

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN TEA ESTATES OF WEST BENGAL: A REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

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Abstract

The tea industry in West Bengal is a vital component of the state's economy, employing over 400,000 workers, primarily in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling, particularly in the Terai and Dooars regions. The sector involves multiple, often conflicting stakeholders who interact within a fragmented industrial relations (IR) environment. This review critically evaluates the existing academic literature on industrial relations in the tea estates of West Bengal, focusing on labour-management relations, trade unionism, wage conflicts, welfare provisions, and the role of the government. The review synthesizes major academic perspectives to inform future research and policy. Key findings highlight structural shortcomings, political interference, gender disparities, and recurring disputes. The paper identifies significant research gaps—particularly concerning informal labour, gendered workplace experiences, and the efficacy of enforcement mechanisms—and concludes with recommendations for more inclusive and participatory IR strategies.

Keywords: Industrial Relations, Tea Plantations, Gender Disparities, Labour Unrest, Trade Unionism, Dooars, Terai, Wage Conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

The tea industry is a vital component of West Bengal's economy, employing over 400,000 workers, particularly in Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling. It contributes significantly to the state's export revenue and serves as a major source of rural employment and livelihood security. Despite its economic significance, the sector continues to face persistent industrial relations (IR) challenges. These include frequent strikes, lockouts, wage disputes, precarious employment conditions, and inadequate labour welfare measures, which collectively hinder its stability and growth. Given these long-standing issues, the dynamics of labour-management relations in West Bengal's tea estates have increasingly drawn academic and policy attention. This review critically examines the existing literature on industrial relations within the sector, focusing on trade union activities, wage determination, collective bargaining, and the role of government intervention and labour legislation. It explores how these factors shape employment relations and impact the overall functioning of tea plantations. The review also aims to identify key research gaps in the literature, particularly in the context of evolving legal frameworks and socio-economic conditions. By highlighting areas for further investigation, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the sector's IR landscape and inform effective policy responses.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORKS IN REVIEWED STUDIES

Recent studies attempt to synthesize multiple theories to provide a holistic understanding of industrial relations (IR), taking into account institutional, economic, and socio-political dimensions. An analysis of existing literature on industrial relations in the tea plantations of West Bengal reveals the adoption of a wide range of theoretical frameworks. Scholars have drawn from both traditional industrial relations theories and more recent critical approaches to explain the complex dynamics between labour and management. These frameworks help examine persistent issues such as wage disputes, employment insecurity, union activities, and regulatory shortcomings. Classical theories often focus on institutional structures and collective bargaining processes, while critical perspectives highlight power imbalances, historical exploitation, and socio-political factors influencing workplace relations. Together, these theoretical tools offer a deeper understanding of the structural and systemic challenges that shape industrial relations in the region, allowing researchers to contextualize both conflict and cooperation within the plantation economy.

2.1 Dunlop's System Theory (1958)

John Dunlop's systems theory has been extensively referenced in the reviewed literature to contextualize industrial relations as an interrelated system comprising three principal actors: employers, employees (and their representative trade unions), and the government. According to Dunlop, these actors operate within a specific environment influenced by technology, market constraints, and societal norms, resulting in the development of a "web of rules" that governs employment relationships. In the context of West Bengal's tea plantations, several empirical studies (e.g., Dasgupta & Sen, 2011; Bhattacharya, 2018) utilize this framework to analyze the failures in IR systems. The frequent disruptions in tripartite negotiations, weak enforcement of statutory provisions, and the marginalization of worker voices underscore systemic incoherence. The system's failure lies in the fragmented interactions among actors and the absence of a shared ideology or regulatory consensus.

