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**GLOBALIZATION, TEA INDUSTRY AND TRADE
UNIONISM: AN OVERVIEW WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO ASSAM CHAH
KARMACHARI SANGHA (ACKS)**

*Satyadeep Lahkar
Borun Dey*

Abstract

It would not be an exaggeration in saying that the notion as well as practice of globalization is influencing each and every aspect of human life and society. Be it social, political or cultural arenas of present world, the deep imprint of globalization is so vivid that none of them can claim themselves being free from the impacts of globalization. In this context, it has been widely seen that globalization has also impacted the social movements going worldwide. Given the scenario, the spirit of trade unionism or more specifically trade union movements, major segments of social movement have also been seen receiving impacts of globalization to a great extent. In this connection, it may be highlighted that the tea industry of Assam and the trade union movement pertaining to the same has received tremendous changes owing to globalization. Hence, the present paper aims at throwing some critical lights on the dynamics of globalization, tea industry and trade unionism paying special attention to Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha. The paper is qualitative in nature and historic-analytical methods are used. Further, it is based on primary sources i.e., field investigation and interviews made and taken by interview along with consulting relevant secondary literature.

Key Words: Trade Unionism, Globalization, Tea Industry, ACKS, Development

Introduction

Assam came under British rule later in comparison to other pockets of the country. The colonial ruler initiated the process of industrialization in this region too like the other parts of the country. However, the Britishers faced some problems in this regard and among them a major problem was the lack of adequate manual labourers. Assam traditionally has been a self-supporting village economy based on agriculture and therefore most of the indigenous local population of Assam was reluctant to work as manual labour under the Britishers. The Britishers under the banner of East India Company occupied the administration of Assam in 1836 and it established a Company namely 'Assam Tea Company' in February, 1839 in order to spread tea plantation in Assam and to have profit. From then onwards till date the tea industry has been serving a dominant role in the industrial map of the state as well as of the country.

Globalization, Tea Industry and Trade Unionism: an Overview

Modern industrial set ups and the notion of trade unionism are considered as both sides of the same coin as emergence and continuation of modern industries often develop the spirit of trade unionism. Here, the tea industry of Assam is also not exceptional from this very fact as various trade union entities have emerging and operating its functions in the tea plantations of Assam. However, *Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha* (ACMS) and *Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha* (ACKS) have been two formidable trade unions of Brahmaputra valley representing the labourers and the employees recruited in the tea plantations of the valley. Emerged on 9th February 1947, ACKS has been articulating as well as aggregating various interests of the greater community of tea plantation employees of Assam.

The notion of globalization received its height in India in the last decades of the previous century specially after the initiation of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) by the state apparatus. Such move impacted the very socio-political structure of our country including trade union movement too. Emergence of innovative technologies has hampered the bargaining power of labour and in most cases labourers were bound to adopt the policy of VRS (Voluntary

Retirement Scheme) and with the arrival of new millennium the scenario became more vicious as the opportunity of employment getting complicated due to the initiation of recruitment of labourers and employees solely on contractual basis which ultimately hampers the strength of trade unions in terms of its numerical strength which are diminishing day by day.¹

Globalization, Tea Industry and Trade Unionism: the case of *Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha (ACKS)*

As it has been mentioned above that the spirit as well as the practice of trade unionism is also not getting untouched from globalization. Hence, the present paper aims to examine the magnitude of such impact on ACKS and its respective trade union movement in Assam. In this context, the researcher has interviewed the senior office bearers of *Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha* who has vehemently opined on the condition of anonymity that the existing scenario itself is a big challenge in general to trade union movement of India and in particular to that of *Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha*. The office bearers further have gone on to say that with the arrival of multinational companies with fascinating market created by the same severely affected the numerical strength of ACKS. They further opined with great resentment that now the new generation is no longer interested to be a '*babu*'. Similarly, while the interaction with the researcher a retired employee of Ethelbari Tea Estate of Tinsukia District, Assam and an active member of Panitola branch of ACKS recalled the parted days when the service of a *babu* in tea estates occupied special honor and respect in the society and it was one of the desirable jobs for educated youths up to the closing decade of the last century. In this context, the *ex-chah karmachari* expressed the view that now even the most of offspring of *chah-karmacharies* are not interested to be recruited in tea estates and this creates a great challenge in front of the ACKS and the seven-decade long trade union movement operated by them. Moreover, the leader expressing his view in this regard opined that introduction of computers in the official works of tea estates is also a key factor for the reduction of employees in the tea estates and though there have been *computer Kereni*³. But there was not satisfactory agreement on the pay structure of such employees. Now one may raise queries regarding the position of ACKS in

such a situation to continue its role as a trade union of representing the greater community of Tea Plantation Employees of Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Here, the researcher has made query in this regard to an incumbent central office bearer of ACKS and in response to the researcher the leader opined that ACKS being a trade union always trying to tackle such problems created by globalization and he pointed out the agreement of ACKS with C.C.P.A signed on 25th March, 2016 which has fixed a grade of *Computer Kereni* recruited in the tea estates of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Further, the leader has gone on to say that now ACKS has been adding voice to a new demand for respective authority to appoint the educated off-spring of *chah-karmacharies* in the tea estates. Although no agreement with C.C.P.A has been made in this regard and the leader expressed his pessimistic view that very soon ACKS would be able to sign such an agreement which would ensure the appointment of the off-spring of '*Chah-karmacharies*' and would also ensure the strength of members of ACKS, an entity that has been bearing the flag of trade union movement in Assam from last seven decades.

