

Participation of Women in the Emerging Trade Union Activities in the Tea-Gardens of Assam

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Abstract: One of the most popular known beverages in the world is tea. Tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India and also one of the biggest industries in the country. In India if we see tea is grown basically in two regions- North-East and South. A larger portion of tea is produced in Assam and North Bengal while in other states like Sikkim, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, production is on a lesser scale. The state which has the highest area under tea cultivation and is also the largest producer of tea in India is Assam. Sonitpur is one of the thirty three districts of Assam. It is an administrative district in the state of Assam. Its economy is basically an agrarian one and its one of the most unique feature is the existence of large number of tea gardens. Both Brahmaputra and Barak valley in Assam has tea gardens. The purpose of this study is to look into the role of trade unions in Sonitpur District of Assam, India, and to analyze the participation of women workers in union related activities.

The story of the tea plantation laborers is a less talked topic. Much less discussed is the role of the women tea laborers who constitutes a large working force. Even after having social, historical and anthropological importance, research work on the role and contribution of women tea laborers' of Sonitpur District is a rarely found topic and also not much work has been carried out about the tea laborers of Sonitpur District and has not gained much significance in the field of research. Women's position in the tea plantation has always remained a disadvantaged one and their labor never got recognized as the planters were much more interested in using women as a reproducer of labor which would help them in generating a stable work force in the long run.

Keywords- Tea, Tea Gardens, Trade Union, Labour, Women

I. INTRODUCTION

Tea industry plays an important role in the national economy as it is a primary foreign exchange earner and its contribution to the national exchequer cannot be underestimated [1]. After India got independence, many important changes took place in the tea industry of Assam. In post-Independence period, significant changes began to take place in the tea industry of Assam. Many historical developments like the threat of Japanese invasion through Burma during World War II and Indian independence led to a new situation where English planters were replaced by Indian management [2]. The industrial relations system has many important aspects. One such important component of the industrial relations system which has helped to understand the importance of rights and to be more aware of it in the changing social, political and educational environment is the

Trade Union. Trade unions are the organization of workers or employees who serve as a communicating thread or an intermediary by maintaining a link between the management of the tea gardens and the workers. Workers formed such unions to bring issues that they have been facing to the forefront of the managerial authorities. For their economic improvement, along with a change and hike in their wage pattern, improvement in their working conditions and other benefits has always remained a major concern. The trade unions have not only economic objectives but also have other objectives which have attained attention in connection to the changing sociopolitical environment. The trade unions or the labor unions take up the responsibility of looking into the complaints and grievances of the workers and bringing in front of the management so that they can bring development for their members. The trade unions do not just see the workers only as a factor of production but as workers who has a self-individual identity and each of their problems and issues is a concern for them. It was Mahatma Gandhi who looked at trade unions as moral institutions with the aim of making the workers good human being and responsible citizens. To investigate industrial democracy, trade unions play a crucial role which would further help in strengthening democracy. The main role of the labor unions is to be an organization which would fight and defend the interest of the workers and to put a check on the functioning of the management so that the workers do not get exploited and also to be an instrument of change in the industrial relations system wherein the workers can have an organization of their own to prevent exploitation.

A trade union also sometimes referred to as labor union is an institution composed mainly of workers or employees who amalgamate to achieve similar common interests and goals like improvement in working condition and to take care of and boost their mutual interests through collective action. Every trade union will have a leader whose leadership will act as catalyst for bargaining with the employer or the management on behalf of the union members. This process where negotiation of wages, work rules, safety in workplace and other procedures takes place is known as Collective Bargaining. Historically in many developed economies, the pathway for the growth of a stable working population can be attributed to collective bargaining and union representation where through this they were able to generate improvement in working condition and bring in job security for the workers.

The workers union came up to protect the interests of the workers and to bring about the awareness of rights with the changing political, social and educational environment- like the right to bargain, right to settle down rules and regulations of the management etc. Thus, the unions' efforts have become influential in being able to improve the quality of life of workers by achieving the establishment of minimum wages, regulation for specified working hour's provisions for health and safety, and overall improvement in working conditions.

II. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN TRADE UNION

'Women' is that section of the larger population who from time immemorial has been considered to be the most disadvantageous section be it socially, economically or politically. They have always been treated as the silent section whose voices are never heard or are suppressed. The women workers of the tea gardens are of no exception. Even though they form half of the labor force contributing to the growth of the tea industry, their efforts and the work of the women workers go unnoticed and unappreciated. As a result of which they too have begun considering themselves just as a mere worker rather than a productive worker. Their position in the tea garden is not only suppressed in their workplace but also in their private space. Therefore, very less women are seen being politically active or showing their leadership skills. Even though after independence measures were adopted in favour of the workers in general and women in particular, but very little is being seen to be the applied in the real ground.

A woman is always double-burdened. Similar is the case for a woman working in the tea garden. She is not only a worker for her employer but for her family members too. A women worker always goes through oppression. She is oppressed with the double burden of work and family, oppressed with the differential wage pattern between male and female workers for the same kind of work and oppressed with not having any authority or say over her own hard-earned money. Even though a woman working in the tea garden is seen to be economically independent but in true sense she is always considered to be dependent section without any authority or opinion of her own.

To improve the position of women one cannot be only dependent on law. Law alone is not responsible for the protection of workers. One also has to be conscious and aware of what is going on in and around. To achieve such level of awareness education is very important. Educating the workers in general and specially the women workers in particular is the need of the hour. Only when educated, the women workers can be more vocal and aware about their rights and privileges. After India got independent, the importance of structural inequality that existed between man and woman got weakened. Women were given the right for universal suffrage but the decision was not liked by many as the fact that women were given same privileges as men were hard to digest by the majority of people. Gender roles are very well defined through the process of socialization where any activity or

piece of work is distinguished as 'feminine' or 'masculine'. Because of such distinctions, the political domain is never considered to be the area of expertise for women. Thus, when talking about the equal distribution of political rights between men and women, our traditional Indian society essentially accepts the distinction between masculine and feminine roles (3). Even though many protective welfare labor laws were passed, but that does not necessarily improve the economic, social or political status of a women working in the tea garden. Social attitudes, social institutions emerging out of different social ideologies greatly affect a women's position and their activities.

III. NON-REPRESENTATION OF CASUAL WORKERS IN TRADE UNIONS

'Casual workers' also known as the 'Faltu workers' are those workers in the tea gardens who are employed temporarily (three to six months). Their employment is non-permanent in nature. They are mainly hired in large numbers in the tea estates during the 'season time'. Season time is that period when production is at its peak, generally between May to October every year. As during the production period more hands are required, hence the management recruits a large number of casual workers and exploits their labor. Unlike the permanent workers, the Faltu workers are not entitled to many benefits and opportunities. Even though their labor is as equal as any other permanent worker, but still they are deprived of many benefits except a few kilos of subsidized ration from the management, daily wages for their performed work, and one-time supply of umbrella, slippers, tarpaulins which are required during work in the garden. Because of such disparity, the casual workers feel discriminated both by the management and the permanent workers. They feel as if they are treated badly and are looked down upon by the management. Some casual workers are relatives of some permanent workers while many are not. The casual workers do not stay inside the tea garden premises as they do not get any housing facilities. They usually reside outside the garden in nearby 'bastis' (local word for Ghetto) or in management allotted land within the garden where they need to manage their own shelter. They even do not receive firewood and medical facilities like their permanent counterparts.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Six tea-gardens of Sonitpur District, Assam, India were visited to have a deeper understanding of the concerned study. Workers and union leaders from several tea- gardens were interviewed to find out the functioning of the trade unions and their participation. It was seen that it is mostly Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), which is affiliated to the Indian Trade Union Congress (INTUC) is functional in the selected tea gardens. The number of members in the trade unions ranged between 9-70 members mostly dominated by male members. Some tea gardens even had membership fees of Rs.100 for permanent workers and Rs.80 for casual workers. Even though women members are present but their

participation is very less. Their membership is just representative failing to serve the real purpose. When it comes to political matters or any such matter where opinions and voice has to be raised, women are seen taking the backseat as they intentionally consider themselves to be in marginal positions. A woman often finds it difficult to break the shackles of societal norms where they are expected to be submissive, docile, emotional and home-oriented. If any women show the courage to be vocal, opinion oriented and politically active, they are tagged as unfeminine.

