in the tribal society of the tea gardens, this concept of purity and pollution has eroded a lot, particularly among the younger generation tribals. The younger generation did not observe all these concepts of pollution in their day to day life. Now, they dine with each other irrespective of any tribes. But, still in the ceremonies like marriage, child birth, death (Sradh ceremony) the people of one status group would not dine with the people of another status group. The former would be supplied some uncooked food items and the person himself would cook it separately. The women folk and old people were found to be less flexible than the menfolk and younger generation regarding the rituals of pollution.

#### INTER-TRIBAL MARRIAGE :

Inter-tribal marriage was strictly forbidden in the tribal society in the past. It was a punishable offence and

the tribal panchayat was to decide it. In the tea gardens also, the tribal panchayat would decide the fate of the couple. In the earlier days, the couple would be asked to leave the garden or they would be excommunicated. If they did not leave the garden, they were driven out of the garden.

But, during the last few years, inter-tribal marriages were increasing. The tribal society now have become less rigid about it. The panchayat generally decided a fine for the grooms party. The panchayat kept a minimum part of it and the bride's father/guardian got the maximum part. After this, Hariya was distributed and a white chicken or goat was sacrificed. Each one of the concerned parties would drink a drop of blood of this animal. The meat was cooked and consumed. The Christian adivasis also observed all these rules and rituals in case of inter-tribal marriages and in addition to these they went to the church.

#### POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS :

In their homeland there were two distinct political bodies which looked after all the matters of public interests and private rights in and outside the village community. The village panch (or panchayet) headed by a recognised headman (generally an elderly person) controlled the affairs within the village, whereas the parha organisation was a confederacy of a number of neighbouring villages with a central organisation known as the Parha Panch acted like an inter-village council.

The meaning of panch means five, but in practice all the elder members of the village community could participate in its deliberations. There were three recognised officials, the munda (headman), the pahan (priest) and the mahato (messenger) gave permanency and corporate character to the panch. The process of panchayat, was as follows. The aggrieved person verbally had to complain to the village mahato and the village pahan. The elders of the village would assemble at the villa akhra or some other appointed place. The village gorait summoned the depicting parties before the assembly. The pahan or the mahato informed the defendant of the substance of the complaint against him and heard his answer, and if necessary took evidence. Then panch gave its judgement. After the judgement, each party had to pay a fees to the panch. The money was to be spent on liquor.

Each parha consisted of a number of villages. One of the villages was called the Raja (king) village, another the Dewan (prime minister) villagg, a third the panrey (clerk of the crown) village, a fourth the Kotwar (bailiff) village and so on. Those villages which have not got such denominations were known as Praja (subject) villages. The Raja village was the head of the villages of the Parha. Some head men of that village presided over the meeting of the parha panch. In the traditional tribal society, through the meetings of the parhapanch the inter-villages disputes were solved.

The above structure of Panch and Parha have been nearly extinct in the tribal society of the tea gardens.

The elderly leaders of the traditional panch now have been gradually replacing by the union leaders. If any dispute occurs out of any social, political, religious or economic matter in the tribal society of tea gardens, the union leaders only or with some elderly persons would meet to solve the problem. If they could not, they would inform it to the manager of the tea garden.

The pahan (priest) beside a member of the panch also acted as a priest in their homeland. But in the tea gardens of Terai and Dooars the Pahans have been replaced by the Bhagats. Perhaps the pahans did not migrate to the tea districts of North Bengal.

#### LANGUAGE :

We have already discussed that each tribe had its own dialect. But, in the tea gardens most of the tribes except Oraon, Munda have forgotten the use of their mother tongues. The lingua franca of all these tribes was Sadri including the Oraons and Mundas. Due to the commercial intercourses among the different tribes in the tea gardens Sadri has been developed as the lingua franca among the tribes. Sadri was also spoken by the tribes in Chotonagpur also.

#### SOCIALIZATION :

Bachelors' and Maidens' dormitories were the institution for the training and socialization of youths and girls among most of the tribes in the past. These dormitories were the glimpses of the very archaic form of economic, social and

religious organisations to train the youths and girls for the purposes of food-quest, about their social and other duties and about the magico-religious observations calculated to secure success in hunting and to augment the procreative power.