The discourse of globalization, tea industry and trade unionism would definitely be incomplete without being dealing with the rumor of crisis in tea industry. Such rumour nurtured and spread over the period of time has also possessed a great threat towards both tea industry and the trade unionism of the same which can be treated as one of the major evil impacts of globalization over ACKS and the tea industry of Assam in its glorious journey from planters' raj to '*swaraj*'. Although production of tea is subject to weather and the production of tea may reduce due to various natural factors but a rumour regarding crisis of tea industry of Assam triggered controversy in the first decade of the present century. From 2003 onwards it had been spread far and wide that the tea industry of Assam had been going through severe crisis even C.C.P.A, (Consultative Committee of Plantation Associations), a body representing the employers of tea industry of Assam expressed their inability to continue the monetary and non-monetary benefits given to the workers and employees of tea estates of Assam. Most importantly, mass media, civil-society institutions and even state apparatus also compelled to accept such rumour. Given the complex situation, leadership of ACKS came forward to assess

authenticity of this so-called crisis and came in to submission that such crisis is nothing but a pseudo one intending to preserve, protect and defend the vested interest of some of capitalist forces. Further, ACKS along with INTUC (Assam Branch) approached government of Assam to look into the entire matter and to take necessary action which led to the formation of a committee under renowned economist, Jayanta Madhab to investigate the entire issue on 1st October, 2003.⁴ Most importantly, the leadership of ACKS provided necessary information and data to this committee. Accordingly, the committee submitted its report stating the futility of the so-called crisis which has proved the stand of ACKS on this so-called crisis and C.C.P.A again compelled to continue the above mentioned benefits to employees and workers of the tea industry of Assam.⁵ Apart from this, leadership of ACKS specially the erstwhile General Secretary of the same raised this issue in national level too while participating in a meeting of tea stake holder's organized by Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Government of India held in 16-17 September, 2004 at New Delhi. In this high-level meeting, the General Secretary of ACKS strongly opined that the rumour on tea crisis is a pseudo one and the leader urged the union government to declare special financial package for the revival of sick tea plantations of Assam. Afterwards, the union government made a proposal of providing financial aid to sick tea plantations in the next general budget.⁶

Apart from this, another burning challenge posed by globalization before ACKS is the infusion of the norms of unorganized sector industry to the tea industry, a major industry of organized sector of the country. Tea industry is considered as a vast industry requiring a large amount of land, capital and labourers of both manual and mental category and thereby tea industry of Assam has been traditionally operated by big capitalist companies and the public sector corporation like Assam Tea Corporation. However, with the emergence of neo-liberal policy and globalization which encourages open and competitive market brings drastic change to this scenario. The policy of open-market economy encouraged the peasants and common people to establish small or tiny tea plantations popularly known as '*Xudra Chah Kheti*' in vernacular language and it led to mushrooming of small tea plantations across the Brahmaputra valley. Moreover, small factories known as

bought-leaf factories are being established across the Brahmaputra valley specially in the upper Assam region. According to an article published in *Amar Asom*, a popular daily in Assamese language on 1st May, 2006 more than 38,776 small tea planters established small tea plantations using 2,90,606 *bigha* lands of the state.⁷ Such small plantations and factories can be considered as a big challenge in front of ACKS. Though such plantations and factories recruit both manual and mental labourers but it isn't easier to cover up these labourers under the banner of trade unions due to the 'domestic' nature of such small plantations and factories. Similarly, the management of some tea estates also encourages such tiny planters by purchasing green tea leaves from the small tea planters. The motive behind such encouragement on the part of the tea plantations is nothing but to ensure more profit without providing monetary and non-monetary benefits to the labourers associated with such tiny plantations which they have to provide the employees and workers of the tea estates having permanent worker and employee with their respective trade union. It means that some of the capitalist entities owning tea estates in Assam prefer to patronage small tea plantations because it is easier to make more profit which they cannot make in tea estate as in the registered tea plantations the managements have to give wage/salary to the workers and employees, have to provide housing facilities, healthcare facility and other facilities to the workers and employees.⁸

While interviewing with the then General Secretary of ACKS from 2002-19 in this regard, the leader opined that though such small tea plantations have been infusing the norms of unorganized industry to the century long old tea industry of Assam which possess a great threat to trade unionism in tea industry of Assam in general and in particular to that of ACKS. The leader further opined that due to some lacuna in current labour legislation the flag of trade unionism is yet to be fluttered among the labourers and the workers associated with the small tea plantations and its auxiliary arrangements. Hence, bringing necessary reforms in the existing laws pertaining to tea plantations of Assam is quite essential in this regard and ACKS has been pressurizing the competent authorities in different platforms with different channels. In this regards it is worthwhile to mention that the then existing general secretary of ACKS attended a meeting called by

