

# Tea- Labour Movements in the Northern Bengal Since 1947

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## Abstract

*It is unfortunate that after 72 years of getting independence and many socio-economic and cultural developments including scientific and technological improvement taking place, the condition of the tea-labourers in the northern North Bengal could have not yet been changed. Many Acts, Rules and Regulations have been passed, many Trade Unions have come up in the tea-gardens, many politics have been going on, but the real improvement of the tea labourers lies in dark room. Many crises and severe problems of the tea labourers in the Northern Bengal were started since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and recently it is increased tremendously as a result, the labourers have been losing their works in the tea gardens and as they have no alternative sources of income many of them have been suffering from various diseases, starvation, fasting, and ultimately they have been dying for want of food.*

**Key words:** Northern Bengal, Tea-labour, Tana bhagat movement, Rice movement, Co-ordination committee

## I. INTRODUCTION

There was no Labour Union of the tea labourers at the initial stage in the Northern Bengal and there were many factors behind it. Prof. Nirban Basu, a prominent scholar on labour movements has shown different reasons behind the absence of Labour Union at the initial stage in Northern Bengal. Firstly, Geographically Duars region was detached from other parts of the country. Tea region was like a danger fort controlled by the planters. It was not favourable to survive men though it was favourable for tea cultivation. No man even the people from Jalpaiguri did not want to proceed towards tea garden. Secondly, of all the tea gardens, a large number were in the hands of Bengali middle class. Naturally, the Nationalists had no intention to form Labour Union against the indigenous planters. Thirdly, the political leadership of the district was in the hands of English educated higher caste Hindu Bengalese. The social relation in between them was almost absence.<sup>1</sup>

Though the Labour Union was not found in the Duars, the labourers were not silent, they protested against the oppressions of the tea planters, administrators, police etc. following the different mode of movements. These protest movements were carried on from 1895 – 1918 in their own way of movements. It is unfortunate that no political party or Union or intellectual supported their movements.

The enquiry committee of the Government mentioned, It is informed by the manager of Alipurduar Sub-division that in the month of September, 1903 the labourer of this region revolted due to not having wages for overtime. In the same way 13 labour of Dalsingpara tea garden attacked on an European manager for his illegal oppressions. In 1912, a group of sardars and coolies (tea-labourers) of Nagrakata tea estate area created noise and destroyed the property of tea estate.<sup>2</sup>

The ‘Rice Movement’ of 1906 was an unorganized movement of the tea labourers. The tea labourers demanded to supply more rice in ration and in this movement Santal, Munda, Oraon took the leading role to run their movement. Tea- planters carried on their torture on the labourers with armed raiders. In 1911 many labourers of the tea gardens stopped their work, came out and revolted. In 1916 ‘Tana Bhagat Movement was started in the Jalpaiguri district which was a awakening movement of the tea labourers.<sup>3</sup> In this regard Ranjit Dasgupta writes, “In its origin the Tana Bhagat movement was a messianic movement. It was believed that a Messiah would come to redeem the Oraon from their plight. They were called upon to ‘pull out’ (tana) ghost and evil spirits which were held responsible for their misery. They were asked to purify and reform their lives.... They were, moreover, called upon to do no work as coolies and labourers under men of other castes and tribes.”<sup>4</sup>

The formation of Labour Unions among the tea labourers were started since the 1940s and in this task communist parties; particularly the CPI took a significant role in the process of organizing the tea labourers in the Duars. In 1946 at the time of election the communist leaders propagated the ideology of equality, liberty and nationality as a result; Ratanlal Brahman won the election from labour belt of Darjeeling district which encouraged extending the communist activities in Jalpaiguri district. Ranjit Dasgupta writes, “Prior to mid- 1946 these labourers had not been organized in a trade and on the whole remained untouched by the national movement. But several developments during the War and immediate post- War years converged to bring about a critical change in the life situation of the labourers.”<sup>5</sup>

Left-wing employees of Domohani Railway Workers Union played a significant role among the tea labourers and peasants. In this task Debaprosad Ghosh (known as Patalbabu) who was involved as a whole timer in the Railway Union of Domohani Branch, would contact the tea labourers. Beside this,