In the tea gardens the dormitories were absent. Food quest, agriculture and hunting were no longer so much necessary to the tribes and also there was little scope for these types of economic activities. In lieu of the dormitories the elders taught the youths and girls about their social, religious, cultural customs and duties. Besides, most of the tea gardens had primary schools, though they were not properly equipped and maintained. The children of the workers read in these schools. The percentage of literacy among the workers of the three tea gardens was 49.2, though the level of higher education was much lesser (chapter - V ).

#### FOOD HABIT :

The staple food of the adivasis was Rice. But an ordinary adivasi could not provide for himself and his family a full diet of rice all the year around. Wheat has been introduced lately in these areas. In the lean period they took Gondli (*Panicum miliare*), Marua (*Eleusine coracana*) etc. The side dishes included Sag (spinach), vegetables like pumpkins, arum, sweet potato, brinjals, lady's-finger, beans, radishes, onions, chillies, etc. Meat, fish, milk, eggs were also taken when available.

In the tea gardens, the staple food of adivasi workers was rice and wheat. The side dishes remained more or less same with their past habit. But in the lean period the adivasi workers took Cha-Bhat. The Cha-Bhat was boiled rice with tea and with a little salt added.

In the past they had only one addiction of drinking Haria (rice-beer). But, now-a-days a significant number of adivasi workers have picked up the habit of smoking biri, cigarette, ganja (hemp), tea, pachai (unlicenced country liquor), pan (betel leaf) etc.

#### DRESS PATTERN :

In the earlier days the clothing of an adult tribal male was generally a piece of cotton cloth about a foot in width and three to five or even six yards in length. It was being worn around the waist and then passed between the thighs once tightly and again loosely, the ends being allowed to hang down from the waist. The dress of an adult tribal women was a piece of cloth about four cubits long. They used to wore it round the waist and reached down to the knees. The upper part of the body was without covering.

But now, the pattern of dresses has been changed. The old men wear Dhotis and shirts, young men wear trousers, shirts etc. The dresses of old women were sarees and sometimes blouses also. The girls or young women generally wear frocks, sarees, petticoats, blouses etc.

The uses of traditional pattern of brass-jewellery or bell-metal jewellery have been on the wane. The tribal girls of tea gardens now use hairpins, ribbons, plastic or glass bangles etc. The males do use ornaments now, though in the old days they wear ornaments.

Tatuing was very popular particularly among the tribal girls, but now, it is seldom practiced.

#### HEALTH PRACTICES BEHAVIOUR

The health practices behaviour of the tribal people have also been changed to some extent. In the earlier days they were totally dependent on the local medicants and herbs. But in the tea gardens they have come into contact with the modern allopathic treatment. They used allopathic drugs where it was available. Uses of herbs were also continuing among them, but at a lesser degree.

#### RECREATION :

The tribal people were very fond of dancing and singing. Dances were part and parcel of their life. They danced, they sang in their marriages, fighting, hunting, agricultural operations in their religious festivals etc. Now, these types of entertainments are on the verge of ruin. Instead of these, loudspeakers, tapes, videos, @inemas are the medium of entertainments of the tribal workers of tea gardens now.

Till now we have discussed about the social life of the adivasi workers with their changes, adaptations and adjustments

with the new socio-economic environment. It is not always possible to work out a particular cause for a particular change. A variety of changes have taken place in the life of these workers, in some cases they have adapted themselves with the new environment, in other cases they have adjusted.

Here, now we would discuss about the role and impact of trade union on the social life of the workers.

Besides its role in collective bargaining and on the working life of the workers, the trade union should influence the social life of the workers, otherwise the all round development of the society would be incomplete. In the present tribal society of the tea gardens, we have seen that changes have taken place in all spheres of their life, i.e. in their social institutions, cultural institutions, religious institution, political institutions and so on. Trade unions, had definitely some roles on it. But the question was that how much these roles had penetrated into the social life of the workers and whether these impacts were direct or indirect?

Trade union was the only organisation of the workers. It helped to break the isolation of the tea workers who were insulated in the tea gardens for a number of decades. Besides other reasons like independence, development of communication and so on, trade union helped very significantly to establish the relation between the tea workers and the outside world. Mixing with the neighbouring semi-urban and urban societies,

which were comparatively modern than the tribal societies in the tea gardens, helped to develop modern outlooks about different spheres of life.

