

THE IMPACT OF TRADE UNIONS ON TEA TRIBE OF BISWANATH CHARIALI TEA GARDEN OF ASSAM

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Abstract

Assam produces nearly 53 per cent of total tea production in India and it is an outcome of the struggle of the Tea Tribe or indigenous people of central and east India who were made to migrate to Assam under extreme conditions and now they form one of the subjugated communities of Assam. Tea Tribe community has been waging struggles to protect their rights in the state. Tea production is a labour-intensive enterprise in which trade unions should ideally play an assertive role in shaping industrial relations and upholding the rights of Tea Tribe community. This paper tries to understand the impact of the trade unions on the lives of Tea Tribe and this study tries to find out whether trade union have a future in fulfilling the demands of Tea Tribe community.

Keywords: Tea Tribe community, Trade Union, Migration, Socio-Economic Status.

Introduction

The trade union movement in India is over a century ago and with changes in the world economy, technological advances it is gradually becoming less powerful. The trade union alone cannot fight the challenges of new era. In the past trade union mainly focused their activities on asking for more for their members through collective action and bargaining. The main aim of trade union need to be agents of socio-economic changes and undertakes a variety of non-bargaining activities.

Among Tea Tribe Community the primary demands were increase in the wages, bonus, shorter hours of work and end of the exploitation of labourers. On certain occasions anti-British political movement had its impact on working class. The strikes were frequent but it lasted only a shorter period of time as it was difficult to hold out for a long period for the sake of survival. This usually brought about a trade union activities accompanied by a fall in union membership (Karnik, 1966).

Voluntary Organization and their Contribution in Struggle for Recognition

There were number of organization that were formed to fight against rights of Tea Tribe and played a very important role for the ST Movement in the state.

- **Adivasi Council of Assam:** Adivasi Council of Assam was formed in 1955- 1958 and it is the first organization to start ST movement in Assam. The members of ACA during that period when Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister submitted the memorandum to include nine Adivasi in the ST list but due to the opposition of the tea tribe organization to include the entire tea tribe demand the enlisting of the nine Adivasi did not materialize.

- All Adivasi Student's Association of Assam: AASAA was formed in 1996 after the ethnic violence in Kokrajhar by the Bodos to the Adivasi. The organization has started autonomous movement in both central and state level. In 2003 eight members were shot dead and many were injured during the movement of demanding ST status to Adivasi. In 2007 numbers of AASAA members were beaten up in Beltola tragedy and most of them were put behind the bars for protesting in support of ST demand for the Adivasi.
- There are other Adivasi organization like Adivasi Sewa Samity, Adivasi Sahitya Sabha, All Adivasi Women's Association of Assam, Adivasi Cobra Militant of Assam, Adivasi People's Army that are fighting for ST status and it is the priority issue for these organization.

The phase of labour struggle during the year 1937-40 was a turning point in Assam's history. After Independence Assam Chief Minister Gopinath Bardoloi ministry was keen on understanding the problems of labour, capital with a view to maintain industrial peace within the province.

Review of Literature

The review of the study is divided into two parts

- (i) Firstly, it focus on the historical migration of Tea Tribe Community to Assam
- (ii) Secondly, the existence of concept of trade union among Tea Tribe Community.

Migration of Tea Tribe Community to Assam

The term migration refers to movement of individual from one place to another in search of better opportunities. There are several factors that push people to migrate to different place for new and exciting opportunities (David1974, Diamond 1997, Hirschman 2006). Migration results in multi-dimensional changes in the ethnic, ethno lingual, religious, demographic, cultural and economic sphere (Chandna 1986).

The increase of tea garden in Assam it was impossible for the British to work with minimum labour force and in addition the local Assamese labourers also revolted against the British government because of wage rates. Gita Bharali (2003) in her book 'Seuj Silpar Sandhana' argued that because of shortage of labourers the planters had to find workers elsewhere and they recruited mostly from present Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh as indentured labour in worst condition. They were uprooted from their land and livelihood by the Permanent Settlement Act 1793 meant to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial regime. In the absence of any alternatives they were forced to follow the labour contract and become indentured labour in Assam.

Pradip Baruah (2008) in his essay ' The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development' explains that the agrarian region of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, famine, drought, flood coupled up with exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the landlords and zamindars. These factors led to migration of large number of people to Assam in search of livelihood.

Rise of Trade Union among Tea Tribe

H. Crouch (1996) in his study of 'Trade Unions and Politics in India' described that trade union in India have been habitually grounded for political recruitment. Due to prevailing control of political parties over unions, the union leaders are often recruited from political parties.

Hiren Gohain (2008) in his essay 'A Question of Identity: Adivasi Militancy in Assam' contend that from 1980's; Assam has been witnessing series of movements, where local people have been fighting for their rights on land, language and overall development. Tea Tribes are one of the isolated communities in Assam and therefore trade union emerged and gradually begun participating in the movement by creating social organizations to raise their demand for the development of the community.

Theoretical Perspective

Karl Marx saw exploitation as class based social phenomenon and believed that a proper sociological understanding of social context. According to Karl Marx social status of an individual is determined by his/her production relations. Class for him is a group of individuals in similar situation respect to their control over the means of production. Money becomes a capital because of social relation and capital cannot increase without exploiting those of actually does the work. However in case of Assam Tea Industry the social structure has emerged from the exploitative relationships and it is important to know how this exploitation of the Tea Tribes happened in the development of capitalist tea industry of Assam.

