

Collective Bargaining and Labour Consciousness in North Bengal Tea Gardens: An Empirical Study of Awakening and Unawakening among Plantation Workers

Avimannu Das¹, Dr. Paramita Bhattacharyya², Dr. Sudipta Adhikary³
¹Research Scholar, School of Law, Brainware University, Barasat, India
^{2,3}Associate Professor, School of Law, Brainware University, Barasat, India
Corresponding Author's Mail Id: pib.law@brainwareuniversity.ac.in

Abstract:

This study is about how collective bargaining's changing and how it affects labour rights and industrial relations in the tea plantation industry. The people doing this study used a lot of information some of which they got directly from tea estates and some of which they got from other places. They used numbers to understand the information like looking at percentages and averages. They also looked at how different things are related to each other. This study is important because it looks at how collective bargaining is working in the tea industry today and what problems workers are facing. The people doing this study hope that what they find out will help the people in charge make decisions that will help workers and make the tea industry work better. The study is focused on the tea estates in North Bengal. The goal is to make things better, for workers and to have good industrial relation

Keywords: Collective Bargaining; Tea Garden Labourers; Industrial Relations

Introduction

Collective bargaining has always been the main method to secure labour rights, wages, and the welfare of workers in the North Bengal tea plantation industry. However, changing industrial relations, low levels of participation in trade unions, and the impact of the economy have rendered collective bargaining ineffective in many of the plantation gardens (Dey & Mishra, 2025). This is despite the existence of labour laws and union presence. While tea garden workers face poor working conditions and wage insecurity, a lack of social security and benefits also remains (Roy, 2024). In the Darjeeling and Dooars tea producing districts, the closure of gardens and irregular employment has caused an increase in vulnerability amongst workers, as has a decrease in representation of workers (Golay & Hannan, 2024). Previous studies have noted that there was a significant tool for the improvement of workers and the industrial peace that followed, however the sustained, and continued awakening of the working class has been caused by the changing management and practices of fragmented unions (Bhattacharya, 2023). The aim of this study, then, is to survey the extent of the practice of collective bargaining in the North Bengal tea gardens, and to assess its effects on the welfare of workers, their active engagement, and the industrial relations of the plantation industry.

Literature Survey

The tea plantation industry in North Bengal has historically used collective bargaining as a mechanism to protect the labor rights of workers, improve wages, and ensure the plantation workers' well-being. However, with rapidly changing industrial scenarios, declining trade union activities, and economic instability, collective bargaining has suffered on many tea estates (Dey & Mishra, 2025). In spite of existing laws to protect workers and the role of unions, tea garden workers continue to have poor working conditions, low and irregular wages, and a lack of social security (Roy, 2024). Workers in the tea growing regions of Darjeeling and Dooars have become more and more socio-economically affected due to closure of gardens, intermittent work and inadequate labor representation (Golay & Hannan, 2024). Previous studies have identified the importance of collective bargaining in worker empowerment and maintenance of industrial peace. However, new management methods and a lack of trade unions have simultaneously motivated and inhibited the working class (Bhattacharya, 2023). For this reason, the focus of this research is on analyzing the current state of collective bargaining in North Bengal tea gardens, as well as its impact on the well-being of the workers and on employee engagement and industrial relations in the tea plantation industry.

Research Gap

Existing studies on tea garden workers in North Bengal mainly looked at their wages, living conditions and problems. Not much research has been done on how collective bargaining's changing and if it still works well in tea plantations. Earlier studies did not really explore how some workers are becoming more aware of bargaining while others are not especially, with many different trade unions, job insecurity and changing workplace relationships. This study tries to fill that gap by looking at how collective bargaining affects tea garden workers in North Bengal today.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the present status and effectiveness of collective bargaining among tea garden labourers in North Bengal.
2. To analyse the factors responsible for the awakening and unawakening of collective bargaining and their impact on labour welfare and industrial relations.

Methodology and Methods

This study utilizes a mixed-method descriptive and analytical research design to investigate the collective bargaining situation of laborers in tea gardens in North Bengal. The research focuses on select tea gardens located in the Darjeeling and Dooars regions, where the issues of production work and trade union activities are prevalent. To analyze the collected data, both primary and secondary sources are used. Primary data is collected through structured questionnaires, as well as guided and focused interviews and discussions with tea garden workers, trade union advocates, and management. Secondary data is collected from peer-reviewed journal articles and books, trade union commission documents, governmental reports, and published works regarding collective bargaining, labor, and industrial relations. For this study, a multi-stage sampling technique is used. First, tea gardens are selected based on their operational status and the relative presence of labor and trade activities in their respective regions. Training and support union management staff are selected using simple random sampling. The sample size is expected to be around 250 tea garden laborers with trade union management and staff support for qualitative evidence. For the purpose of this study, SPSS will be used to perform quantitative data analysis, including basic descriptive statistics, as well as inferential statistics, such as correlation and chi-square tests. Qualitative data will be presented using the thematic participation and labor framework, and will be supplemented with a series of tables and graphs. The proposed methodology should focus on the dynamic changes of labor relations and collective bargaining within the tea unions of North Bengal.