Struggling unitedly years after years under the banners of trade unions, a sense of solidarity had developed among the workers which cut across partially the barriers of stratification among the tribal society.

In the annual conferences of unions, delegates came, belonged to different tribal communities. In the earlier days, there were separate cooking arrangements for Bhagats (a sect of Oraon), for women delegates. The system had gradually stopped. Now all delegates irrespective of castes, tribes, sexes dined together. Delegates belonged to different tribes and castes also slept in a common place. When they came back home, the memories of these practice remained. It definitely helped to erase partially the age old concept of pollution among the tribal workers.

We have also seen that most of the social leaders of the tribal societies of the tea gardens were also union leaders. They were also young. In any disputes out of any social, religious or other reasons the judgement of an young social leader (who was a union leader also) should be more progressive than an orthodox old leader.

Besides, some of the unions also organised different seminars, workshops, annual sports, tournaments etc. One union

organised zonal annual sports among the tea garden workers, annual football and volleyball tournaments and coaching camp for mental and physical development of the workers. This union was also conducting adult education classes among its members. Two unions were running training programme on tailoring for the dependent female relatives of the workers. One of the unions conducted educational courses for its women members. Two unions organised regular seminars on the different problems of tea plantation workers to aware the workers about their social and economic rights. Some of the unions also arranged seminars on women trade union leaders for the development of union leaders. But all these seminars, workshops were attended by few participants as the seminars, workshops could hardly create any enthusiasm among the workers.

Though most of the seminars and workshops were attended by few participants, yet the unions did not try seriously to increase the number of participants. We did not find any follow up of these seminars or workshops. Still some of the unions were interested in organising these seminars etc., perhaps because these unions got a handsome amount of money from their international organisations for organising these seminars, workshops etc.

Above all every union conducted political classes for their members, though the number of political classes had been decreased gradually to a minimum. The union leaders also sometimes taught the workers about the evils of inter-tribal barrier,

liquor addiction and so on in their day to day conversations. But those are too casual in nature.

These were the roles and impacts of unions in the social life of the workers. Some of the roles of the unions directly influenced the life of the workers, while others indirectly. The extent of penetration of the works of the unions was not too much as almost all the unions were not so interested about the social life of the workers. We did not find any union organised any seminar on the evils of inter-tribal barrier, concept of pollution, liquor addiction, savings, importance of education etc. Education, which is the pioneer liberating force, hardly got any importance to the union for discussion on the bargaining table.

What we have seen that trade unions did not help the workers to be conscious, educated and well informed so that they became independent.

Besides the trade unions the central government also introduced workers' Education Schemes through Central Board for Workers Education (CBWE) aims at achieving the following four objectives :

- 1) to develop stronger and more effective trade unions through better trained officials and more enlightened members, for the strengthening of bonds of loyalty to the unions,

- ii) to develop leadership from the rank and file and to promote the growth of democratic process and trade union organisation and administration.
- iii) to equip organised labour to take its place in democratic society and fulfill its social and economic responsibilities, and
- iv) to promote among workers a greater understanding of the problems of their economic environment and their privileges and obligations as union members and officials and citizens.

An important objective of the scheme was to inculcate a sense of trade union consciousness among workers. Another objective was to develop a cadre of inside leaders and do away with outside leaders. In order to achieve this objective trade union involvement in the running of the scheme was sought to be enhanced. However, the CBWE scheme does not seem to have much headway in achieving the objective.

#### TRADE UNION AND WOMEN WORKERS:

Tea is the only industry in the organised sector which employs a large number of female workers. They form half the total work force. This is significant because in other industries

in the organised sector employment of women has been decreased continuously.

There was perhaps no other organised industry employing women in so large numbers and at the same time having so high proportion of women workers. This high concentration of women workers was due to certain factors which were peculiar to this industry. The work in plantation being of agricultural nature, women find it easy to adapt themselves to the jobs. In fact, because of their skilful fingers, they can perform certain jobs like tea plucking, coffee picking etc. better than even men in certain cases. Recruitment of labour was done family basis and the whole family was made to settle on plantations. This provided equal opportunity to women for taking up wage employment in plantations.

