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NORTH BENGAL TEA GARDEN WORKERS AND COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: This particular work mainly focuses on the problems of the tea gardens workers of the North Bengal region which they are facing for the pandemic situation due to corona virus and its related lockdown and the effect it had undergone economically, socially and culturally under the colonial economy. The lockdown has hit the tea industry of West Bengal, with losses in revenue. In the sectors and regions which are already reeling under poverty, the Corona virus and subsequent lockdowns on work and mobility have become an added curse. One such sector in India is the tea gardens of West Bengal. The Primary focus of the study is to find out the actual situation of the unfortunate workers who are completely dependent on the tea garden industry.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic, Plantation Labour Act, FAWLOI.

I. INTRODUCTION

The lockdown has hit the tea industry of West Bengal, with losses in revenue, according to a statement issued by the Indian Tea Association on 3rd June 2020.

The region has 287 tea plantations, big and small, but 87 of them are famous for arguably the finest tea in the world for the first and second flush. The annual tea production in north Bengal, mainly in the Hills, is more than 7.5 million kilogram and the first flush contributes nearly 25% of the total production. Due to Covid-19 North Bengal Tea gardens missed the first flush, which contributes nearly 30-35 per cent of the annual revenue of the planters. This is usually harvested in March, but this time, due to the lockdown and the social distancing and other norms that needed to be maintained upon resumption of activity, production has taken a hit. The losses come as a double whammy for the tea business in north Bengal's Darjeeling region particularly, since it had just about started recovering from the losses it sustained due to the violent Gorkhaland agitation and resultant three-month-long shutdown in 2017.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review is an integral part of a study. It helps to gather information about the study. Different relevant journals, published reports about the tea gardens of North Bengal were consulted for the Study.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research work has been done mainly on the basis of secondary information. Preliminary data collection was not possible due to the corona virus situation. For which it was not possible to collect information through pilot survey or face to face interview of the workers or through any focus group discussion or questionnaire survey. The secondary data have been collected from literatures available in journals, news portals, published/ unpublished PhD thesis etc. Also from reports published by Tea Board of India (TBI), Directorate of Economics and Statistics Tea Marketing Control Order (TMCO), Darjeeling Tea Association (DTA) etc.

IV. HISTORY OF TEA CULTIVATION IN NORTH BENGAL

Tea cultivation in the North Bengal began about 120 to 150 years ago in Dooars region, during the colonial British Raj period. In the year 1840 tea was planted in Darjeeling district and adjacent areas in North Bengal. This now reached to a 199 million tea industry.

Tea industry was started in 1874 in this region. About 10 lakhs of workers are directly related to the tea industry in North Bengal and about 45 lakhs of such workers are indirectly dependent upon it. North Bengal has about 450 tea gardens spread out in the

Darjeeling Hills, Terai & Dooars regions that are registered as sellers in the Siliguri Tea Auction Centre. The youngest tea gardens are Chinchula Tea Estate, Raimatang Tea Estate and Kalchini Tea Estate all of which are 72 years old. The largest tea garden is Samsing Tea Estate of 1256.60 hectares. Most of the tea gardens in the Dooars region are members of the Dooars Branch of the Indian Tea Association (DBITA), while those in the Terai region are members of the Terai Branch of the Indian Tea Association.

Though India is still first in tea production in the world and West Bengal is in the second position in the country, but it suffers from various management problems. These are (i) Land management problems; (ii) Wage pattern vis-a-vis management problem; (iii) Problems in world trade and marketing; (iv) Administrative problems etc.

