



livelihoods

today and tomorrow

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‘Sukshetram’

Tea Plantation Workers

Tea occupies a huge space in our everyday life; a day is not complete for most Indians without taking a sip of the brew! But have you ever wondered what goes into making your tea. The picture of scenic tea plantations of Assam, Darjeeling, Nilgiris, etc., with cheerful looking leaf-pickers may crop up before you. But what you don't know is that for a long while now, the tea plantation workers in India have been paying with their life for bringing you your tea! Malnutrition, paltry pay, poor standard of basic necessities, sanitation, and health facilities; hazardous conditions and the list goes on. The life of an average tea plantation worker is not everyone's cup of tea!



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Tea plantation workers in India are one of the most vulnerable communities consisting of scheduled castes, tribes and other minority groups; oftentimes, they live in abject poverty. Their situation is even more fragile in North East (NE) India, where the tea workers have a unique identity; those people who have been sent by British to work in plantations in the 19th century are collectively called as tea-tribes. As the plantations are generally based in secluded areas, the lives of the workers only revolve around the plantation. Working on a plantation is often a family affair, as it is tough to make ends meet with one wage for families of workers. Though these people are working as hard as, if not more, any other agri-based labourer, their pay is many times less. But having always worked in tea plantations, majority of workers find it hard to shift to other livelihoods. A large number of the workers live and die in the estates. Their next generations too continue to toil in the estates. Let us try to delve deeply into the past and present of tea garden workers and their problems in this supplement.



Major tea producing regions in India	Approximate area under tea (in hectares)	Approximate production of tea in 2015-16 (in million kilograms)
Assam	312214 ha	588 M. Kgs
West Bengal	115095 ha	276 M. Kgs
Other states of North India (Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Sikkim, Manipur and Nagaland)	713769 ha	16 M. Kgs
South India (Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka)	119740 ha	232 M. Kgs

India is the second largest producer of tea in the world; with China is being the first. In fact, India was at the first spot for over a century before losing the lead to China due to mismanagement and complacency of tea companies. Tea plays a big role in the economy of India and is the drink of choice for most Indians. Over 80% of the tea produced in our country is consumed by us and the rest is exported to other countries. India, which produced around 1233 million kgs of tea in 2015-16, exported 232 million kgs of it valued at US\$ 686.67 million. The major tea producing states in India are Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and some others in North India, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka in South India.

Assam is said to be one of the largest tea producing regions in the world. The taste of India's teas are famous the world over for their uniqueness, with Assam and Darjeeling tea even getting GI (Geographical Indication) certification, to curb the malpractice by some producers of selling their tea under the renowned and savoured teas of India's gardens so as to fetch better prices. Moreover, being one of the most labour intensive sectors, the Indian tea industry is reportedly one of the largest employer in India, providing much-needed livelihoods to 1.5 to 2 million people in a poverty-ridden country like ours.

However, the current scenario of the industry is far from ideal! According to reports, in the last decade alone, there have been more than a thousand deaths due to malnutrition among tea plantation workers in North East.

Colonial times: The British East India Company first brought tea, which was a popular drink in Britain, to India in the 19th century to beat the Chinese who were the top producers of tea at that time. They found the weather conditions in some areas of India like Assam, Darjeeling and Nilgiris conducive to growing tea.

In 1820s, they began using the Chinese plant variety to start wide scale production of tea in Assam and Darjeeling in India. However, the crop started failing in some areas. They soon found some indigenous types of tea in Assam and started growing that variety; which is the famed Assam tea that we get today. In a move to boost tea production, the Britishers announced free lands to their countrymen who took to growing tea in Assam. In South India, tea plantation started in Nilgiris and nearby areas around 1930s with the Chinese plants, and slowly many plantations began opening there.

But the main production was in North East India, which produced large amounts of tea. However, one problem the plantation owners in the North faced was that of labour shortage and rising costs of hiring labour. There began the seeds of atrocities that still find echoes in the current age. The Britishers first managed to recruit hundreds of labourers in 1940s from within Assam and Bengal. However, due to the space constraints on estates, many outbreaks of diseases ensued killing most of the labour and those who were left escaped these conditions by fleeing. It was then that the British introduced the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859. Under this law, labourers can be punished and imprisoned if they tried to leave the work once they came under contract. Britishers hired Arakattis or middlemen who through fraudulent practices forcibly recruited and brought labourers belonging to tribal and backward castes from present day Jharkhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, etc., who were made to sign contracts without much knowledge. Major tribes and communities among them are the present day-Jharkhand based Munda, Santhals, Kurukh (Oraon), Kudumi Mahato, Kharia, Koiri, Rabidas, Teli and Turi. West Bengal origin Ahir/Gowala, Lohar/Karmakar, Bhumij and Baraik. Odisha origin Khandayat, Tanti, Saora, Nayak, Mahali and Khonds. Chattisgarh origin Gonds and dozens of other motley groups of tribes and castes.