In 1985, the total number of average daily workers (permanent) in the tea gardens of West Bengal was 199, 581. The number of male workers was 97,305, number of female workers was 93,224 while adolescent and children numbered was 4,655 and 4,397 respectively (Tea Board 1987:153 & 154).

The percentage of trade union membership among the female workers was also high in tea industry among all other industries in India. In 1927-28 the number of women workers in the membership of registered trade unions was 1,168 (2.1%). It increased to 106,242 (6.1%) in 1950-51. The percentage of plantation women workers in that was 33% (33,424 in number) followed by 24.7% (26,209 in number) of cotton industry (V.V. Giri 1958 : 400 - 402, Mathur &

Mathur 1962 : 71-78).

A study conducted by the labour bureau shows that about 72% of the total sampled women workers in the plantations studied were reported to be members of one or the other trade union. Women formed about 52% of the total membership while their share in the total employment in sampled plantation was 53% (Labour Bureau 1980 : xiii).

In the tea plantation of West Bengal also a large section of female workers are unionised. Among our women respondents (157 in number), most of them were members of any one of the trade unions or more except a very few.

In the following pages we would discuss the level of literacy of women workers, their union membership, awareness about trade unions, participation in trade union activities, reasons for joining and changing unions, their positions in the unions and the prospect of development of women trade union leadership etc.

#### LEVEL OF LITERACY :

We had earlier seen that around 50% of the respondents (Including male and female workers) were literates which was high compare to the state average of nearly 41% (1981 census). But among the 157 women respondents only around 11% (17 in number) were literates; of them only 5% (8 in number) could sign their names, 2.5% (4 in number) read upto primary level (class I to IV)

and a little high than the 3% (5 in number) crossed the primary level (between V to IX). The remaining around 89% were illiterates.

The table below will give us the level of literacy of women workers.

TABLE - 8.1

LEVEL OF LITERACY OF WOMEN WORKERS

(Percentage in brackets)

Level of literacy	Lalfa T.E.	Angra-bhasa T. E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Could sign	0	1	7	8(5.09)
Class I-IV	0	3	1	4(2.54)
Class V-IX	2	2	1	5(3.18)
Illiterate	32	53	55	140(89.17)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

We have earlier discussed (in chapter V) the causes of low level of literacy particularly about the low level of education among the workers. The reasons were the primary schools in the tea gardens were not properly equipped, there was no scope for the workers to get services in the staff category, unions did not encourage their members to take education, absence of Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools in

the vicinity of most of the gardens etc. In case of women workers, besides these reasons there were some other reasons also. The girl members of an worker's family got little encouragement from their guardians to take education. The girls also found little time to go to schools as they had to do a lot of domestic works including looking after the minors in the houses.

This low level of literacy also reflected on their awareness about trade unions and participation in union activities which we would see in the following pages.

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP AND WOMEN WORKERS' AWARENESS :

In the studied three gardens among the women respondents almost all the respondents were the members of any of the trade unions. The survey showed that 146 of 157 women respondents were members of a trade union, 8 respondents were members of more than one union and only 3 of the respondents were not members of any trade union. The table below gives the gardenwise breakup.

TABLE - 8.2

MEMBERSHIP OF TRADE UNIONS  
(Percentage in brackets)

	Lalfa T.E.	Angra- bhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Members of one union	34	59	53	146(93)
Members of more than one union	0	0	8	8(5)
Non-members	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>3(2)</u>
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

The above table also shows that multi-union members and non-members are found only in Kurty Tea Estate. Earlier (Chapter VI) we have discussed that in this garden inter-union rivalry was too much and a section of workers were also disgusted with the unions. So, some of them gave up the union membership being disgusted and some of them became members of more than one union to please everybody.

Though most of the women respondents were unionised but it was not a scale for measurement their awareness about their unions. So, we have tried to understand this awareness through their awareness about the central affiliations, political party affiliations of their unions, reasons for joining and changing unions, their participation in union activities and so on.

The tables below will show the women workers' awareness about their central trade unions and political party affiliation.