Bimal Dasgupta and Parimal Mitra, trade union leaders and Railway workers Jadunath Singh, Lalbahadur Chhetri, Budhan, Mansingh Guhi Mahavir tried their best to organize the tea labourers. The work of the organization with the tea labourers, communication with them and carry on political movement was very difficult because the entry of political leaders into tea gardens and any kind of communication with tea gardens and labourers was prohibited. However, the leaders communicated with the labourers secretly at the deep night beyond the control of the planters. Sometimes the work of their organization and activities including meeting, discussion etc. were held in the Railway station or the residential area of railway gangmen.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1946 when Tebhaga movement was started, the tea labourers of the district, Jalpaiguri supported and joined the Tebhaga movement. During 1946-48 tea labourers of the Duars started labour movement including general strike and cease work. In 1948 the labourers of Grasmore tea garden started strike for their demands which was continued till 11 days and this incident was the first in Bengal.<sup>7</sup>

Plantation Enquiry Commission noticed that 247 tea companies increased their property into two times during 1939 to 1953. But unfortunately this huge amount of profit went to the pocket of the tea planters depriving the tea labourers. After implementation of minimum Labour Wage Act huge number of tea labourers were beat off from their jobs, as a result, tea labourers fell into a great crisis.

World-wide economic depression was started since 1951 for which tea labourers were more deprived by the tea planters. More than 1.5 lacs tea labourers were repulsed from their job and the rationing system was ceased. The Tea Labour Act was passed in 1951 by which it appeared to have been assured the health, drinking water, sanitary latrine, canteen, education of children and homestead of tea labourers. These facilities of tea labourers were more consolidated by the West Bengal Plantation Labour Rules of 1951. But the owners of tea gardens kept them silent about the rules and facilities of tea labourers. Naturally, against the oppressive attitude of the planters tea labourers came into a platform to organize their movements and in this context left-wing parties took a significant role in continuing their movements. Sir Percival Griffiths wrote, "In February, 1953 on the recommendation of the Minimum Wages Advisory Committee, the price of concession cereals in the Dooars was raised from Rs. 5 to 15 per maund, but a partial compensation allowance of 2.5 annas per day per adult worker on gardens over five hundred acres, and 2 annas on gardens under five hundred acres, with corresponding payment for minors, was to be paid. At the same time Government ordered a ten percent cut in managerial salaries. For all practices purposes conversion, accompanied by what was really a wage cut, had been achieved.<sup>8</sup> In 1953 Tea Labour Union started 3 days

strike in favour of various demands of the tea labourers and to some extent their strike from 17<sup>th</sup> August to 19<sup>th</sup> August had a success. In continuation of this movement the union demanded to the planters to increase their wages and bonus. They demanded wages of 60 days as a bonus. A meeting was held on 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1954 in presence of Government. An endless strike was called since 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1954 for fulfillment of various demands. In this sitting some demands of labourers were accepted by the owners.<sup>9</sup>

In February 1955 a demand from the Cha Sramik Union led to an agreed increase of the minimum wage in the Dooars by 3 annas per day to Rs I/II/6 for men and to corresponding increase for women and children, with lower rates for gardens under five hundred acres. At the same time plucking rates were increased. These increases were substantial and represented the inevitable, though unfortunate, reaction to the high prices and profits of 1954. They were perhaps not justified by the long term economic position of Dooars gardens.<sup>10</sup> The agreement of 1955 was not statutory as it was under process of passing orders on the proposed enquiry into the economics of the tea industry in the Duars. So, In this situation Unions requested the labourers to do a full day's work and to abstain from striking for wages. The Indian Tea Planters Association strongly objected to increase the wages of 3 annas and they showed their logic behind it. After long discussions the Government, employers and labour agreed that the agreement for a 3 annas increase should continue until the Government inquiry was completed on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1956.<sup>11</sup>

The Government inquiry dragged on for many months at the end of it agreement could be reached in the Minimum Wage Advisory Committee. The chairman of that committee then recommended an increase of one anna per day for adults. Still the matter held fire and in the mean time the demands of labour were raised and strikes were threatened. At length in August 1959 an order under the Minimum Wage Act was passed, granting labour an increase of 2 annas per day with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> June 1959. The Indian Tea Association successfully challenged the legality of a retrospective order of this and the increase therefore only took effect from the date of the order, namely 20 August 1959.<sup>12</sup>