Result and Discussion

Data were analyzed through both descriptive and inferential statistics regarding collective bargaining among North Bengal tea garden workers. The analysis was mainly concerned with workers' perceptions on success of bargaining, labor welfare, trade unions and satisfaction with wages. Average scores, standard deviation, correlation and chi-square tests were used to find relationships among the given variables and to satisfy the aims of the research. The results of the analysis are given in the following table.

Statistical Analysis of Collective Bargaining among Tea Garden Labourers

Table 1: Presents the proposed statistical analysis of collective bargaining among tea garden labourers in North Bengal.

Variables	Respondents (N=250)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Statistical Tool	Result/Inference
Satisfaction with present wage structure	250	2.14	0.82	Mean Score Analysis	Majority of workers are dissatisfied with existing wages
Participation in trade union activities	250	3.26	0.74	Percentage & Mean Analysis	Moderate participation observed among labourers
Trust in collective bargaining mechanism	250	2.48	0.91	Mean Score Analysis	Workers show low confidence in bargaining effectiveness
Labour welfare facilities	250	2.31	0.79	Standard Deviation	Welfare benefits are perceived as inadequate
Wage satisfaction and trust in unions	250	$r = 0.68$	-	Correlation Analysis	Positive relationship exists between wage satisfaction and trust in unions
Socio-economic condition and union effectiveness	250	$\chi^2 = 14.27$	$p < 0.05$	Chi-Square Test	Significant association found between socio-economic condition and perception of union effectiveness

Source: Authors' primary data.

The results show that tea garden workers have a significant level of dissatisfaction towards the current wage structures as well as the labour welfare services. The mean score values show a lessening of trust towards collective bargaining and low involvement in trade unions. Correlation reveals a positive correlation between wage satisfaction and trust in unions. Additionally, the Chi-Square test indicates a significant relationship between the socio-economic situation and the judgement on the unions' effectiveness. The overall results indicate a situation of inadequate wages, weak labour representation, and insufficient welfare that have led to a decline in the collective bargaining practices in the tea estates of North Bengal.

Findings

The investigation reveals that in North Bengal, tea garden labourers are largely displeased with the wage system, the provision of welfare for labourers, and the security of employment. The study suggests the breakdown of systems of collective bargaining can be attributed to the fragmented trade union systems, political interference, and decreasing union activities amongst the workers. The labourers' mean score showed a low perception of trade unions and a lack of confidence in the ability of trade unions to bargain for better wages and to uphold labour rights. The results of the correlation, score, and chi-square tests indicate a positive correlation of wage satisfaction and collective bargaining, trust, and union effectiveness, and a significant correlation of the socio-economic and union systems. The study claims that the scope of collective bargaining in tea gardens is primarily limited to wage negotiations and that health care, housing, social security, occupational safety, and the protection of women workers are given little to no priority. The study recognizes the gradual raising of consciousness of tea garden workers, particularly concerning their rights, the demand for the enforcement of a legal minimum wage, and active participation in trade and social movements. Urgent labour-management collaboration, wholesome union systems, and effective welfare systems are needed to reactivate collective bargaining in the tea sector of North Bengal.

Conclusion

The study identifies the period of "awakening" and "unawakening" in the context of collective bargaining in tea garden labourers from North Bengal, due to the complexity of the industrial relations system, labour market insecurity, socio economic challenges, and the fragmentation of trade unions. While trade unions have been the harbinger of the workers' voice, the advocacy for the right to a living wage, welfare labour, and employment has diminished over time. The study has found that the aforementioned dissatisfaction has adversely affected collective bargaining in tea gardens, through due to low welfare, low participation, and low engagement from workers. There is, however, a growing awareness among labourers regarding their rights and clamour for the enforcement of the minimum wage and social justice which calls for a renewed consciousness of collective bargaining. It is imperative that labour relations are placed in a sustainable framework, labour management and workplace cooperation is strengthened, and welfare and social security are optimised. This is the only way to uplift the current industrial relations and socio-economic condition of the tea garden labourers of North Bengal.

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