TABLE - 8.3

AWARENESS ABOUT CENTRAL TRADE UNION

(Percentage in brackets)

	Lalfa T.E.	Angra- bhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Aware	0	6	1	7(4.45)
Not-aware	34	53	52	139(88.53)
Non-members & members of multi-unions	0	0	11	11(7.00)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

TABLE - 8.4

AWARENESS ABOUT POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION  
(Percentage in brackets)

	Lalfa T.E.	Angra- bhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Aware	29	43	42	114(72.61)
Not-aware	5	16	11	32(20.38)
Non-members & members of multi- unions	0	0	11	11(7.00)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

The table 8.3 shows that only 4.4% (7 in number) respondents were aware of the central trade unions of their unions. But a significant number of respondents i.e. more than 72% (114 in number) respondents could tell the names of the political parties their unions were attached with. One of the interesting features was that whenever they were asked about the names of their unions, most of them told the name of the party to which the particular trade union was associated. Those who could tell the name of their unions, most were members of such unions which did not have any direct affiliation with any political party. As for example - RCMC and WBCMS had no direct political affiliations with the Congress, though both these unions were indirectly associated with this party. Almost all members of these two unions among our respondents were aware of the names of their unions. When they were asked about the names of their unions,

most of the members of CBMU, DCBWU, DDCKMU, ZCBWU etc. among our respondents told the names of the parties to which their unions were associated.

This, in one hand shows women workers' less awareness about their unions, on the other hand it also reflects most of the unions close association with the political parties.

#### REASONS FOR JOINING UNIONS :

Earlier we have discussed the reasons for joining unions of the workers (both men and women workers). Now we will discuss only about the female workers' reasons for joining unions.

A number of different types of reasons we have received from the female respondents for joining unions. The reasons may be single or more. We have excluded the 11 workers from this survey who were members of more than one union and non-members. Only one respondent could not tell the reason for joining union.

The most dominant reason was husband's influence over the female workers followed by fathers' influence. About 90% women respondents told it. Influence of sons, brothers and other relatives were some reasons for joining unions, but they were not so significant.

The next important reason was union's activities i.e. whether this union serves the interest of the workers. If a

union serves the interest of the workers, the workers would naturally join this union. But, here this reason was not as significant as it should be.

Besides the influences of husbands, fathers, female workers also were influenced by their fellow workers, workers of other gardens and by their neighbours.

There were some other reasons also like ethnic affinity, personal gain, in search of a better union etc.; but none of them was so important.

So, it is found that women workers are mainly dependent on the others for choicing their unions, particularly dependency on their husbands and fathers is very high. If follow the general tendency of women folk of our country. Union's positive role for workers' interest is not the prime factor for choicing a union to the women workers. It does not mean that when an women worker joins a union by the influence of her husband or father, the union's activity is not a factor; what we have seen is that the judgement is not of herself, in most cases it depends on the others. The same nature of dependence, more or less, also we would see in case of changing unions in the next few pages.

#### PERIOD OF MEMBERSHIP :

The period of membership was taken from the time when an worker became a member of a union irrespective of her..

employment status (temporary or permanent). The table below will show the period of membership of the women workers in the three gardens.

TABLE - 8.5

PERIOD OF UNION MEMBERSHIP

(Percentage in brackets)

Years of membership	Lalfa T.E.	Angra-bhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
1 yr. or less	5	5	22	32(20.4)
2 to 5 yrs.	14	13	19	46(29.3)
6 to 10 yrs.	5	20	11	36(22.9)
11 to, 15 yrs.	5	7	1	13(8.3)
16 to 20 yrs.	4	4	1	9(5.7)
21 yrs. +	1	10	2	13(8.3)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>149(99.9)</u>
Non-members	0	0	8	08(5.0)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

The above table shows that nearly 50% (20.4 + 29.3 = 49.7%) women respondents' period of membership is not more than 5 years (i.e. for a short period). Membership for a medium period (6 to 10 yrs.) is nearly 23% and membership for a long period (i.e. from 11 yrs. to more than 21 yrs.) is little high than

22%. The short period of union membership is high due to that most of the respondents are young.

CHANGE OF UNIONS :

The table 8.6. shows that around 47% women workers including the 11 non-members and multi-union members have changed unions for one time or more. Excluding the 11 workers the percentage would be around 40%. The extent of change among the women workers is more or less same as all types (both male & female) of workers.

