

Status of Tea Workers in the Tea Industries of the North Bengal

Anita Chakraborty¹

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Abstract

The growth of tea industry in India was an endeavor of East India Company. A historical written record indicates that it was first established in year 1834. In India the industry accounts for 31% of the global production with 979000 tonnes of production for the year 2009. The total turnover of the industry is roughly estimated to be Rs. 19,500 corers in 2011. During 2013-2014 the production was estimated at 1207310 MT contributing 23% in global production. India has retained its leadership over the tea industry for the last 150 years, since 1947. However at present the industry has been facing a severe crisis. The situation is becoming more complex and multidimensional since the sector is governed by multi-stakeholders. It suffers from more than one problem. Sickness, closure and abandonment of tea gardens, issues with respect to crop yield, total production and degrading tea quality, wage, education, health and livelihood issues of the laborers, frequent violence and strikes across tea gardens, issues of intellectual property rights under WTO regime, competition from the tea coming from Nepal, Sri Lnka, African countries etc. are some of the major problems faced by tea industry in recent times. Thus the current study is an effort to overview and collates the current status of tea workers in the tea industries of the North Bengal.

Corresponding author

¹Dept. of Botany S P College, Dumka-814101, Jharkhand, E. mail: anitagcenator@gmail.com

Orcid ID 0000-0002-8232-8258

Introduction and Overview

The documented evidence according to the history, of tea drinking in India dates back to

750 BC. The growth of tea industry in India was an endeavor of East India Company. Tea in India is generally grown in North Eastern India, including Assam, the Darjeeling district and the Dooars region of North Bengal, and in the Nilgiris in South India. A written literature indicates it was first established in Year 1834. During 1850's almost 1000 acre of land was occupied under this plantation practice with an estimated production of 250000 Ibs. By 1934-35 the practice yields almost 88200000 Ibs of tea. In the 1850s, the industry started rapidly expanding, consuming vast tracts of land for plantations.

Tea drinking has evolved in different ways over the years in India. It differs from region to region. From the roadside tea stalls and the railway platforms to the boardrooms of corporate India, tea is easily available everywhere. Traditionally, a guest in any Indian home is welcomed with a cup of tea.

The tea produced in India is among the finest in the world owing to strong geographical indications, heavy investments in tea processing units, continuous innovation, augmented product mix and strategic market expansions. It had become a staple beverage and a day without it is believed to be incomplete in India. Tea has a lot of health benefits; its antioxidant properties help to eliminate toxins and free radicals from the blood which protects the human body from the ravages of aging, the effects of pollution and also provides protection against cancer. Tea drinking may reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke by keeping the arteries smooth and clog-free. Besides, it boosts the immune system, increases the metabolic rate of the body and keeps the body hydrated.

The tea plantation industry in India is basically an organized sector with heavy investment and big landholdings. These plantations cover large landmass which prevents erosion of soil of the area and protects the land from landslides and run off. It has been found that the areas under tea plantation have less risk to landslides, which is a serious issue in the hilly areas. If tea is grown with the help of organic fertilizers, it can thus help in restoring the lost soil fertility and this will enhance the productivity of the tea industries.

There are mainly two ways of producing tea in India namely the CTC production, which has an acronym, crush, tear and curl; and Orthodox production. The quality of the best orthodox leaf from Darjeeling and Assam is world-renowned and fetches the best prices. Tea is indigenous to India and is an area where the country can take a lot of pride. This is mainly because of its pre-eminence as a foreign exchange earner and its contributions to

the country's GNP.

The Tea industry accounts for 31% of the global production. Tea production in India was 979,000 tonnes as of 2009. The total turnover of this industry is roughly estimated to be Rs.19, 500 cores in 2011. India has retained its leadership over the tea industry for the last 150 years. Since 1947, the tea production in India has increased and the lands that are used for production has also increased by around 40%. Even the export sector of India has experienced an increase in the export of this commodity particularly. In spite of its increase in production, tea industry of India is going through a crisis phase (*Das, 2009*). In recent years, tea production was found to follow a declining trend with less productivity and loss of economy. According to a report, Tea output in North India declined to 49.67 million kg in May 2012 against 51.74 million kg in May 2011, whereas, it fell to 22.88 million kg from 24.44 million kg in South India in the same period. Output in Assam, the largest tea producing state, decreased by 40.34% to 25.33 million kg in April, 2014 from 42.46 million kg a year earlier (*The Economic Times, June 20, 2014*).

