

CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

Tea is one of the most important industries in India. India is the world's largest tea producer & exporter. Not only that, as a single commodity tea is one of the largest export earner in India. It produces around 700 million Kgs. of tea annually and exports around 200 million Kgs. The export earning is around Rs. 1000 crores per year. There is two tea growing zones in India - North India and South India. In North India tea is grown in Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Bihar, Uttarpradesh, Manipur, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Orissa and in South India in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. But the four major tea producing states are Assam, West Bengal, Karnataka and Kerala. The total number of tea estates in India is 13, 536 (Tea Board 1987 : 4) and the number of permanent labourers is 892, 398 (Tea Board 1987 : 158). Besides, there is a significant number of temporary (casual) workers employed in these tea estates.

This study covers tea plantation of West Bengal which is the second largest tea producing state in the country. It produces nearly 25% of the total tea production of India and employes about 25% of its total labour force. The state has 323 tea estates (Tea Board 1987 : 3), engaging 2, 32,553

permanent workers (Ibid : 155) and it produced 157,371,000 kgs. of tea (Ibid : 11) in 1985. Nearly half of the workers are female. There are three tea growing areas in West Bengal namely, Darjeeling hills and Terai in Darjeeling district and Dooars in Jalpaiguri district. The huge labour force in the tea plantations of West Bengal are immigrants either from Chotonagpur - Santal Pargana region of Bihar or from Nepal. In the Darjeeling hill areas most of the tea garden workers are Nepalis but in the plains namely Terai and Dooars the workers are immigrants mainly from the tribal pockets of Bihar and its neighbouring areas. Workers of Nepali origin constitute around 20% of the total tea plantation labour force in these two areas. The immigrants workers have settled permanently in these areas, with little or no relations with their places of origin. Though the tribal workers had their origins in the same region, they were divided into multiple tribes. Majority of them are Oraon, Munda, Kharia but there are substantial number of other tribes such as Lohar, Baraik, Turi, Mahali and so on. In the initial stage these workers maintained their tribal boundaries. They were grouped according to their traditional occupations - cultivating and non-cultivating or artisan groups. The cultivating groups such as Oraon, Munda, Kharia claimed themselves socially superior to the non-cultivating or artisan tribes and formed a common status group. Lohar, Baraik, Mahali comprises another status

group, namely the non-cultivating or artisan tribes. The cultivating group in order to assert their superiority maintained certain taboos and concepts of 'purity and pollution' relating mainly to marriage and food. However, there has been certain changes among the workers and they show greater signs of integration.

The wages of plantation workers were very low before 1947. The wages at that time were arbitrarily fixed by the planters through their organisations namely D.P.A., I.T.P.A. The workers had no say in this matter. They are the lowest paid among the industrial workers.

Besides the low wages living conditions of the workers were extremely deplorable. They lived in an unhygienic and unhealthy atmosphere. Poor source of water, lack of sanitation, irregular settlement pattern, inadequate supply of building materials, overcrowdedness etc. were the typical features of the living condition of the plantation workers.

The level of literacy of the workers was also very low. Inadequate educational facilities like absence of sufficient number of schools in the gardens and its neighbourhood, lack of consciousness about the necessity of education kept the tribals in a level of low literacy.

The above mentioned factors kept the plantation workers backward. This process could be maintained because they were isolated and had little or no knowledge of the world outside the plantation. The worker at this stage had no organisation of their own which would help them to fight for their rights or for their social development. It was the trade union movement which entered as an intervening force.

The first trade union was formed in Dooars in 1946. Terai witnessed the first sign of trade union movement in 1949. Though the development of trade unions in the tea plantations started at a late stage, it spread quite rapidly. Almost all the workers in these regions are now unionised. Trade unions became important organisations for the workers because they were the only outside organisations to enter the tea gardens with a view to help the workers.

Trade union is the main and only organisation of the workers for collective bargaining. Its impact is not restricted only to the work relations, but also extended to the social life of the workers. It played a very important role in changing the industrial relation by breaking down the fear and servility of the workers towards the planters. They have awakend the workers to their rights and taught them to fight for their demands.

The main features of the trade union movement in the plains of North Bengal can be summerised as the following.

There are several trade unions operating in the region. Most of these unions are affiliated to all India federations such as A.I.T.U.C., I.N.T.U.C., H.M.S.U.T.U.C., C.I.T.U. etc., though there are cases of regional unions also. The existence of multiunions on the industry level influences at the garden level. Hence one can find the operation of more than one union at the garden level. The existence of multiunions may help the workers as they have a choice of membership or it can harm their interests due to disunity in their ranks.