TABLE - 8.6

EXTENT OF CHANGE

(Percentage in brackets)

	Lalfa T.E.	Angra- bhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Changed unions	13	17	33	63(40.12)
Did not change unions	21	42	20	83(52.86)
Members of multi-unions & non-members	0	0	11	11(7.00)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

Like the reasons for joining unions here also female workers depend much on their counterpart, though the degrees of dependency is less than the former (i.e. in case of joining unions). Here also women workers' dependency on their husbands

is the dominant reason than their dependency on sons, fathers etc.

Previous union's incompetency to serve the workers' interest is the next important reason for changing unions. Earlier we have seen that union's activity was not so important factor for joining a union. But this time it became a very important factor.

There were some other reasons also for changing unions which were not so significant. They were influence of other workers, differences with leaders, personal causes (like personal gain etc.) etc.

From this table it was also found that the extent of change was highest is Kurty Tea Estate. Among the respondents who have changed unions around 60% belonged to Kurty Tea Estate. A significant number of them have changed unions for incompetency of the previous unions. Not only that this reason was found highest in this tea estate for change of unions. Members of multi-unions and non-members were also found only in this tea estate. All these shows the instability of trade union movements in this garden.

#### WOMEN WORKERS' PARTICIPATION IN TRADE UNION ACTIVITIES :

In the day to day union activities such as meetings, processions, demonstrations were the main features. Election of office bearers was one of the most important programme of

the unions, but that is not held regularly.

The following tables will show us the rate of participation, type of participation of women workers in their union activities.

TABLE - 8.7

WOMEN WORKERS' PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS, PROCESSIONS & DEMONSTRATIONS (Percentage in brackets)

	Lalfa T.E.	Angra- bhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Regular	5	6	6	17(10.32)
Irregular	26	27	47	100(63.69)
Non-participant	3	26	11	40(25.47)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

TABLE - 8.8

WOMEN WORKERS' PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION  
(Percentage in brackets)

	Lalfa T.E.	Angra- bhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Participant	10	16	9	35(22.29)
Non-participant	24	43	55	122(77.07)
	<u>34</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>157(100)</u>

So, from the table 8.7 it is found that nearly 11% women respondents participated regularly in the day to day union activities. This is extremely low. However, the percentage of irregular participants is quite low; more than 63% respondents sometimes participate in union activities. And around 25% women respondents never participate in union activities.

Womens' participation in union election is also low. Only around 22% of them participate in union elections.

There are number of reasons for the low participation in union activities. The most vital of these is the housework. The women workers have to do all domestic works in, their home from food preparation to washing clothes. They also have to collect excess firewood. Besides they have to look after their children. After doing all these they find little time to join union activities.

Besides housework, sometimes they also feel shy to join union activities with the males. In this respect low education, low awareness are also barriers.

All the women workers are also not aware of their leaders. It is found that while 80% women respondents are aware of their local leaders, only 40% of them knew their regional/central leaders. This shows in one hand women workers' less awareness about their leaders, on the other hand it also shows the leaders incapability to organise the women workers.

WOMEN LEADERSHIP - PROSPECT OF DEVELOPMENT :

In the tea gardens, though half of the workers are women, they are rarely in the union leadership. In the three gardens studied, we have found only 2 women trade union leaders among 50 union leaders. In another 30 gardens (10 each in Terai, Eastern Dooars and Western Dooars) there are no women leader among 214 union leaders. A study by the Labour Bureau showed that though the bulk of women workers were found unionised but most of them were only passive members and did not play an active trade union role. No sampled women worker in the selected plantations was found holding any responsible position at the decision and policy making level of trade unions (Labour Bureau 1980 ; xiii).

Women workers' rate of participation in union activities is also very low. Their awareness about their unions is also limited. But this picture often becomes totally different when any movement takes pick form. It is often seen that women workers have taken the leadership of a number of movements in their pick form. Not only that it has become a popular practice in the trade union movements in tea plantation that the men union leaders push forward the women workers during any movement, particularly if the situation takes a militant shape. The women workers become more militant than their counterpart in these movements. Besides their (women workers') militancy the male workers also think that the management can not scold or

beat the women workers. Some instances could be cited as for example.