Tea production has been hit due to unfavourable weather. High temperatures with no rain and floods, in Assam and North Bengal, have affected the output (*Indian Tea Association, PTI*). In the market, the rising competition at domestic as well as international front has deepened the crisis of tea industry of India (*Das, 2009*).

West Bengal is a second major tea producing state and contributes about 1/4th of the total production of tea in India. The tea plantations in West Bengal are concentrated at the cooler regions of North Bengal. Tea is grown on the slopes of the famed Darjeeling hills in the eastern Himalayas, but a good amount comes from the plains of North Bengal in the Dooars and Terai region. There are 273 tea estates in West Bengal, in this organized sector covering 103, 431 hectares under tea cultivation constituting approximately 2, 62,426 permanent workmen engaged by the tea estates of the North Bengal region (*Bera, 2014*). The economy of North Bengal districts is highly undeveloped with only the tea gardens being pockets of prosperity. The tea gardens, along with their municipal and urban area, have been excluded from the operations of the West Bengal Panchayat Act (*West Bengal Act XLI of 1973*). The positive effect of these pockets of prosperity failed to spread. Emergence of small holdings of tea-plantations on propriety basis had only been the result of demonstration effect exerted by the organized companies.

Production of tea in West Bengal was 221.57 million kg in 2009 as compared to 233.13 million kg in 2008. The overall production of tea has declined by 4.9 %, the production also declined by 6.2% during 2008 over the period 2007. According to the district wise production of tea in the North Bengal, it was 6.9% in Tarai and 3.7% in the Dooars district, during 2009 over the period 2008 (Tea Board, 2009). Thus it can be seen that the industry is passing through a crisis.

Being a large-scale mechanized pro-management system, it is essentially labour-intensive and India is one of the largest tea employer employing workers (mostly women) in several ways of production, processing, packaging, etc. The Tea Industry is one of the oldest organized firm sectors with a large network of tea producers, retailers, distributors, auctioneers, exporters and employees. No doubt, this industry can earn handsome revenue for the state.

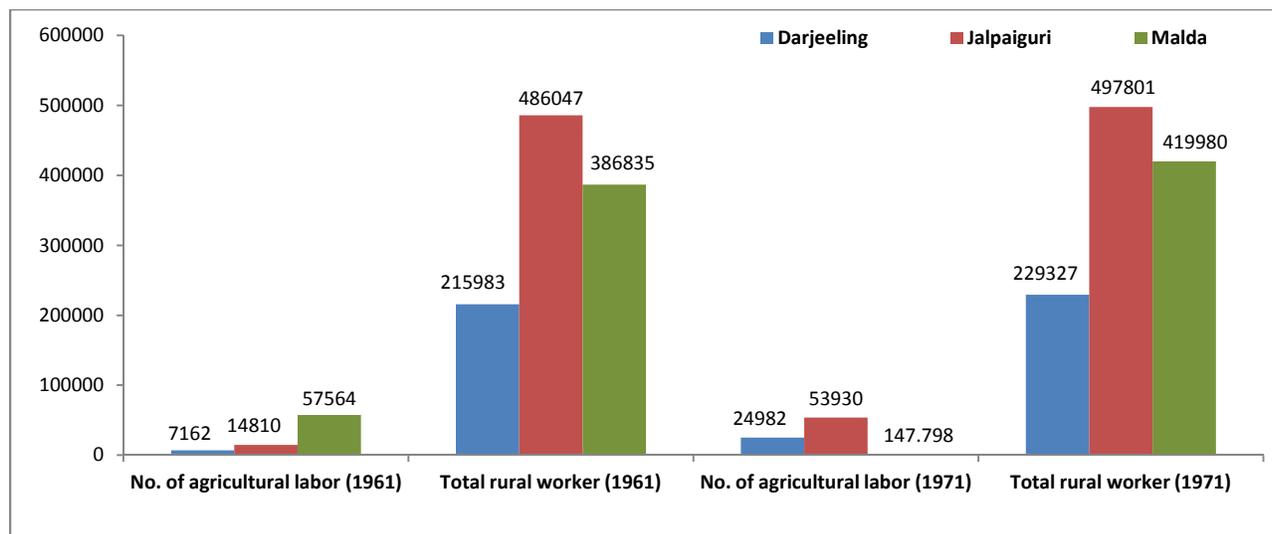
It has been observed that some tea gardens have about 6000 to 6500 acres of land each, while others have less than 100 acres of land. A question then naturally arises whether or not we can lay down standards of an optimum farm size of a tea garden. It is a general belief that in the tea plantations, a good amount of surplus land is being retained by the planters. It has to be found out whether or not the tea gardens pay enough rent. It is also a matter of common knowledge that a large number of tea gardens have become sick or uneconomic and many have been closed down. For these reasons along with a few more in the past few years, the tea industry in West Bengal has been in a state of crisis. Many owners have abandoned tea plantations, causing much misery to workers and their families. It is estimated that more than 60,000 plantation workers have lost their jobs since 2002 and livelihood of another tens of thousands are threatened (*Das, 2009*). The tea industries and plantation workers, directly and indirectly, thus have been also affected as a result of the closure of a number of tea estates (*Banerjee, 2014*). The abandonment of the plantation by the owners and managers has been devastating for the workers living on the plantation itself. Consequently, many have been forced to migrate to work elsewhere in inhuman conditions. Unemployed workers along with their families have been dying of starvation and malnutrition. Thousands of workers have been left in the lurch, facing wage cuts, irregular or delayed payments and retrenchment. The tea estate closures have also