The 'Co-ordination Committee of Tea Plantation Workers' was formed in 1965. The committee fought to attain the rights, prestige of the tea labourers through which the labourers can survive with honour and dignity. For attaining their demands and dignity they carried on their movements, sometimes they called for strike. In this circumstances, labour minister Abdus Sattar of Congress- led government formed one-man committee to solve the problems of tea labourers. In 1968 'Kader Nawaj Committee' published the report where mentioned to be scheduled the number of

labourers accordingly the ratio of the amount lands. But the owners denied accepting the recommendations of the committee. Naturally, movement was started from the platform of co-ordination committee and in 1969 tea labourers again assembled in a strike which was continued till 17 days. At last the owners of the gardens surrendered, the labourers obtained 9000 new posts of recruitment and the owners could not drive out the labourers at their will. By the pressure of the movement of the labourers in 1975 the owners bound to increase 37 paisa as wages.

Since 1976 different issues led the tea labourers to start movement one of which was Idira-Government attacked on the bonus of the tea labourers. Against all the oppressive attitude of the planters tea labourers mobilized strongly, they came into compact themselves under the banner of left-wing parties. The state conference of CITU was held in 1974 in Malbazar in presence of Jyoti Basu, the leader of CPI (M). Huge number of tea labourers from Malbazar, Meteli, Nagrakata assembled in this convention of Jyotibas. Since 1977 with the coming of Left-Front Government a new situation was raised in the labour movement of the Duars. 7000 new posts of labourers were created and 20% bonus was allotted for the labourers.

In the changing situation after 1977 some favourable elements in the lives of the tea labourers were allowed. Amounts of lands for tea cultivation was increased, introduced new technology, but with the ratio of these changes labourers were not recruited. The owners of the gardens obtained profit by using temporary labours. A tripartite settlement was signed in 1993 by which the labourers expected the owners would be sympathized to the demands of the labourers, But the Tripartite Committee could not solve the problems of the labourers. They had no pure drinking water, latrine, sufficient lights, and opportunity of treatment. The co-ordination committee, the common platform of all tea labourer organization called for a massive movement. 10-Days strike was observed on 12 July, 1999. Near about three lacs labourer participated in this strike. The movement expanded through village to village and garden to garden. At last, the owners of tea gardens bound to accept the demand of tea labourers. They agreed to recruit 10,000 labourers and to distribute medicine from hospitals. But different types of problems and crises rose among the tea labourers. There are many reasons behind this crisis.

It is true that the monopoly of tea trade of India was lost many years ago with the emergence of tea cultivation in different corner of the world. The quality of Darjeeling tea like other parts of India was decreased whereas the quality of tea outside India increased rapidly as a result the market of Indian tea faced in competition. It is true that the quality of tea of India was the best in the world market since 1860

to the last phase of 20<sup>th</sup> century. But at present Indian tea lost this position and it is occupied by Kenya and China, India has gone to third and fourth position. Since the last two decades Indian tea has to face in hard competition in the exported market of the world. On the other hand the tea planters became corrupted; they invested money on the other sectors of industry. After taking huge amount of loan for the development of tea-gardens the planters cheated the money and ultimately the development tea-gardens became failure. Repeatedly the ownership of tea-gardens has been changed confidentially and nobody knows it. Technological development has not been done as a result the production cost of tea has increased where quality of tea has decreased. The age of many tea-trees in the Duars has become 50-60 years; naturally the super quality of tea has not produced. Apart from these, there are many reasons such as corruptions in auction market for selling tea, corruptions of authorities in tea-gardens, unfair politics of various Trade Unions and negligence of government to the development of tea industry etc. led the tea- industry into challenge.

Due to above mentioned reasons many crises and severe problems of the tea labourers in the Northern Bengal were started since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and recently it is increased tremendously as a result the labourers have been losing their works in the tea gardens and as they have no alternative sources of income many of them have been suffering from various diseases, starvation, fasting, and ultimately they have been dying for want of food.

The following report shows the present condition of tea gardens and labourers of the northern North Bengal surveyed by labour department, West Bengal.<sup>13</sup>

Population in tea estates 1,86,559 families reside in the tea estates of hills, Terai and Dooars areas of North Bengal.

Tea estates of hills, Terai and Dooars have population of 11,24,907.

There are 2, 62,426 permanent workmen engaged by 273 tea estates of hills, Terai and Dooars region.

Housing and other facilities

1,66,591 workmen out of 2,62,426 have been provided houses. It means 95,835 workmen are yet to be provided houses.