The middlemen, in their greed, brought thousands of people through Brahmaputra river on boats to Assam, with the passengers being treated like filth. A large number of the bonded labour perished on the ships itself. The workers, once hired, were all crammed together in small living areas due to lack of space in the estates, they were not given leaves, not allowed to meet outsiders, even the marriage of labourers needed permission from owners. The conditions of the workers were based on discretion of the estate owners. Until 1901, wages of plantation workers was Rs. 4/-, when it was increased by Rs. 4.5/-. A railway labourer used to get Rs. 12/- at that time. However, food grains were given to the plantations workers. Due to low wages, the labourers had to make their whole family work in their estates for survival.

Education took a hit because children were busy working. There were no proper healthcare facilities in spite of frequent outbreaks of diseases. Managers of the plantations became dictators and would often torture, kill or rape labourers. This was the condition of tea plantation workers under British Raj. Through selling these teas overseas, and with cheap production costs, the British made a huge fortune.

Take a look at the following figures - between 1863 and 1866, around 80,000 people were brought to Assam from various places, of them, 30,000 people died due to outbreak of diseases and severe weather conditions which the workers were not used to. From 1870s to 1920, approximately 4-5 lakh people including lakhs of women and children were recruited by the British. These tea plantations workers working in Assam came to be known as tea tribes of Assam.

Independent India: After independence, seeing the pathetic conditions of the tea plantation workers, the Indian government came up with the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 (PLA). The provision of the bill sought to improve the overall conditions of the labourers. Registration of tea estates of more than five hectares and employing 15 or more persons; and provision of housing, drinking water, sanitation, medical and education facilities, subsidised food grains, firewood, etc., were some of key points. The Act also provides for safeguards such as limitations by way of maximum hours work in a week, provision of weekly holidays, prohibiting night work for women and children, certification of fitness, annual leave with wages, wages during leave period, sickness and maternity benefits, etc.

Though the Act in some part improved the conditions of the plantations workers all over India, the problem started in ensuring its proper implementation. The provisions of PLA were mostly not followed in spirit. It has been reported that there was a high incidence of waterborne diseases such as gastroenteritis and cholera, which claimed the lives of many workers. The clinics and hospitals in the estates or nearby, provided only basic treatments and not fit for treating any major problems. Tuberculosis has been very prevalent. Workers used pesticides on the plants without wearing any protective gear. Workers' leaves, generally, were not sanctioned easily and if sanctioned, workers didn't get paid leaves. Mostly the concept of maternity leave did not exist in many estates. Wages were meagre in comparison to other agricultural labour. The wages of workers in Assam was 94 until 2014, when it was raised to 126; in West Bengal, it is 117. In Kerala, it has been raised to 226 after a protest by women workers. Part of the workers' wages are paid in kind through subsidised food grains. Housing and sanitation facilities have mostly been dilapidated.

However, what precipitated matters was the tea crisis of 2000. Even when the tea boom was going on, the money didn't trickle down to the plantation workers much, but when upon continuous droughts and low exports due to declining quality of tea, and falling tea prices caused losses to the owners, the workers' lives became the most badly affected. Many large companies too didn't escape the crisis. From the year 2000 onwards, many tea plantations have shut down, that too illegally to escape giving any money to workers, leaving tens of thousands workers jobless. These jobless workers have no where else to go due to lack of alternate livelihoods. Only a few estates' management are paying wages on time. Some workers stopped getting subsidised food. The average calorie intake of a plantation worker was said to be 200 calories in West Bengal; an average person needs at least 2000 calories to be healthy. Malnutrition and starvation have killed more than a 1000 plantation workers in the last 10-15 years. Reports suggest that the quality of tea from India has come down due to lack of investments on the tea estates on the owners' part, infrastructure not being upto date, tea plants growing old, technology not being used, etc. Instead of doing all these things, the companies are trying to cut losses by spending less on workers' salaries and

benefits; arguing that providing subsidised food is a huge burden on the companies’ account and that social security schemes need to be given by the government.

The situation of tea has improved a tiny bit in the last couple of years; many shut down tea estates are opening again, but the crisis isn't over yet!

Recently, demonetization has added to the plantation workers’ woes; due to cash crunch, 4-5 people together are being paid a single Rs. 2000/-, which has left the plantation workers in a quandary. Moreover, government has been rooting for no cash payments for tea workers and encouraging them to open bank accounts, by dropping the in-kind provision in the PLA; which would mean that they would not be getting anymore subsidised food items of 35 kgs from the companies but would get ration from the government under National Food Security Act, 2013. However, the government ration consists of around 20 or so kgs, which they feel is one more nail in their coffin.

Conclusion:

The tea plantation industry in India was first created by the British with the help of lakhs of indentured and bonded labour; but even after 70 years of independence, misfortune still hogs the life of India's tea garden workers. The need of the hour is for government intervention and support to treat the sickness in the tea industry. If the tea companies continue to make losses, and continue to shut down, more than a million workers and their families will lose livelihoods. An in-depth study, with recommendations for improving the tea industry needs to be done urgently. These tea plantation workers need answers for why they are being treated this way. Our country has so far failed in its efforts to lend a helping hand to its plantation workers. ❖