aggravated the ecological fragility of the area in the form of weakening of slopes; soil erosion initiated landslides/soil-erosion or has aggravated geo-ecological problems.

Since the problems have increased in the last few years, it has severely affected the lives of many people related to the tea industry. The tea industry has a high significance in the industrial map of West Bengal. It is marked as the largest organized industry in the two most backward districts of the state of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling providing an employment to 218848 permanent workers in which half of them are constitutes the women. The cultivation of tea in North Bengal was started in 1800 (as per the community). The geographical settings and climatic conditions help the practices to get flourish and established. The physical features and the socio-cultural-economic environment provide the human power to expand the business both at national and international scale.

The tea industry in West Bengal receives an overwhelming response during the pre-independence phase of plantation and production. The post-independence period faces major setback because of the shift in livelihood practices amongst the tea garden workers. The labor work force opted for different sector and skill of practices. During 1960s to 1970s North Bengal had registered the highest number of agricultural labor in West Bengal especially the North Bengal (Bandyopadhaya, 1977) (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Share of agricultural labour increase (1961-1971)



The shift of workforce results in lower production and also consequently in generating the

seasonal unemployment¹. Large scale transfer of ownership impacted the capital resource of the industry too. Thus this period was the massive slump in the tea industry. Gradually the tea plantation lost their pull on growing surplus labor force (due to increase in population and high rate of migration) in the north Bengal, they even started pushing out a growing number of unemployed members of tea garden labor families.

Among the teas cultivated in India, the most distinguished one comes from Darjeeling Himalaya. The best of India's prize Darjeeling tea is considered the world's finest tea. The first commercial tea gardens in Darjeeling were planted in 1852. Darjeeling was then a very sparsely populated region was only used as a hill resort. Tea being one of labor intensive industry needed sufficient number of work force to plant, tends, pluck and finally manufacture the produce. Hence, people from the neighboring regions, and states were encouraged to immigrate and engage as laborers in the tea gardens. By the year 1866, Darjeeling had 39 tea gardens producing a total crop of 21,000 kg of tea. In 1870, the number of gardens increased to 56 to produce about 71,000 kg of tea harvested from 4,400 hectares. By 1874, tea cultivation in Darjeeling was found to be a profitable venture and there were 113 gardens with approximately 6000 hectares. Today there are 87 registered gardens sprawled across the geographical area of 20,200 hectares.

At present the tea industry has been facing a severe crisis from last couple of years. The situation is becoming more complex and multidimensional since the sector is governed by multi stakeholders. It suffers from more than one problem. Sickness, closure and abandonment of tea gardens (Table 1); issues with respect to crop yield, total production and degrading tea quality; wage, education, health and livelihood issues of the laborers; frequent violence and strikes across tea gardens; issues of intellectual property rights under WTO regime, competition from the tea coming from Nepal, Sri Lanka, African countries etc. are some of the major problems faced by Darjeeling Tea Industry in recent times.

The decline in the price of Indian Tea, unhealthy practices in auction centers, low productivity, mismanagement, insufficiency in value added products, phenomenal impact of

¹ 40-50 percent of total labor force constitutes the seasonal employment categories. This huge force were mostly constitute of women folk who were solely responsible in tipping (plucking) activity in the tea gardens

small growers and bought leaf factories and the trade liberalization policies of Government of India have contributed to the crisis as whole.

Mismanagement and lack of product diversification are evident in majority of tea plantations. The failure of the tea industry, institutions related and the state to control the declining tendency of tea price has made the crisis the worst that the economy has ever seen. It has not only seriously affected tea producing states of West Bengal but the State like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Assam were also heavily victimized. The news of abandonment of estates by management or closure becomes common all over India. The crisis has not affected all regions in the country uniformly.