The Sonali Tea Estate of Dooars was abandoned by the management in 1973. The ownership of this garden was handed over the workers with all liabilities which worth Rs.3,400,000. The transfer of ownership was held in the cold season, when there was no production in the garden, only expenses were to be done. Union meetings were held off and on, but these seemed to give no solution. The union leaders were as unsure as the workers. They were faced with a new situation and they did not know how to grapple with it. Then, sometime in the beginning of December, in one such union meeting a solution seemed to emerge. All of a sudden a group of women started chattering amongst themselves excitedly. A hushed silece fell on the rest. The voices died down after a few moments and a women spoke out; let us go to Jalpaiguri. What is the point in sitting here and starving? Let us go to Jalpaiguri to the Sarkar (the civil authorities). Thus the decision to march on foot to Jalpaiguri was taken (Bhowmik 1981 ; 193-194).

There was an incident on 17th April, 1987 in Angrabhasa Tea Estate. The workers of this tea estate gheraoed all the staff and managers for a few hours. The demand was : wages due to be paid on 22nd April should be paid on 18th April on account of Easter-Saturday. The management did not agree as the papers were not ready and also apprehended that it might be a practice in future. The police came and dispersed the agitated workers.

The women workers of this garden took a leading role in this movement.

In the same year another incident was happened in another tea estate of Western Dooars. The then manager of this tea estate was too much rough; off and on used to behave with the workers in an inhuman manner, scold the workers in ugly languages, even the women workers were not exempted by him. One day situation turned violent. The workers were demanding to lessen the thica (quantum of tusk). The manager did not agree. Instead he started abusing the workers. The workers gheraoed the manager, demanding his apology. The manager continued abusing the workers. The workers attacked the manager and killed him. It was heard that women workers were the first who attacked the manager.

Prior to this incident another incident happened in a tea estate of Central Dooars. It occurred with the same manager of the previous tea estate. He was then in the present tea estate. Unable to bear his dirty languages day after day one day women workers of this tea estate tied the manager by a rope and brought him to the A.L.C. office, Birpara.

In 1983, the women workers of a tea estate of Eastern Dooars became disgusted with their union leaders (NUPW). They came to the NUPW, Birpara office and took charges of the garden committee. They run the union smoothly for a couple of years. But ultimately the women workers could not hold the union leadership due to male chauvinism.

So, we have seen that though women workers are not office bearers of their unions yet they often takes the leadership during the pick hours of the workers' struggle. A number of question come-up - whether women workers are reluctant to take formal union leadership? Whether they would be more efficient leaders than their counterpart? Whether their leadership is necessary? We would try to get answers of these questions and also the reasons there of in the following discussion.

A survey on women leadership shows that nearly 35% of the respondents (both male & female) thinks that women workers are not reluctant to take union leadership; more than 40% workers tell that the women workers are reluctant to take union leadership and around 25% of the respondents can not say whether the women workers are reluctant to take union leadership or not.

Why such a high proportion of women workers are reluctant to take union leadership? A number of reasons are told by the respondents.

The most dominant reason is housework. In the tea gardens role of women workers' is very important both in the work life and social life of the tea gardens. They are more committed than their counterpart in their worklike and in their social life women performed all the duties besides contributing their total earnings. They usually get up at

4 a.m., prepare food for the family, perform all other household work, then go to work place. After returning from their work place they again prepare meal, wash clothes and perform other works. Even the excess firewood (besides the quota) is collected by them after their duties. If they have children, they are exclusively brought up by them. They contribute all their earnings to their family. On the other hand the male members of an worker family generally do not perform any household work; after returning from their duties they usually take rest or go to market. Moreover the males are generally liquor addicted, a good portion of their earnings is drained out for it. So, naturally the women workers have little spare time to attend union activities regularly; joining leadership is rather a distant matter to them.

The next important reason is womens' secondary status in society which have made them shy. They feel some sort of social barrier which retarded the growth of mental development for leadership.

Women workers' less education, less awareness about the world outside the tea garden, less experience about union leadership are also some of the reasons told by the respondents for which made the women workers reluctant to take union leadership.

Inter-union rivalry is also a reason for which women workers feel disgusted with union activities and they are not interested to take union leadership.