2.2 Marxist Perspectives

The Marxist tradition provides a structural and historical critique of labor-capital relations in the plantation economy. The tea sector, particularly in the Dooars and Terai regions, originated under colonial capitalism, and many studies (notably Bhowmik, 2005) apply

Marxist analysis to examine the exploitative foundations of labor relations. These perspectives highlight the proletarianization of Adivasi and tribal laborers, sustained wage suppression, and asymmetrical power relations that characterize the industry. From a Marxist viewpoint, industrial unrest is not merely a symptom of poor governance or managerial failure but a manifestation of entrenched class struggle. The use of temporary labor, the informalization of employment, and the socio-economic marginalization of plantation communities are interpreted as mechanisms of managerial control under capitalist structures. These insights help frame IR conflicts not as isolated incidents but as embedded in broader class and power structures.

2.3 Pluralist and Unitarist Approaches

The reviewed literature on industrial relations in West Bengal's tea plantations demonstrates the use of diverse theoretical frameworks to interpret the complex interactions between workers and management. Scholars investigating these patterns have relied on both pluralist and unitarist interpretations, incorporating classical industrial relations theories and modern critical perspectives to explore ongoing challenges such as wage disputes, job insecurity, trade union dynamics, and inadequate regulatory mechanisms. Traditional approaches emphasize formal institutions, collective bargaining, and negotiation processes, while critical theories focus on issues like power asymmetries, colonial legacies, and broader socio-political influences. These conceptual models provide valuable insights into the underlying structural and institutional factors affecting industrial relations in the region. By integrating these varied perspectives, scholars are better equipped to analyze the persistent tensions and potential avenues for reform within the tea plantation sector.

2.4 Integrated Perspectives

Recent studies attempt to synthesize multiple theories to provide a holistic understanding of industrial relations (IR), taking into account institutional, economic, and socio-political dimensions. These integrated approaches draw from classical theories, which focus on institutions and collective bargaining, as well as critical theories that emphasize power dynamics, historical exploitation, and socio-political influences. Such frameworks help explain persistent issues like wage conflicts, employment insecurity, union struggles, and weak regulatory enforcement. By combining traditional and critical perspectives, researchers gain deeper insights into the structural and systemic factors shaping industrial relations in the tea industry of the region.

3. MAJOR THEMES IN REVIEWED LITERATURE

3.1 Wage Conflicts and Tripartite Bargaining

Several studies have highlighted the persistent discontent among tea plantation workers in West Bengal, particularly in the Dooars region. Scholars such as Chattopadhyay (2017) and Baruah (2016) highlight persistent discontent stemming from low wages, delayed payments, and the failure of tripartite wage negotiation agreements. Despite their institutional presence, tripartite wage negotiations often lack legal enforceability, resulting in inconsistent implementation and weak worker protections, leading to inconsistent implementation and limited protection for workers. Despite their formal presence, tripartite mechanisms often lack legal enforceability. Tripartite structures exist, but they often lack legal enforceability, resulting in weak implementation and limited worker protection. These findings offer critical insights into the structural deficiencies and enduring challenges within the region's industrial relations framework.

3.2 Trade Unionism and Political Interference

Trade unionism in the tea plantations of West Bengal is shaped by political rivalry and fragmentation. Bhattacharya (2015) argues that the expansion of politically affiliated unions undermines collective bargaining and exacerbates inter-union conflict. Chakraborty (2018) similarly observes that many unions prioritize political agendas over workers' welfare, undermining unified representation and contributing to unstable industrial relations in the region.

3.3 Worker Living Conditions and Welfare

The Plantation Labour Act (1951) mandates the provision of housing, healthcare, and education for tea plantation workers. However, Sarkar (2019) identifies widespread non-compliance across estates in West Bengal, resulting in poor living conditions. Furthermore, the ILO (2017) underscores the gendered vulnerabilities embedded in the current IR system, particularly the burden of unpaid care work and underrepresentation of women in trade union leadership gender-specific challenges faced by female workers, such as the burden of unpaid care work and their persistent underrepresentation in trade union leadership within the tea industry.

3.4 Industrial Disputes and Lockouts: Majumdar (2018)

In his study, Majumdar (2018) analyzes recurring garden closures and lockouts, emphasizing their adverse effects on estate-dependent families. He links such industrial unrest to rising absenteeism, declining productivity, and the out-migration of skilled labour—factors that collectively contribute to workforce instability and the gradual erosion of sustainability in West Bengal's tea plantation sector.