Plantations are main stay of North Bengal economy, particularly in rural sector. The closing down of estates and tea factories adversely affect the overall performance of economy of States. Crores of tax revenue to government from tea industry under different heads like agricultural income tax, plantation tax, land tax, factory's license fee, Building Tax has been pending for years. The financial position of local bodies in the tea areas is seriously affected. Since plantation workers are highly dependent on management for water, electricity, firewood, health, education etc, most affected group of people or direct victims are the workers there. Tea estates being enclave economies, workers there lose employment, wages and statutory benefits like health, education, safe drinking water, sanitation etc.

Table 1 Status of tea estate in Darjeeling Hill (2005)

Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens	Closed/Locked up Tea Gardens	Sick Tea Gardens
Peshok	Happy Valley	All functioning Tea Gardens are sick, although not defined/declared officially
Vah Tukvar	Allobari	
Potong	Narbada Majhua	
	Mohan Majhua	

Source: <http://lib.icimod.org/record/12150/files/749.pdf>

Number of studies has been carried out in view of the tea industry crisis in the country and

its consequent impact on the garden laborers. Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi and West Bengal Network on the Right to Food and Work had recently conducted two individual studies during 2002-03. However the assessment focused only on the tea gardens/estates and associated labor issues of Terai and Dooars regions of North Bengal. Tea estates in Darjeeling Hills have been untouched by the mainstream researchers and research institutes in view of the region's volatile political situation and its remote geographical location from prime locations of the country.

The deep crisis in the tea industry has severely affected the standard of living of estate laborers, employment opportunities, and level of trade union activities. Thus it will be prudent to revision the impact of the crisis in tea on the socio - economic condition of the workers and their responses and surviving strategies.

Among organized industries tea employs the largest number of females in the primary sector. Male labourers perform marginal tasks. This is also reflected in gender relation in the labouring community.

Two thirds of the total number of labour days in tea plantations is ordinarily devoted to the most important job of plucking. Generally, plucking of tea is the exclusive occupation of women. This crisis is seemed to have severely affected women, both physically and mentally, because the burden of most of the household affairs is on the shoulders of housewives. So study of plantation workers invites special attention from women workers. This workshop will also bring the gender stewardship into the whole industrial landscape and the current crisis it is passing through.

India continues to be the world's largest producer and consumer of tea. Tea drinking in India dates back to 750 BC. Tea produced here is amongst the finest in the world. Originally tea is indigenous to parts of Eastern, Northern and Southern India. This industry has expanded and grown tremendously over the years. Tea isn't simply tea in India but it's like a staple beverage here and a day without it is considered to be impossible and incomplete. The Indian Tea industry accounts for 31% of the global production and is the second largest tea producing country in the world. Being an organized sector with heavy investment and big landholdings, the plantations require large landmasses for its cultivation.

Tea is a labor intensive crop and requires abundant supply of cheap and skilled labour, especially at the time of plucking the tea leaves. It is a tedious process employing a huge number of workers (especially women) in various steps of production, processing, packaging, etc. Weak international prices over the last few years have led to a worldwide tea crisis, which is felt at its worst in India, especially in West Bengal tea growing regions.

The economy of tea growing in North Bengal districts, which are highly undeveloped, is only the tea gardens being one of the most depended ways of livelihood. In recent times, a large number of tea gardens have become sick or uneconomic and thus many have been abandoned or closed by the owners. The abandonment has resulted because of many reasons and has thus affected the workers and their families in various ways. Due to increasing population, unemployment and prolonged starvation, majority of the workers are suffering from severe malnutrition and other diseases, also resulting in deaths. Even the workers of the running estates are facing various difficult survival circumstances. Living in the middle of nowhere, with no work other than what is available, workers and their families have been suffering from many threats and problems.

The report of the Tea Finance Committee (1964) and another publication “Tea Despatch”, appointed by Government of India, showed downward trend in the industry and net return and a dampening effect on increasing fresh development expenditure by the industry; and closure of various tea gardens in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri affecting the livelihood of a number of people, respectively. Another study by L. P. Tirkey (2005) described the impacts of tea plantations on the geological and socio-economic conditions of communities in the North Bengal districts in India and it was found that the major set backs were experienced in the tea plantations in the post-independent period due to over-aged tea bushes resulting in financial crisis and temporary or permanent closure of tea estates.

Report of Plantation Inquiry Commission (1956) that presented a survey of economic conditions and problems of tea plantations in India from 1950-53, concluded that till 1954, yield per hectare was greater in Dooars and Terai than in Darjeeling. Increased production of tea could be possible as a result of improved method of field and factor operation and increased productivity of labour.