6 tea estates (3 in hills & 3 in Dooars) have not provided even a single house to their workers.

There are 51 tea estates who could not provide houses to 50 per cent or more workmen. The

workmen of 10 tea estates are the worst sufferers as near 20 per cent of them could not be provided their houses.

In 2009, 53 tea estates did not spend a single penny on housing. In 2012, 62 tea estates did not spend a single penny.

37 Tea estates did not spend a single penny (on housing) during last four years (2009 to 2012).

44 tea estates do not have any latrines. Houses in 12 tea estates in Dooars are under complete darkness (no electricity connection).

The workers of tea estates suffer badly for supply of drinking water, both in quality and quantity. The tea estates of hill areas in Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong sub division have severe scarcity of drinking water. Natural spring water and Jhora are only sources of water. Most of the tea estates of hill areas does not properly distribute the sources through pipelines.

#### Health and medical facilities

Out of 273 tea estates, only 166 have hospitals. Out of these 166, only 56 tea estates have full time residential doctors. Other 110 tea estates' hospitals depend on visiting doctors. Among doctors of 166 tea estates, only 74 doctors have degree of MBBS, others are non- MBBS. Out of 166 tea estates having hospitals, 116 do not have any nurse.

107 tea estates (hills -64, Terai- 20 and Dooars-23) do not have any hospital. Out of 273 tea estates, 85 do not have any dispensary. Ten tea estates have neither hospital nor dispensary.

Out of 273 tea estates, primary health centres (PHCs) exist in only 160, 113 tea estates (hills-38. Terai-23 and Dooars-52) do not have any PHC. Out of 273 tea estates, 160 provide ambulance. Many of these ambulances are not up to the standard.

Since May 17, the Duncans tea factory at Dhumchipara in Alipurduar district of North Bengal, where Dominique works, has been "more or less" shut. Dried tea leaves lie strewn on sorting tables and a sturdy lock hangs on the door of the processing shed.

In the past month, beginning October 13, nine employees of the factory and the Dhumchipara tea garden have died. Bagrakote — where reports of hunger deaths at tea gardens since it partially shut down in March prompted a visit by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to the region — saw casualties mostly among the ageing. Here in Dhumchipara, the youngest to die was 36-year-old Chanchal Mangar.<sup>14</sup>

The following report has been published in the Telegraph, Oct, 27, 2015:

A tea worker died today in the Dooars from suspected lack of treatment and food in a Duncans Goenka estate where pay has been irregular for at least six months and medical facilities almost negligible, according to a report submitted to the state government.

The 14 Duncans Goenka gardens in the Dooars and in Darjeeling "are in a state of limbo. They are neither closed nor open in the usual sense of the terms, with frightening consequences for the workers on the estates. This situation has added one more chapter to the shameful history of hunger in the tea industry,"

The latest death reported, of 44-year-old Mukti Santhal, was in Bagrakote estate in Jalpaiguri district. John Barla, a prominent trade union leader and president of the Progressive Tea Workers' Union, today said that in the past seven to eight months 42 residents had died in Duncans tea gardens from malnutrition and lack of treatment. The figure could not be confirmed from officials as deaths in gardens are not categorised as those from malnutrition or lack of treatment.<sup>15</sup>

The following report has been submitted to the State government, West Bengal by Harsh Mandar, the Supreme Court's special commissioner on right to food:

There are close to 300 still operating, but gardens have closed throughout the region, including in Bundapani, Dheklapara, Redbank, Surendranagar and Dharanipur. A study by the United Tea Workers Front (UTWF) in Dooars found that over the past decade, 1,000 workers have died.

"The fact is there are more than 100 deaths this year, owing to the closure of at least five tea gardens and abject poverty," Anuradha Talwar, the State Adviser to the Supreme Court Commissioners on the Right to Food, told Al Jazeera. "As their wages are abysmally low, the poor workers or their family members have neither the fat on their bodies nor the balance in their banks to survive."<sup>16</sup>

It is clear from the above discussions that the oppressions, deprivations and life-pain of the tea-labourers was started since the inception of the tea-gardens in the Northern Bengal as elsewhere in other parts of India under the British rule and this painful situation have been going on till today. Many water have been flowing over through the Tist, Torsa, Raydak and Mansai, many ups and downs have been taken place, but the condition and life-pain of the tea-labourers could have not been ended. They are helpless, they have nothing to do but for accepting death.

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