

Even When the Passive Resistance Is Obligatory: Civil Intellectuals' Solidarity Activism in Tea Workers Movement

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Abstract : This study shows how a progressive portion of civil intellectuals in Bangladesh contributed as the solidarity activist entities in a movement of tea workers that became the symbol of their unique moral struggle. Their passive yet sharp way of resistance, with the integration of mass tea workers of a tea estate, got demonstrated against certain private companies and government officials who approached to establish a special economic zone inside the tea garden without offering any compensation and rehabilitation for poor tea workers. Due to massive protests and rebellion, the authorized entrepreneurs had to step back and called off the project immediately. The extraordinary features of this movement generated itself from the deep core social need of indigenous tea workers who are still imprisoned in the colonial cage. Following an anthropological and ethnographic perspective, this study adopted the main three techniques of intensive interview, focus group discussion, and laborious observation, to extract empirical data. The intensive interviews were undertaken informally using a mostly conversational approach. Focus group discussions were piloted among various representative groups where observations prevailed as part of the regular documentation process. These were conducted among civil intellectual entities, tea workers, tea estate authorities, civil service authorities, and business officials to obtain a holistic view of the situation. The fieldwork was executed in capital Dhaka city, along with northern areas like Chandpur-Begumkhan Tea Estate of Chunarughat Upazilla and Habiganj city of Habiganj District of Bangladesh. Correspondingly, secondary data were accessed through books, scholarly papers, archives, newspapers, reports, leaflets, posters, writing blog, and electronic pages of social media. The study results find that: (1) civil intellectuals opposed state-sponsored business impositions by producing counter-discourse and struggled against state hegemony through the phases of the movement; (2) instead of having the active physical resistance, civil intellectuals' strength was preferably in passive form which was portrayed through their intellectual labor; (3) the combined movement of tea workers and civil intellectuals reflected on social security of ethnic worker communities that contrasts state's pseudo-development motives which ultimately supports offensive and oppressive neoliberal growths of economy; (4) civil intellectuals are revealed as having certain functional limitations in the process of movement organization as well as resource mobilization; (5) in specific contexts, the genuine need of protest by indigenous subaltern can overshadow intellectual elitism and helps to raise the voices of 'subjugated knowledge'. This study is quite likely to represent two sets of apparent protagonist entities in the discussion of social injustice and oppressive development intervention. On the one, hand it may help us to find the basic functional characteristics of civil intellectuals in Bangladesh when they are in a passive mode of resistance in social movement issues. On the other hand, it represents the community ownership and inherent protest tendencies of indigenous workers when they feel threatened and insecure. The study seems to have the potential to understand the conditions of 'subjugated knowledge' of subalterns. Furthermore, being the memory and narratives, these 'activism mechanisms' of social entities broadens the path to understand 'power' and 'resistance' in more fascinating ways.

Keywords : civil intellectuals, resistance, subjugated knowledge, indigenous

Conference Title : ICSCSM 2020 : International Conference on Social Conflict and Social Movements

Conference Location : Tokyo, Japan

Conference Dates : May 28-29, 2020