3.5 Productivity

It focuses on the general trends, which suggest that tea estates with stable industrial relations, structured grievance redressal, and compliance with welfare standards tend to exhibit better productivity. These factors contribute to workforce stability and reduced turnover, creating conditions conducive to higher efficiency.

4. GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Despite a growing body of scholarship on industrial relations in West Bengal's tea sector, several critical gaps remain. First, while many studies reference "North Bengal" as a general region of analysis, few focus specifically on the Dooars or Terai sub-regions at a micro level, such as individual tea gardens or specific communities. Second, there is a notable lack of longitudinal research; most existing studies are cross-sectional and fail to examine changes over time or track long-term trends in labour-management relations within the sector. Third, although women constitute a majority of the plantation workforce, their specific experiences within the IR framework—particularly in terms of leadership, voice, and gendered labor challenges—are underrepresented in the literature. Lastly, the growing role of informal, seasonal, and migrant labor remains insufficiently explored, despite its increasing significance in the tea economy. Addressing these gaps is essential for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of industrial relations in the region.

- Limited Region-Specific Case Studies: While studies refer to "North Bengal," few focus exclusively on the Dooars or Terai sub-regions at the micro (garden-wise) level.
- Insufficient Focus on Women Workers: Despite their numerical dominance in the workforce, their IR experiences are underreported.
- Neglect of Informal and Migrant Labor: Literature often overlooks the growing role of temporary, seasonal, or migrant workers in the tea economy.

5. SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature collectively reveals that industrial relations (IR) in West Bengal's tea plantations remain fragile, fragmented, and highly inconsistent across estates. Although formal mechanisms—such as tripartite wage boards, statutory labor protections, and grievance redressal procedures—are institutionally established, their practical efficacy is significantly undermined by weak union coordination, limited government oversight, and employer-driven cost-cutting measures. These structural weaknesses have led to a persistent erosion of trust among stakeholders and have hindered the development of stable and equitable labour relations. Notably, some studies identify positive outliers, such as worker-owned cooperatives and estate-level production committees, which demonstrate the potential for collaborative IR models that empower labour and enhance productivity. However, such initiatives remain limited in scope and have yet to achieve broad institutionalization across the sector. A recurring theme in the literature is the urgent need to strengthen social dialogue among employers, workers, and government bodies. Enhancing the capacity and accountability of labour inspection mechanisms, along with the professionalization and depoliticization of trade unions, are consistently recommended as strategic interventions. These measures, if systematically implemented, could pave the way for more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable industrial relations in the tea sector of the Dooars and beyond.

6. CONCLUSION

This review of existing literature highlights that industrial relations in West Bengal's tea plantations continue to serve as a critical constraint to both worker welfare and productivity enhancement. Despite the presence of legislative frameworks and institutional mechanisms, the effectiveness of these reforms is frequently undermined by weak enforcement, political interference, and fragmented stakeholder engagement. The persistence of wage disputes, labor unrest, and substandard living conditions reflects deeper structural issues within the industrial relations ecosystem. Moving toward equitable and sustainable labor relations requires the effective implementation of labor laws, the depoliticization of trade union activities, and the institutionalization of participatory mechanisms for collective bargaining. There is a pressing need to prioritize the effective implementation of labor laws, depoliticize trade union activities, and institutionalize participatory mechanisms for collective bargaining. Furthermore, future research should move beyond macro-level generalizations by incorporating micro-level, field-based studies, particularly those that centre the experiences of marginalized groups such as women, migrant workers, and informal labourers. Only through such grounded, inclusive inquiry can meaningful progress be made toward building a just and productive tea plantation economy in the region. Only through such inclusive, field-based inquiry and institutional reform can West Bengal's tea industry foster a more just, stable, and productive industrial ecosystem.

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