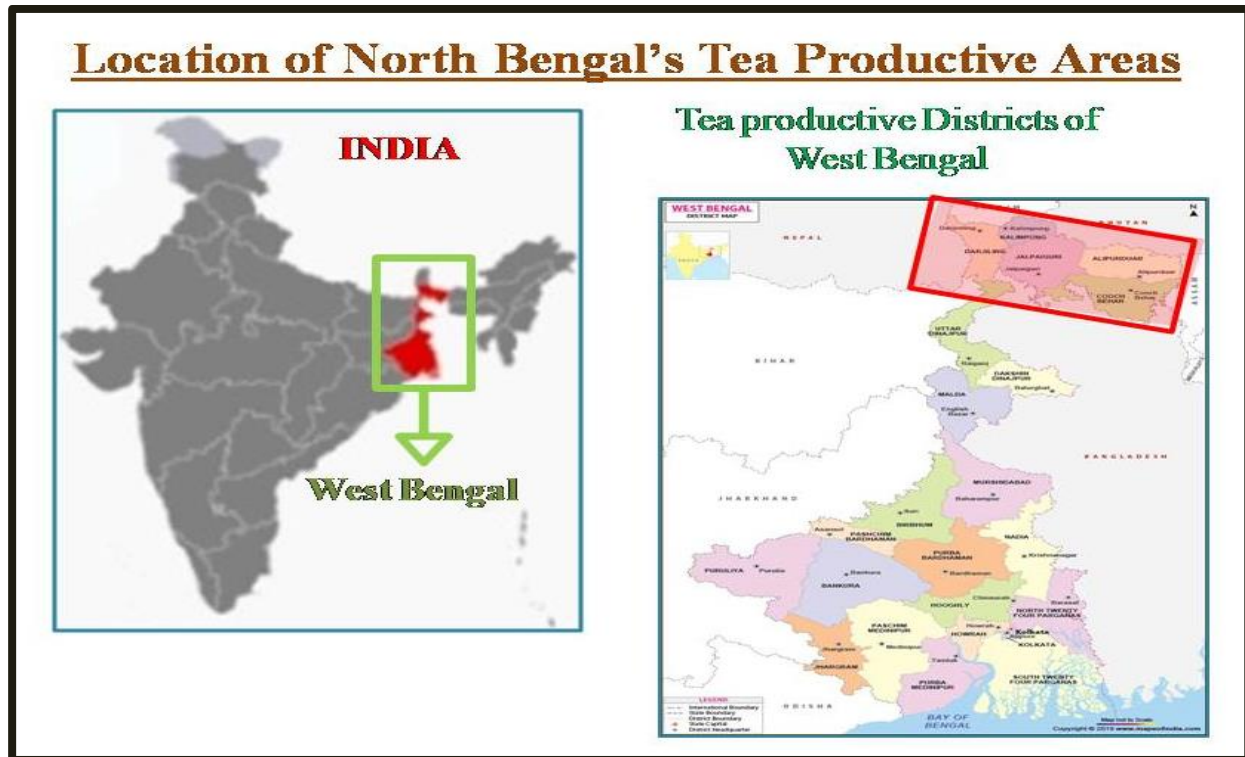


Figure: 1. Location of study area (Source: Google)

V. HOW THEY HAVE SURVIVED YEAR AFTER YEAR

A tea estate is run by managerial executives. They are responsible for the smooth and efficient functioning of the tea estates to maintain required development, industrial growth, peace and harmony of the workers. But, in reality many cases of labour unrest have been noticed in different tea gardens of North Bengal in recent years. The major complaints of the laborers are; the management is not looking well after them and they are facing various problems related to their income and livelihood condition.

The plantation laborers have always been forced by the management to maintain social isolation in order to ensure reproduction of the labour force within the gardens. The labour is not free to switch jobs or migrate unless they are retrenched and the garden is locked down by the management. Forced migration of other family members and human trafficking of children, especially girls, however, are common phenomena owing to the abject poverty of the workers. Tea gardens lack access to safe and adequate drinking water. Most

hospitals and medical facilities in these gardens are abysmally equipped. They lack proper healthcare officials and even medicines. The outbreak of a viral epidemic in these places can therefore result in a human catastrophe.

Workers in tea estates are of two types - permanent or temporary. The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 (PLA51) requires tea companies to provide housing, drinking water, and health facilities for permanent workers. Figure 2 (Source: Tea Board of India (2017) records a decline in permanent employment in between 1992 to 2015 in all states, even as tea production has increased in Assam (51%), Tamil Nadu (61%), and West Bengal (93%). A decline in permanent workers can be explained either by a greater reliance on temporary workers or increasing mechanization in tea production. The increase in production is consistent with the rise in tea plucking targets set for workers [figure: 3]. In north Bengal, the target had been 14 kg/day that has now increased to 20kg/day. As the target was increase workers starter plucking 6 leaves and a bud insist of 2 leaves and a bud.

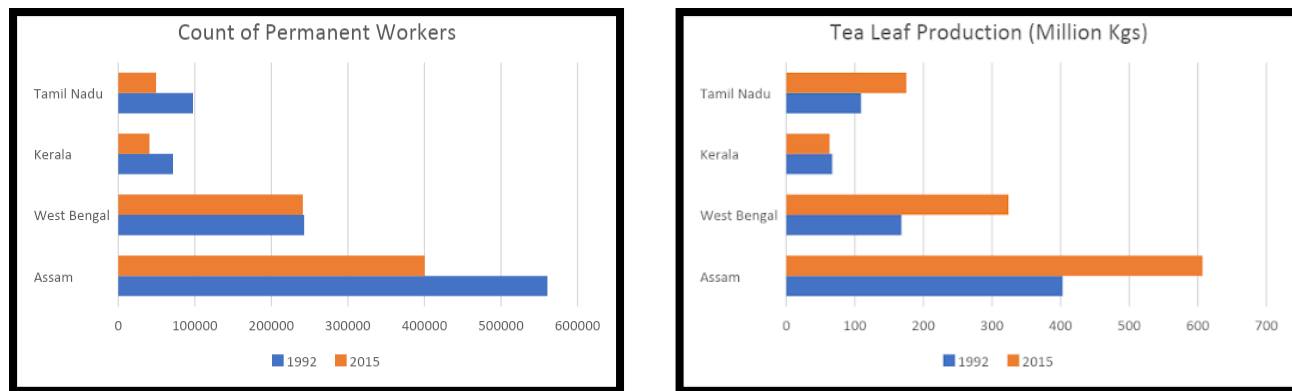


Figure: 2. Decrease in permanent workers; Figure: 3. Increase in tea leaf production from the year 1992 to 2015. (Source: Tea Board of India, 2017).

