

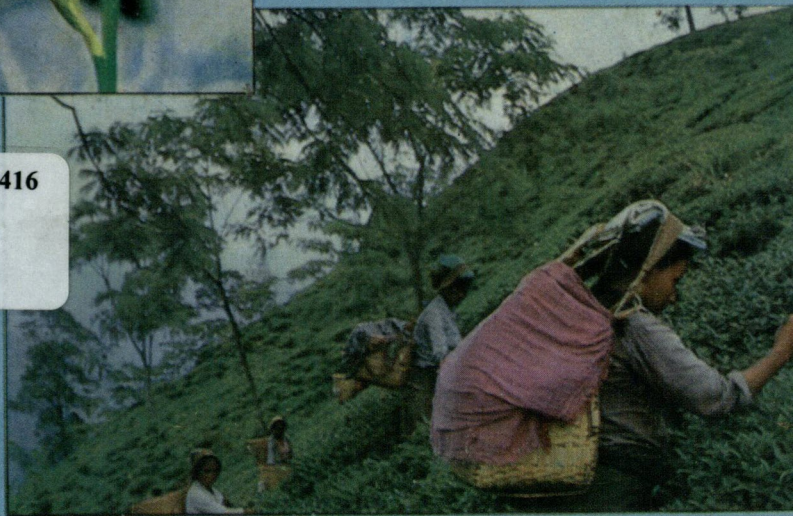
SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF PLANTATION WORKERS IN NORTH EAST INDIA

R.N. Chakravorty



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Plenty of books are available written by distinguished scholars on the growth and development of tea industry in India, but a very scanty attention was paid to bring into limelight the rise, growth and horrible socio-economic conditions and conundrums of the workers employed in various tea gardens in north-eastern region of the country. The present volume appears as a much wanted boon to fill-up the vacuum, as in this profusely illustrated book, the author has probed into deep and critically analysed many clues and cliches, surrounding the most fascinating story of the rise, growth and development of tea industry and its workforce, specially the piteous living condition of the workers in north-eastern region, before and after independence, and the roles which are being played by the Central Board for Workers Education under the patronage of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Geneva, for allround development of the workers.

The study culminated from academical exercises, theoretical and practical experience of the author over two decades, may serve as a beacon-light in understanding and formulating proper policy to solve the problems of large number of workers of the country in both organised and unorganised sectors.

Dr. R.N. Chakravorty of Dibrugarh, Assam, served under the Central Board for Workers Education for more than 25 years at different centres of the Board in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Bihar and West Bengal. During long span of his service in the Board as Education Officer and Regional Director, he had the opportunity to implement, monitor and evaluate the workers' education scheme in north-east region which is the cradle of tea plantations, employing about eight lakhs of workers.

He extensively toured different tea gardens in the states of Assam and Tripura and closely observed the work culture, pattern of living of the workers and the facilities provided by the managements to their workmen. He also has a proven track record of assisting the managements and trade unions to resolve the industrial disputes through bi-partite negotiations in most critical situation not only in tea gardens but also in ophther industrial organisations e.g., oil, jute, cotton etc. in above mentioned states.

He used to contribute educative articles on tea industry and its workforce in the news bulletin *Chah Mazdoor* of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh, Dibrugarh, a pioneer workers' organisation of the country, and sometimes in the *Indian Workers*—a notable news-media of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, New Delhi.

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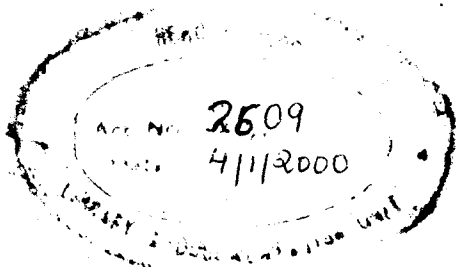


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Introductory

The present volume is the outcome of the Research work done by the author on the theme entitled "Impact of Workers Education with special reference to Socio-Economic Conditions of the Plantation Workers in North East India" on which the Doctoral Degree of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Sociology was awarded by the Dibrugarh University, Assam in 1993.

Though plenty of literatures are now available in the country on the Development of Tea Industry written by different distinguished scholars yet the author had to rummage with great inconvenience in searching out adequate materials for his research work in connection with the rise, growth, condition and problem of the workers employed on various plantations in India, especially on the tea gardens in North East India.