When coming to the participation of casual workers in trade unions, it was seen that in the sample tea gardens there were no members in the union amidst casual workers. During the season time of the tea gardens, the casual workers outnumber the permanent workers. Despite their contribution to the tea industry, their labour goes unattended. When 22 years Mamoni, a casual worker, was interviewed on being asked their non-participation in trade union activities, she replied that they are not much aware of what goes on inside the garden as they do not reside there. She added, after work they have to rush home for their other pending works so they do not get time for any other discussions. Also that they do not stay within the estate premises they are not well-informed about meetings and discussions. Because they are not so familiar with the trade union activities, it was observed that the casual workers are also a little anxious to approach the union to discuss their matters.

The below shown [Figure 1] is a graphical representation highlighting the membership of permanent women workers in trade union in the sample tea gardens of Sonitpur District of Assam.

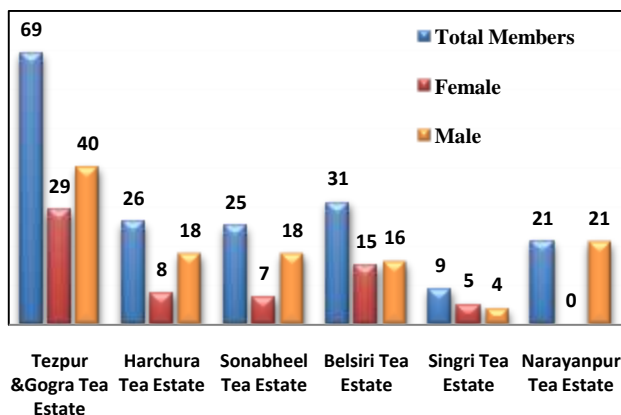


Fig.1 Graphical Representation of Participation of Women in Trade Union in the Sample Tea Gardens of Sonitpur District of Assam: (Source: Field Survey)

The above figure is indicative of the fact that the low membership of women implies low participation in trade union related activities in the sample tea gardens of Sonitpur District, Assam. Thus, the above numbers clearly states that the trade unions are purely male dominated areas with very

less participation from women. The women members that are present are just a representative number as their participation is very much passive and no active involvement can be seen from their side.

Various reasons can be attributed for the low participation of women in trade unions.

- Trade union activities or any political activities for that matter have always remained a male dominated zone. In such a situation woman does not find themselves connected to become a member of trade union.
- Due to excessive male domination in every aspect of life, women have considered themselves to be inferior to men and find no good reason to become a part of an organization where male voices are dominant and women are counted just as a mere member.
- Women are always double-burdened with managing both household and professional activities. Same goes for a tea garden women worker where she has to go out for work in the garden and coming back to home has to look after children, husband, other members along with performing household chores. In her busy schedule she hardly finds time or any energy left to join a trade union.
- Being a member of trade union calls for meetings, discussions, gatherings over certain issues which require time to be invested. Women fears that being attached to a union where more men are present, they may be socially stigmatized as 'bad women'.
- Women's participation in trade unions is encouraged just for representing women. Meetings and discussions are mostly carried on by the men folks. Thus, the women have very less enthusiasm in becoming a part of any trade union or participating in any trade union activities.
- If looked into the history of trade union leaders, very less women are seen in the position of leaders. Thus, women consider that only men are the born leaders and they have no role to play in it.

V.CONCLUSION

On the whole a clear picture can be drawn where trade unions have failed in adopting a holistic approach towards the problems of workers and adopting an theoretical understanding of women's problems and empowering them. If we look into issues that has been discussed by union members for women is mainly on maternity leave and benefits. This again has a male motive attached to it. Considering child rearing, feeding to be only mother's job, life will become difficult for the male member if such responsibilities come to them. So the male dominated trade union members assure that maternity benefits are given to the female workers full-fledged. But again issues like post natal care and requirement of crèches, goes unattended as the women are expected to

work and bring back home money. Thus, a women's position gets reduced to an object that can be treated and used according to male requirement. Even though a lot of changes can be observed in recent trends regarding men's attitude towards women, but a lot has to be done to overcome such situation completely. Therefore, to consider women's problems as 'real problems', women themselves has to be more aware, active and participating; education can help in bringing such changes and also when the male members of the community adopts a gender friendly ideological perspective towards women issues, a change of wind can become visible.

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