Out migration has led to poor workforce practices and performances with absenteeism becoming common and lack of experiences being the norm. While production has risen, the pre-covid-19 decline in permanent workers indicates rising labour market shortages. As the nationwide covid-19 related lockdown eased, migrant workers began returning home. Several tea garden workers who had left West Bengal in search of better opportunities have also returned, in the past, out migration from tea estates had been a serious concern with labour workers even as tea production rose. Thus, the return migration has the potential to re-invigorate the tea industry in a way.

VI. TEA GARDEN WORKERS AND THEIR HISTORY OF HUNGER

Hunger, lockdowns and even social distancing are not new terms in the tea plantations of West Bengal. They only took new meaning here post the pandemic. For centuries the lush tea gardens in Assam and West Bengal have severely violated labour rights. Hunger and starvation pervades the daily lives of the 3, 50,000 underpaid, overworked, malnourished workers in the surviving tea gardens of West Bengal.

The tea industry is touted as the country's second largest employer holder, but also an industry that undermines the labour rights and deprives workers and their families' most basic needs. There's widespread poverty, malnutrition, human trafficking and starvation death; obvious factors underscoring the desire for a better life. The availability of basic facilities like healthcare and education is also poor. It was during the mid 1990's when small growers began to flood the tea market emerging out of the Dooars region. As per data published by Tea Board of India (TBI), the number of tea plantations in North India (which includes West Bengal, Assam and all the North-Eastern states) jumped from 3,141 in 1994 to 36,836 in 1999. Between 2000 to 2015, 1400 people have died in 17 closed tea gardens in North Bengal. It was found that severe malnutrition was the main cause of death. Many deaths have occurred in other tea estates as well but they have gone unreported. A majority of these starvation deaths have occurred in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar tea Gardens. The most affected are those families who worked in tea estates that have been shut down.

VII. THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19 IN NORTH BENGAL AND SUBSEQUENT LOCKDOWN

In India, a full lockdown started on 23 March. However, many tea gardens in North Bengal did not close down immediately, and, flouting the lockdown order, remained open until 25 March. The gardens finally shut down only after fears of the Covid-19 outbreak mounted. A joint deputation of 19 trade unions and organizations to the chief secretary of the state demanded full lockdown of the tea gardens and payment of wages to the workers during the lockdown. The first Covid-19 death of a 44-year-old woman on 30 March in Kalimpong Medical College fortified the demand for a full lockdown and the simultaneous payment of wages of the workers.

But the tea estate owners have a terrible history when it comes to labour rights. Moreover they were worried because this is the season of plucking of the first flush tea leaves, which yields the most precious leaves. So, together, they did a rough estimate of impending huge loss for the industries. By 29 March they had demanded compensation from the government worth Rs 1,455 crores.

Flaunting their clout with the government, the tea industry managed to secure an exception to the lockdown right away. The central government issued a notice on 3 April, 2020 directing that 50% of the tea garden workforce can remain at work in the gardens, provided proper measures for sanitization are taken and social distancing is maintained. This was against the rule of the lockdown, as well as the much touted 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' sentiment but the tea crops clearly seemed more valuable to the government over the lives of tea garden workers.

On 9th April, 2020 the West Bengal government also declared that 15% of workforce can be used for skiffing and plucking the first flush leaves and again on 11th April, 2020 in a fresh notice they directed employing 25% of the labour force can work for all activities of the garden, with necessary precautions. It was decided that the workforce will be employed rotationally. As a result, it is mostly the permanent workers who were employed in most gardens.

VIII. LIFE OF TEA GARDEN WORKERS DURING LOCKDOWN

In India, hunger had taken a pandemic proportion long back. In the Global Hunger Index (GHI) of 2019, India ranked 102 among 117 countries. In 2018 it ranked 103 and in 2017 it was at 100. Hunger and starvation spiral when minimum wages are not paid to the mass of workers and subsidized and quality essential services such as healthcare and education is not available. In the sectors and regions which are already reeling under poverty, the Corona virus and subsequent lockdowns on work and mobility have become an added curse. One such sector in India is the tea gardens of West Bengal.