So, being inspired by the kind counsel of the venerable experts in the Council of Research of Dibrugarh University and in the Department of Sociology, the author has embarked upon to bring into light the academical exercises in the directions of politico and socio-economic settings of the tea industry and its labour force in the States of Assam and Tripura in North East India with special emphasis being laid on the Role of the Workers' Education Scheme to ameliorate the socio-economic conditions of the workers in tea industry of North East India.

The contents of this volume have been schematised by making some additions, alterations and leaving aside the analytical exercises, specially large number of tables, of the original research work with a view to make it more simplified, informative and useful to the readers, student

community, labour leaders, social philanthropists, tea producers and Government officials etc., in relation to the most neglected and down-trodden tea population of North East India, the pitiable plight of whom seldom comes to the notice of the public in India and abroad, so as to enable them to exercise their good offices to accelerate the process of formulating a social policy by the concerning authorities upon the moral and social development of the vast number of plantation population who are constituting a major and most important productive force of the entire population of the country and contributing a lot for the social progress of the nation as a whole. Because, an industrial system is itself an institution which grows out of the social needs and only a genetic study can be helpful to the development of an intelligent social policy.

The author also takes the privilege to narrate some of the essential features which are having linkage with the present study, in the following paragraphs, for clarity and exigency of the study.

The present study is essentially an academical exercise in disquisition of yielding results of a centrally sponsored scheme of Workers' education, specially in the context of tea plantation workers in Assam and Tripura in North East India. It is a pioneering piece of Research maneuver since no scholar has yet penetrated into this particular field to unveil the effectiveness of the training programmes which are being conducted by the Central Board for Workers' Education in the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, for the last three decades, aiming to ameliorate the socio-economic conditions of the workers in both public and private sectors including the plantation workers of North East India.

Besides, there is a debonair background for taking up the matter in the level of academical research continuum which may be succinctly described in the following few lines :

In course of touring different tea gardens in Assam, the scholar had the opportunity to come across some astounding features in the tea gardens in regard to the tea bushes and also the men who used to manned the same. Videlicet, to his utter surprise he noticed that some of the tea bushes in certain gardens were earmarked as 'Jat Assam', 'Jat Betjan', 'China-Assam hybrid' etc. Similarly, it was also identified by him that the workers who used to plant the bushes, nurse it and pluck the leaves, were also from different communities such as Munda, Orang, Puri, Sober, Tanti, Naik etc., who were aboriginal of other provinces but were forcefully brought over here and compelled to work in the tea gardens in remote corners of the State against their wishes. It is worthwhile to

state while the tea bushes were brought from other places in a most dignified way by the distinguished personages, the labourers were brought from other places in a most undignified way and that too, by mischievous and dishonest persons. These were the basic differences in establishing the tea plantations in the country by the Britishers so far the plants and the workers are concerned.

Nevertheless, for living in the gardens for more than a century, in a cluster, they were acclimatized with the environment, local culture and traditions, the colonial system of work culture and thus, with the passages of times, they had to identify themselves as a separate class of 'tea tribe', though they are having linkage with the rest of the population of the country. Though they have been kept aloof, due to irony of fate, they represent a unique class of people who are really seemed to be most graceful in the garden's environment as that of a child in his mother's lap. So, the characteristics of the tea gardens are visible in its crores of tea bushes and also large chunk of tea workers, both male and female, adult and child, coupled with colonial fashion of its functioning, presuming it, still, to be the mini dominions of the tea planters.

These events prompted the Researcher to delve into the matter to its entirety, as a result of which the Theme of the present study had been formulated in one hand, and to find out the effectiveness of the training programmes conducted under the Workers' Education Scheme of the Government of India on the other hand, with special reference to the tea workers of the two States as stated before.