The union leadership at the industrial level, comprising the office bearers are usually non-workers belonging to the middle class Bengalee. This is because these non worker leaders were the first to organise the workers and make them aware of their rights. The local or garden level leadership however is from the workers. This pattern of leadership at the union level persists because the local level leaders are not adequately educated and not fully equipped to deal with the complex problems relating to the laws concerning labour. It may also be likely that the existing leadership does not encourage the development of internal leadership.

In the tea gardens of North Bengal half of the workers are female. However it can be seen that their participation in union activities is low. One can very rarely find women leaders at the local level. At the same time it can also be

seen that in some extreme cases women became more militant and took active part than men.

The spread of educational facilities, erosion of isolation of the plantations during the post-independence period has given rise to young educated workers who show greater awareness of their problems than the earlier generations. There has been improvement also in the living and working conditions of the plantations during this period. It is necessary to study these phenomenon and analyse its' impact on the functioning and growth of trade unions.

BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

So far a number of studies have been made on the history of tea plantation in India, history of the trade union movements in the tea plantations, on the social change among the workers, on the women workers in the tea plantations, on the conciousness of the workers and so on by various scholars. A brief review of few of them are given below.

Sir Percival Griffiths

(1967) in his book describes vividly the history of Indian tea industry and its different aspects like production, labour, recruitment ownership etc. He also tells about the origin of trade union movements in some areas. Griffiths' book is one of the most authentic books regarding the history of tea industry in India.

B.C. Ghosh (1970), a planter, has told about the origin of the tea industry in Dooars, pioneers in this tea industry, special features of tea estates and also about the recruitment process and about the habits, customs of the workers, health, education, earning of workers and so on. While this book is good enough in describing about the origin of the tea industry in Dooars and its entrepreneurs but inadequate in describing the habits and customs of the workers, their condition, earnings etc. in his book.

R. L. Sarkar and M. P. Lama (1986) have given an unique description about the different aspects of tea industry like wages including social security benefits, employment, living standards of the workers in the Eastern Himalayas, mainly of Darjeeling hills. The importance of this book lies in that it covers briefly almost all aspects of tea plantation in Darjeeling hills from the origin of the tea industry, origin of the trade union movements to the living condition of the workers.

Tushar Kanti Ghosh's book contains history of tea plantation of West Bengal, the land management policies, rules, regulations etc. and the problems existing therein. It also studies land management of sick and closed tea gardens and the existence of dual economy. It concludes with the observation that the problem of sick and closed gardens lies in the improper

land management policies and seeks governments intervention there for.

Manas Dasgupta's (1988) three articles on the trade union movement in Tea plantations in Terai is of course a pioneer in this field, but it has some limitation. It describes well the background of Terai tea plantations, plantation economy and the wage labourers but the section of the history of trade union movement is very brief and lacking in detailing.

Nani Bhattacharya's (1976) booklet (in Hindi) is written on the trade union movement in the tea gardens of Dooars upto 1974. Mr. Bhattacharya is a R.S.P. (Revolutionary Socialist Party) leader and also a well known trade unionist (President, U.T.U.C., Lenin Sarani) - so his book mainly consists of the contributions of the Dooars Cha Bagan Workers Union (U.T.U.C.L.S. affiliated).

Samir Chakrabarty's (1984) small book in Bengali contends history of tea in India and West Bengal, history of Terai and Dooars, recruitment process, process of tea cultivation, wages in tea plantation etc. Once can get a bird's eye view about tea in this book.

Ranjit Dasgupta's article (1987) on the worker's protests in Dooars : 1890-1947 in Bengali is an unique description of the tea garden workers' protests in the pre-inde-

pendence period in Doears. He cited evidences of labour unrests though they were a few, sporadic and short lived.

Sharit Bhowmik's (1981) ^{study} on Plantation System is an unique and fine analysis of different aspects of class formation and its relation to class consciousness : The workers of the tea plantation are all immigrants. The system of plantation has changed their traditional economy. Previously they were self-supporting cultivator or secal craftman, now they have become wage labourers. The objective conditions like homogeneous economic activity along with the trade union movements give rise to the subjective awareness of class consciousness among the workers. These two factors have also made certain impacts on the social life of the workers. Different tribal barriers, heterogenety, stratifications have been eroded to a large extent. Thus heterogeneous tribal communities have emerged as a "class for itself".