For the laborers who are being put to work, social distancing goes for a toss as they throng the tea garden gates every morning or huddle together at lunchtime. The garden management wanted to continue work without any concern for the risks the workers. Gradually, tea gardens raised the proportion of the workers beyond the one-fourth limitation. The workers were once again not in a position to oppose this as the management has not released three previous installments of payments for the workers. Given a choice between hunger, death and contracting Covid-19, the workers choose the latter. Because, Infection is, a matter of chance but death by hunger seems more inevitable and imminent.

The novel corona virus-induced lockdown has taken its toll on 12,000 workers of 14 closed tea estates in north Bengal as most of them cannot avail themselves of the monthly doles given by the state government because of absence of banking facilities in their vicinity and transport.

Besides, the laborers are without other sources of income in the lockdown and want the government to pay the FAWLOI (Financial Assistance to Workers of Locked out Industries) monthly. The money is paid once in three months; the workers and their families, who are waiting for the lockdown to be over, have also demanded that the state labour department pay the assistance every month, instead of disbursing it on quarterly basis. They are getting food grains from ration shops but need cash to buy other grocery items and vegetables for at least two square meals a day.

For the workers of the tea gardens which had closed down, the difficulties were even greater.

Moreover, after the lockdown, the meager compensation of Rs 1,500 per month that they used to receive from the state government as a worker of a now closed tea garden has also been stopped. They are fully dependent on the ration that the government is providing. But, the ration disbursement in the Dooars region is done on a per-family basis. The registered monthly ration of 20 kilos rice, 15 kilos flour and 3 kilos of sugar is given to every family, irrespective of its size. Bigger families find it difficult to sustain on this much, but now it is the only source of food for everyone. It was also become difficult to collect other essentials such as milk, oil, salt and vegetables on their own.

The other major source of income for the tea garden workers in Dooars is the income of the family members who have migrated outside for work. With the countrywide lockdown halting all economic work of any kind, that source of income has also dried up completely. The migrant workers from Dooars are stranded in various parts of the country without work. They have become dependent on relief food being distributed by the government or non-government agencies. This is the situation of all tea garden workers across Dooars. Fear of starvation is a phantom that has relentlessly haunted them throughout their lives. The new fear of infection has added teeth to their insecurity, which now constantly gnaws at them. The present crisis is draining their lives bit by bit as their meager savings deplete with every meal.

IX. APPEAL TO THE GOVERNMENT ON BEHALF OF THE WORKERS

On behalf of 19 organizations, including several tea garden unions that work for the Right to Food campaign in the State, write a letter to the Chief Secretary of the State, in which they wrote - "An immediate lockdown of [tea] gardens is necessary, but with the survival of the workers in mind. We insist that employers should be made to pay full wages for the period of lockdown. As wages in tea gardens are generally paid on a weekly or fortnightly basis, the same procedure should be followed". They also highlights that West Bengal employs 2.5 to 3 lakhs tea garden workers, thus supporting about 10- 12 lakhs people, and is the backbone of the economy of at least three districts in north Bengal — Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar.

Right to Food campaigners in the State also made a similar demand in a press release, in which the noted - "Employers should be made to pay full wages for the period of lockdown. In case of default, State Government should pay the wages [and] should recover the amount from employers." The campaigners said that such an effort would cost the State government ₹176 crores.

X. IMPACT ON EXPORTS

North Bengal is majorly export oriented. Different from other parts of the industry, the Darjeeling tea industry is an export-dependent industry from which 70 percent of the national revenue is earned from the export of 95 percent of the first and second flush teas. In Terai and Dooars region, there are at least 188 teagardens that produce and exports CTC (crush-tear-curl) tea. Suspension of international flights and large spread of the covid-19 pandemic in importing countries has severely affected North Bengal tea sale, and there is an apprehension of substantial market share being lost in future too. According to Darjeeling Tea Association (DTA) countries like Germany, Japan, USA, and UK are majorly affected by the pandemic, resulting in an estimated loss of exports of around 50 percent in the current season.

XI. GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE TO THE WORKERS

The tea industry collectively has an opportunity to reverse conditions that had led to out-migration. Implementing benefits for permanent workers under the PLA51 would be welcome. The West Bengal government has been launching schemes relevant for tea workers (e.g. 5000 crores has been allocated for housing development project (Chaii Sundari); using Financial Assistance to the Workers of Locked out Industries supporting benefits for returning migrants. The Alipurduar administration launched 'Apnar Bagane Proshashan' to conduct meetings with the tea workers; the goal is to respond to workers' grievances and share awareness of government schemes. In this sense, the aftermath of COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity for the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal – with reverse migration and support from the government this is an excellent opportunity to consolidate and formalize its workforce and strengthen the labour ecosystem of the tea industry in Assam and West Bengal that produces a large fraction of the total tea produce.

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