It is said that the workers are the backbone of any industry or the country as a whole. But the question comes to the fore, how this vast number of illiterate and ignorant workers, specially workers in tea plantations, can cross over their 'Tour De Force' i.e. the long journey of their mission in fulfilment of their obligations as workers of the industry, citizens of the country, members of their families and their own organisations without proper education and training? Looking into the tea plants or tea bushes, one can find that even the tea plants or bushes are fashioned by proper cultivation, nursing and treatment to derive maximum output or profit out of the same. While the efforts of the then British planters were laudable in this respect, their endeavour to educate and train the tea workers disseminates a very cryptic affairs which is solely responsible for the present states of conditions of the tea plantation workers. The matter will be ample clear by a reference to the remarks

made by the Royal Commission on Labour in their Reports of 1931 that in India nearly the whole mass of industrial labour was illiterate, a state of affairs which was unknown to any other country of industrial importance. But still no positive step was taken to educate the workers by the then British Government and the British planters though they fortified their luck out of the Indian tea industry.

The scenario in this respect began to take a new shape only after attainment of Independence. Realizing the necessity of educating the vast number of illiterate and ignorant labour force of the country, the National Government established the Central Board for Workers' Education (CBWE) in the Ministry of Labour in 1958 to impart proper training to the workers in different industries and establishments, aiming to ameliorate their socio-economic conditions through the process of economic development as envisaged in the Five-Year Plans. Thus, it would be transpired that while the developed countries like U.K., USA, USSR, France, Germany, Norway, Denmark etc. launched workers' educational schemes and implemented the same through different institutions, organisations like Colleges, Universities, Workers' Educational Association etc., both at the Government and Non-Governmental levels during 1870's or so, it started in India about hundred years later. This single instance will prove the essentiality of imparting training to the workers in different directions, be it general or technical, as the case may be.

The workers' education is essentially a part of general education but for the workers, aiming to equip themselves with necessary knowledge and information, so as to enable them to improve the quality of their life and ensure excellence in all fronts, as we know, well-enlightened and well-disciplined labour force is also the second line of defence of the Country, besides their being assets to the industries.

So, today, the promotion of workers' education has become an essential plank in an effort designed to promote orderly and peaceful industrial relations and in fostering a sense of partnership between industry and labour.

The role of workers in tea industry is immensely great as it is labour-intensive industry and without necessary co-operation from their side it would be hardly possible for the tea industry to flourish. So, the role of workers' education is equally of great importance to train them in proper perspective.

The main thrust of the present study is to find out the benefits which could be derived by the tea workers out of the packages of training programmes of the Central Board of Workers' Education, specially in the directions of their social life, their participation in economic and welfare programmes of the tea industry, emergence of leadership from among themselves and strengthening the trade union movement in the tea industry etc.

But the workers' education is a continuous process and as such, the desired level of achievements can only be expected and judged on the coverage of all the rank and file of workers under its different educational programmes and also keeping the verve of the workers alive through the processes of training and re-training, as the case may be. Because, as we know, educational seeds sown today may bring full fruit only in five, ten or twenty years—a generation is not too long in this perspective.

The significance of the present study is manifold as narrated in the body of the book itself but is apparently electric considering its importance both at the national and international levels in view of the fact that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) itself is patronising in the promotional aspects of workers' education throughout the world in furtherance of working community and their organisations too.

The fairness of the study also lies in its designing the methodology as an attempt has been made to testify the impacts in twelve directions considering the age, educational level, marital status and sex of the respondents (442 trained workers—sample population) which are quite intensive in nature.

In the task of completing the study, the scholar had to face tremendous difficulties as specified in the study itself. But with the able guidance of Dr. D. Doley, Prof. Deptt. of Sociology and the magnanimity of the respected members of the Research Committee of Dibrugarh University all the hurdles that stood on the way could be surmounted.

The scholar takes the opportunity to extend his profound and heart-felt gratitude to the honourable members of the Research Committee, Registrar of Dibrugarh University for their according valuable permission to bring the study to its finality under the able guidance of Dr. D. Doley, Professor and Head, the Department of Sociology.

The Researcher is also heavily indebted to Dr. D. Doley, Professor for his taking utmost interest in guiding the scholar in proper perspective of the study and completing the task within a short span of time,

considering the constraints which the scholar had to cross over in conducting his study for a considerable period of time.

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the Research Study in furtherance of the tea community.

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The Researcher expresses his thankfulness to the learned authorities-official and non-official whose valuable contributions have been used in preparing this volume.

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It is, therefore, honestly expected that the present work will stand to serve the end for a fuller realisation of the object under view.

R.N. Chakravorty
Dibrugarh