Government of India on 26-27 August, 2005 held at Sram Bhawan, New Delhi. In this meeting several proposals have been passed to make necessary reforms in plantation labour act, 1951.⁹ Afterwards, 'The plantation Labour Act, 1951' has been amended by the parliament with 'The plantation Labour (Amendment) Act, 2010' which broadens the jurisdiction of the term employer under section 2 A (E) of the said act and by dint of such amendment now individuals also fall in the purview of employer. Moreover, the state government determined minimum wage for the workers of the bought-leaf factories by a notification bearing no.GLR.503/81/Pt/39 dated 3rd November, 2015.¹⁰ But these workers and employees are yet to be cover up under the banner of trade union.

Hence, in a nutshell, it can be commented that the very forces of globalization impact the trade union movement in India in general and that of ACKS in particular to a great extent. Further, it has been widely seen that ACKS in this regard trying with its best to tackle such impacts by using various means. The leader has further argued that since globalization has been negatively impacting trade union movement in various means like decline in the members of trade union, infusion of the norms of unorganized sector to the organized industries like the tea industry of Assam but now most of the trade unions are coming together regardless of the ideology possessed by them in order to combat together the evil effects of existing neo-liberal eco-political structure of our country. Most importantly, leadership of ACKS in spite of a trade union representing not more than 20,000 employees recruited in the tea plantations of the Assam valley is able to represent itself in various international forums. Though prior to the emergence of neo-liberal order in our country, the leadership of ACKS has been participating in international forums but in present context, as opined by the leader, it is quite essential in the sense that sharing international platforms helps the leadership of ACKS to have in-depth idea about the worldwide scenario of the trade union movement and to replicate the tactics used by trade unions of other countries to curb the challenges possessed by worldwide flow of globalization. Importantly, the leader of ACKS, while talking about the impacts of globalization on trade union movement carried out by ACKS with the researcher, opined that sharing international platform by the

leadership of trade unions of the countries like them helps in tackling new challenges before trade union movement posed by globalization. Here, the leader who participated in the 27th conference of ISSA (International Social Security Association) representing India held in September, 2002 at Stockholm of Sweden pointed out how the spread of the globe across the world specially in the socio-political arena of developing societies impacts the entire citizenry of such society specially the working-class of the same. Moreover, the evil effect of globalization initiates new tactics like introduction of new technology reduces the new recruitment of workers and that is also on contract basis has affected the bargaining capacity of workers which finally hampers the right to social security of workers which has also been incorporated in the article 22 of UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Further, the leader has revealed that though the tenants of globalization effects the right to social security of the working-class section and now consciousness among the leadership of trade unions have been increasing day by day and it sensitizes the leadership of trade unions not to be busy with traditional issues like salary, bonus and such other issues. But, most importantly issues like social security of the labourers are getting upper hand in the arena of trade union movement including that of ACKS. Here, the leader opined that globalization in one hand has been affecting the issues of labourers and their respective trade union movement. But at the same time, it compels the trade unions to come together to tackle the burning challenges of trade union movement created by globalization regardless of their ideological orientation which can be termed as a major boon for the greater scenario of trade union movements of the societies like ours.

Conclusion

To sum up, it may be noted that globalization has some tremendous impact on trade unionism and the trade union movement of ACKS is also not exceptional from this fact. However, it has been seen that though the notion as well as the practice of globalization possesses certain challenges to ACKS but it also provides a platform to the trade unions including ACKS to raise their voice in more organized way and to develop the sense of solidarity among various trade union entities across the globe.

Notes :

¹ Interview of G Sanjeeva Reddy, President of INTUC published in *Nava Chetana* (2012. April 6).P.6.

² The traditional word prevailed in the tea estates of Assam to denote employees.

³ These words are used in tea estates to imply the clerical employees who works with computer.

⁴ *Nava-Chetna* (2004, Nov 14).p.12.

⁵ Baruah, Juva Kumar.2012. AikobaddhaSramSangathan: Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha (United Trade Union : Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha) in Hemanta Kumar Baruah (eds.) *SeujiSeuji*. Assam ChahKarmachari Sangha, Tezpur, pp.97-8.

⁶ Secretarial report of ACKS.2006.pp.51-2.

⁷ Goswami, Ajit Kumar. “Bishyayan aru Asomor Chah Shilpa” (Globalization and Tea Industry of Assam)in Jayanta Madhab Dutta (eds.) *Seuj Silpar Sandhanat (Asomor Chah Udogar Oitohasik, Rajanaitik, Arthanaitik Aru Samajik Dishsamuh)*, Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha, Jorhat, p.118.

⁸ Sarma, Devabrata. Golokikaran aru Sramikshreni totha Chah silpa (Globalization, Labour Class and Tea Industry) '*Nava-Chetna*', June14,2006, p.6.

⁹ Secretarial report of ACKS, 2008, pp.24-5.

¹⁰ Retrieved from <http://www.labourcommissioner.assam.gov.in>>files on November,27,2017 at 3.55 PM (IST).