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increasing fresh development expenditure by the industry.

Section - 6 (3) of the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act states:

- a) Ratio of tea and ancillary lands is 1:5 for plains, and 1:1 for hills.
- b) Forest land in compact blocks greater than 20 acres should not be allowed to be retained by tea gardens.
- c) Khet lands under paddy cultivation should not be retained.
- d) Markets and other sairati interest lands should be retained by the Government.

Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal (2004) by the West Bengal Advisor to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court reported a detailed account of hunger, malnourishment, starvation and deaths amongst tea plantation workers of North Bengal. The publication "Tea Despatch" (June 1, 2004), reported the closure of eighteen gardens of Jalpaiguri and six gardens of Darjeeling till December 19, 2003, affecting the livelihood of 45, 484 people. Another article "Report on Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal" (2004) published that the year 2002 was mainly the year of the crisis as it was during the middle or end of this year that most plantations closed down, with wages and rations being irregular for most plantations even before closure. The report showed that 240 deaths have taken place in one year in just 4 plantations.

Kadavil (Indian Tea Research) suggested that initiative should be taken to coordinate, facilitate, and conduct a global tea research programme with research partners in a number of major tea producing countries with the aim of improving labours, social, environmental and economic conditions in the global tea industry and increasing the competitiveness of the tea industry as a whole.

Tirkey (2005), studied and described the impacts of tea plantations on the geological and socio-economic conditions of communities in the North Bengal districts in India and it was found that the major setbacks were experienced in the tea plantations in the post-independent period; ownership changes, entry of trade union, labour problem and decline in tea yield due to over-aged tea bushes, eventually resulted in acute financial crisis and temporary or permanent closure of many tea estates. According to another report, annual

report of Tea Board, (2009-10), reported that the decline in the production of the tea industry is due to the lack of investment to maintain the health of tea gardens, rising cost of inputs, lower yield rate, fall in prices, etc. The crisis in this industry is mainly the outcome of the negligence of the garden owners to maintain the health of the industry over the years.

As per the article by ET Bureau in The Economic Times, (March 30, 2009), the tea production is heading towards a shortfall due to the prevailing dry spell in the major tea producing nations. Figures showed that tea production in India is also hit by the drought like situations, which have affected the first flush teas in Assam and Dooars regions.

A lot of research and studies have been undertaken on tea plantations but more studies need to be done covering the issues of tea plantation and industry workers as well.

Weak international prices over the last few years have led to a worldwide tea crisis, which is felt at its worst in India, especially in North Bengal. In the market, the rising competition at domestic as well as international front has deepened the crisis of tea industry of India. This compels the Government, tea producers and other organizations to come forward for developing specific remedial measures.

The overall health of the tea industry in North Bengal and the associated socio-economic health of the labourers cannot be attributed to a single factor; a series of factors and counter factors have played their interlinked roles over the years. The Indian Tea Association have identified the causes of the crisis as the Supply Demand Imbalances, Bought leaf factories, decline in exports, increase in imports and slowing down in growth rate of domestic consumption. In this detailed survey the more minute reasons associated with the closure of various tea plantations and ways to uplift the worst conditions of the tea workers and others associated with this industry will be figured out with the results of field surveys.

Most of the tea estates were closed down in 2003-04 when declining tea prices encouraged many promoters, especially where gardens were inherently weak, to discontinue operations. There seems to be no solution in sight for the thousands of workers who are “trapped” in the closed tea gardens in North Bengal. Workers were dependent on their employers not just for wages. They used to receive a number of other facilities, such as subsidized rations,

free quarters, drinking water and electricity. Some of the managements used to provide workers and their families with health care at the tea plantation's hospital and transport for their school and college-going children. This abandonment has affected the workers in various ways. Electricity was cut off and as the water supply was electricity dependent, the workers were even deprived of drinking water. As labour residential areas were far away from any other habitation and therefore any other source of drinking water, i.e., river water, was used for drinking though it was not fit for drinking purposes. Children in schools and colleges have been forced to stop their education due to the general situation of unemployment in their families and the unavailability of the transport system to reach their respective schools and colleges. While the above are comparatively minor problems, a more major problem has been the starvation and malnutrition that has resulted due to unemployment and the non-availability of alternative work. Even the workers of the running estates are facing wage cut, tougher picking demand, job insecurity leading to appalling living and working condition, etc. Living in the middle of nowhere with no work other than that available in the tea plantations, workers and their families have been suffering from malnutrition, anemia and other nutrition related problems. Combined with the lack of medical treatment, the results have been drastic.

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