There are some other reasons also for women workers' less interest to take union leadership. One of them are - the women are more committed to work, they think that if they become more active in union activities, their duties would be hampered; the other causes are fear of management, communication problem etc.

Whether women workers would be more efficient than the male workers, if they take union leadership? Nearly 50% of the workers think that women workers would be more efficient than their counterpart in union leadership; more than 35% of the workers do not think that the women leaders would be more efficient than the men leaders and remaining around 15% workers can not tell whether the women trade union leaders would be more efficient or not.

Why the women leaders would be less efficient? The most important reasons according to our respondents are their (women workers') comparative illiteracy, inexperience, less awareness etc.

Earlier we have seen that women workers' shyness due to their secondary status in society is a reason for which women workers are not coming to union leadership. Here, also, the respondents told that women workers' shyness would also be a barrier for efficient leadership.

There are some other reasons also told by the respondents for probable less efficiency of women leadership such as :  
 Communication problem - union meetings are held also in nights and also in some distant places. It is not always possible for the woman workers to move in nights and to distant places.

About the necessity of women leadership in trade unions most of the workers agree that women should come forward to take union leadership. Only a small section of the workers do not agree with the former and some of the workers can not tell their decisions about it. Why womens' leadership is so necessary? Some of the respondents can not describe the reasons. These who could tell the reasons, half of them think that women should come into the union leadership because they can convince the other women workers. Another important reason is that women workers can tell their demands more freely to a women leader. In the tea gardens though there is less rigidity about free mixing between male and female workers, but still it is not possible for a male worker to interact so freely with an women worker as it could be done by an women worker. So, it is obvious that an women would be more easy to an women and they can freely discuss their problems among themselves.

Women workers' militancy, courage, managements different attitude with them are some of the most important reasons for which workers thought they (women workers) should take the union leadership. They can stick to their demand until it is

met by the management. The management also obey them as they are women.

Some of the workers think that women workers should also share the responsibilities with the male workers in the union leadership. If they come, the union would be more strong.

In the tea gardens generally the male workers are liquor addicted, there are corruption also among them. Women are not liquor addicted, they are comparatively honest also. These are some of the reasons for which some workers want women leadership in their unions.

Some of the respondents also feel that if the women come forward to take the union leadership the male workers would be more active in the union activities.

The above discussion showed that the workers in general want women leadership in trade unions. Most of them think that women leaders would be more efficient than the male workers and they also admit the necessity of women leadership. A number of central leaders (mainly outside leaders) were interviewed. All of them prefer the women workers as union leaders as the women are more honest, disciplined, less opportunist and sincere to workers' interest. Two unions also organize seminars on role of women workers in trade unions and on women leadership etc., though those

seminars are attained by a few participants.

However, in practice there are very few women trade union leaders in the tea plantation. Why the women workers are so much lagging behind the male workers in the union leadership inspite of their nearly half share in the work force in the tea plantation and their necessity in the union leadership?

Housework, womens' secondary status in society social barrier, less education (both formal and informal) etc. are some of the most important barriers for the development of women leadership which we have discussed earlier.

But there are some other reasons also. They are - in the tea industry traditionally the union leaderships were in the hands of male workers. It was obvious in a male dominated society. Perhaps women workers did not felt necessity to come into the leadership in the past. Now the situation have been changed. The trade union movements now is going through a stagnant phase. Many of the recommendations of Plantation Labour Act. Have yet to be fulfilled. The unions do not care for it, they are mainly concerned with the three years wage agreement, annual bonus etc. The other demands of workers such as-regular supply of firewood, repairing of their quarters etc. remained unfulfilled. For it, the women workers are the worst sufferer. They have to pay more for the incompetent, inactive, dishonest leaders. Naturally, now-a-

days there are a growing dissatisfaction among the women workers. They want a change. In a number of situation it is seen that they have taken leadership from the males during the movements. They feel the necessity to come forward. Male workers also admit women workers' efficiency and necessity in the union leadership, their leaders (both the garden level and central level) also support it, but still the males are not mentally prepare to transfer the leadership to the females. A sense of male - chauvinism dominate their minds. The central leaders also are not exception to that. All these actually retarded the development of women leadership.