According to dual labour market theory, labour market of industrialized countries has a dualistic structure skilled workers and unskilled workers. The skilled labours are well paid whereas the unskilled labours are paid low. The employers do not pay higher wages to local workers to do the unpleasant jobs because that they want to maintain wage differentials between the primary and secondary segment of job. As a result due to labour shortage the employers are compelled to recruit labour from other countries who do not have plan to settle permanently but accept the secondary job easily since it pays them more wages (Piore, 1979 and Stalker, 2000).

There is another theory developed by geographer Mabogunje (1970). According to this theory migration alters the social, cultural, economic and institutional conditions of both areas during the whole process of migration. Mabogunje define migration system theory as a set of places linked by flows and counter flows of people, goods, services and information which tend to facilitate further exchange, including migration between the places. He focused on feedback mechanism, through which information about the migrant's reception and progress at the destination is transmitted back to the place of origin. Mabogunje (1970) in his approach towards rural-urban migration in West Africa described the five elements

- The environmental setting: economic conditions, government policy, social and community values and the availability of transport and communication.

- The migrant: the energy travelling through the system.
- Control subsystems, which determine for instance who goes and who stays.
- Adjustment mechanisms reacting to the departure and the arrival of the migrants both in village and urban context.
- Feedback loops such as return visit which calibrate the system either to continue and expand(positive feedback) or to diminish and close down (negative feedback)

Wallestrian have developed the world system theory which he attempt to link the development process of the countries with the international migration. The main cause of migration is the existence of unequal development between the central developed countries and the peripheral agricultural countries. According to Wallestrian the central countries will develop by exploiting the peripheral countries. The migration is the natural consequence of globalization and market dissemination across national boundaries. It also observed that globalization, cheap air transport and growth of multinational companies etc. lead to the augmentation of migration (Joly,2000).

Objectives

- (i) To study the rise of trade union among Tea Tribe community.
- (ii) To study the impact of trade union movements on the present conditions of tea tribe community.

Methodology

The methods applied in the collection of data for the research are- Interview, Participant Observation and data collected from secondary sources are- books, articles, archives, newspaper etc.

Conceptual Framework

Trade Union Activities in Tea Garden

Congress victory in labour constituencies in 1946 brought home to the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee for the need of regular political and social welfare among Tea Tribe community, Assam Cha Karmachari Sangha was formed on 9th February 1947 and it marked the formation of powerful trade union for new phase of labour movement in Assam. Indian National Trade Union Congress was formed on 3rd May 1947 and under INTUC trade union has been formed for 200 tea gardens of Assam.

After Independence the scenario of the state changed. The government approach towards working class was more favorable than that of colonial era. India Labour Conference held in Delhi in 1951, the representative of workers put up a strong petition for rational fixation of wages. A committee was formed to regulate the statutory minimum wages of tea garden workers under Minimum Wages Act of 1948. Tea Tribe community have now legal protection

under Plantation Labour Act of 1951 and this act sought to raise the standard of living of plantation workers. It included several provisions related to housing conditions, health and hygiene, education and social welfare.

Effectiveness of Trade Unions

Trade union is an association of workers for the purpose of safeguarding the interest as well as improving the working condition of tea tribe community through collective discussion and negotiation with the management. The activities of trade union are confined to the particular tea garden, looks into the affairs of non-fulfillment of certain small-scale demands of Tea Tribe community by the authorities. Trade Union are trying to make change inside the tea garden in forms of problems are discussed with the management, arranging awareness programmes, providing help in repairing old houses. But most of tea garden workers have a negative attitude towards the trade union because the trade unions done nothing in many years to the upliftment of the Tea Tribe community. The most of younger generation of Tea Tribe community has joined Tea Tribe's Student Unions. All Adivasi Student Association and Assam Tea Tribes Student Association have lost faith on trade union. The newly growing student organization among Tea Tribe community is taking over important issues of welfare of Tea Tribe community in Assam and demanding a Scheduled Tribes Status to the tea garden labour community.

Conclusion

The origin of tea plantation can be traced as back to 1774 and the first commercial firm formed for cultivation was Assam Company. From the time there was rapid growth of tea industry in Assam there was shortage of labour and therefore the planters began to recruit people from Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh as indentured labour in a worst condition. Assam Company enacted various measures to restrict the tea garden workers; they were isolated from the outside world and were made completely dependent on planters. After Independence the condition of tea garden workers were slightly improved. During the initial years of formation of trade union, they performed very well to protect the rights of the workers. But now days because of declining trade union membership they do not come to remote and isolated tea gardens to inquire about the problems of tea garden workers. According to tea garden workers, trade union have now become corrupted and politicized. There are also intra and inter union rivalry, conflict interest of political relationships, politically biased intentions have led to the decline of trade unions. The trade unions have to find a way to bring Tea Tribe community to their collective social life and help them to increase their present livelihood conditions. Establishment of institutional structure to ensure human development in tea plantation is an urgent need. The state should provide opportunities for higher education of Tea Tribe community, skill development among the workers so that they can explore other opportunities in expanding sector of the society. There will be upward mobility and supply of labour will decrease and lesser labourers will remain in gardens with higher productivity.

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