Sharit Bhowmik's (1992) another study on Tea Plantations covers more or less all aspects of tea plantation in brief. He specially emphasizes on the recent employment trend and unionisation in the tea plantations and shows the high rate of casualisation in one hand and on the other hand stagnation in the trade union movement. He also points out the reasons behind their high casualisation, stagnation in trade union movements etc.

The study of A. K. Das and H. N. Banerjee (1964) is made on the impact of the tea industry on the economic system, social life and psychology of the tribal workers of tea gardens. This study was made in four tea estates of Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal. The authors describes how the simple agricultural tribes have become more economically conscious, why the simple or nuclear type of families are now preferred by the tribal labourers instead of traditional joint families. They also points out that the workers' hard bound life in the tea estates and also the change in their economy affected their traditional social system and social activities to a great extent. The earlier co-operation among the family members are no longer exist. The sole authority of husband or father does not exist. Divorces, remarriages, consumption of intoxicants, various diseases like gastrointestinal troubles, venereal diseases, tuberculosis etc. are increasing owing to moral laxity.

In another important study on social change, Ramendra K. Kar (1981) describes and discusses the life of an immigrant tribal group in a tea plantation in Assam. The changes have taken place in their family life, religious life, kinship bond, occupational pattern, marriage, material aspects of life, social control, attitudes towards education, modern medicine, solving problems of individuals and community level etc. The joint family system has been breaking down, while nuclear families

are coming up. The uses of birth control methods are increasing; the size of the families are now small. Marriage is now become a more personal affair. Intertribal and interclan marriages have been taken place. The eldest person does not have the economic control when he retires. The traditional observations in the performances of birth, marriage, death etc. in day to day life are no longer taken seriously. The Dravidian names have been changed into Sanskrit names. They are now bilingual, besides their own tribal dialect they also speak a dialect (Sadri) which is a mixture of Hindi and tribal dialect.

P. K. Dasgupta and Iar Ali Khan's monograph (1983) attempts to deal with the life and culture of the tribes who work in the tea plantation in West Bengal and Assam. It shows how the various tribes have forged into an inter ethnic solidarity while maintaining some of the markers of individual ethnic identity. This study was made in three estates, one in the Darjeeling district (West Bengal), one in the Jalpaiguri district (West Bengal) and one in the Goalpara district of Assam. It has also tried to show that though in all the three districts tea plantation started with migrant labourers from Chotonagpur and Nepal and the labourers in the long run had settled in the respective regions, yet there is marked differences in attitude and behaviour among the three sets of population in their socio-cultural and political concepts.

Women constitute half of the workforce; however there have very few very fullfledged studies on women workers. The above mentioned studies cover women workers but their focus lies on all workers, There are a few studies on women workers.

The Labour Bureau (1980) in a report provides a broad picture of the characteristics of womens' employment, their working conditions, wages and earnings, the welfare amenities and social status available to them, besides throwing some light on their living conditions and other socio-demographic characteristics in Tea, Coffee, Rubber and other plantations in India.

Life and labour of plantation Women Workers which was investigated by Mita Bhadra shows that ideas, values, awareness concerning status are a functions of educational and cultural background. Emancipation and liberation from male domination leading to improvement in status can not be achieved through economic independence alone. It also shows that conflict between work and home life among working women largely depends on the nature of employment. If the working conditions in an industry is flexible enough to the special needs of mothers and housewives, as the plantation industry

shows, the maladjustment of women workers with industrial jobs can be reduced to minimum. Lastly it points out Industrialisation may affect men and women workers differently. The women workers in plantation, being confined more to home life, seem to be less affected by it than men.

Shobita Jain's (1988) study of wage labourers on a tea garden of Assam shows that the plantation women workers, part of the largest and most viable section of Indian working women possess a level of independence sufficient to enable them to live on their own. The independence is likely to be eroded^{if} it is not viewed as an asset to mobilise action for changing the present working and living conditions on the tea gardens.

Sibranjan Mishra (1986) in his study of tea industry in India observed that inputs are not utilized to the optimum available capacity. Producers are not efficient allocators of resources in exploiting fully the economic opportunities available to them.

Apart from the historical reasons for this phenomenon the requirement of large capital, technical equipment and scientific marketing service for plantations, whether in Southern or in the North-Eastern states in India, There has not been optimal growth of this industry.

Since the conditions of labour has close association with the health of the industry, the haulling growth of the plantations has told upon the organised movement of workers. Strong trade union movement was not possible due to this.

The above review is not exhaustive as it does not cover the wide range of literature in the historical and economic perspectives. However these studies have helped me in classifying my ideas and refining my objectives and methods for the present study. The following chapter discusses these objectives and methods.