

Decline of tea industry and its impact on tea workers: A study of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal.

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Abstract:

Tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India. The Indian tea industry accounts for the employment for more than a million workers, of which a sizable number of women and persons belong to the weaker sections of the society. Moreover it provides indirect employment to various sectors like warehouses, manufacture of plywood tea chest, aluminium foil, transportation, construction etc. The tea industry is also vital in terms of substantial foreign exchange. So apart from its own workforce it also looks upon a number of dependents. However in the recent days the tea workers, especially the ones drawn from the tribal areas of Jalpaiguri region, are facing innumerable difficulties. The study of the impact of the decline of the tea industry on the workers life in Jalpaiguri region reveals that due to closure and lock out of the tea gardens about 20% of 1.64 lakh workers and their dependents living in several tea gardens in Dooars, who are direct dependents of the migrated labours were brought over here are forced to give up on their work and shift to other means of livelihood. Tea, despite being the major beverage of the country, is facing a serious decline and hence the workers and the other sectors co dependent on them are also on the verge of falling down. This study aims to bring into focus the problems faced by the industry and suggests a few solutions to overcome them as well. The study refers to both primary and secondary sources. Extensive field survey has been conducted for a better understanding of the situation. Various journals, thesis and papers have been referred to present an accurate statistics.

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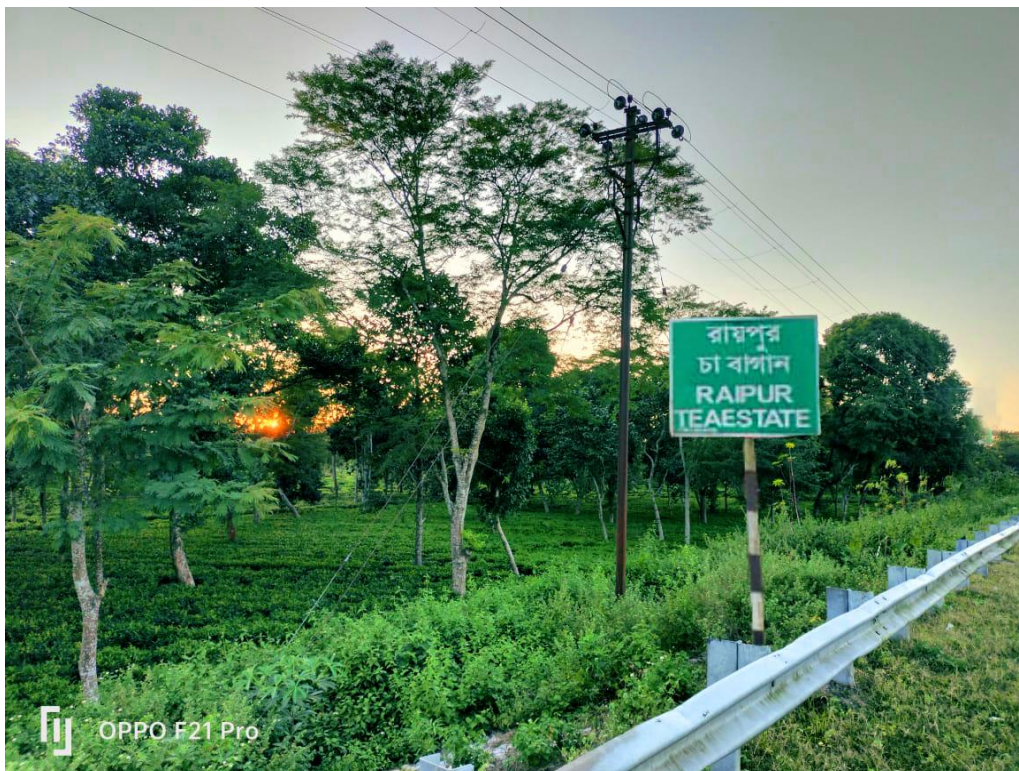
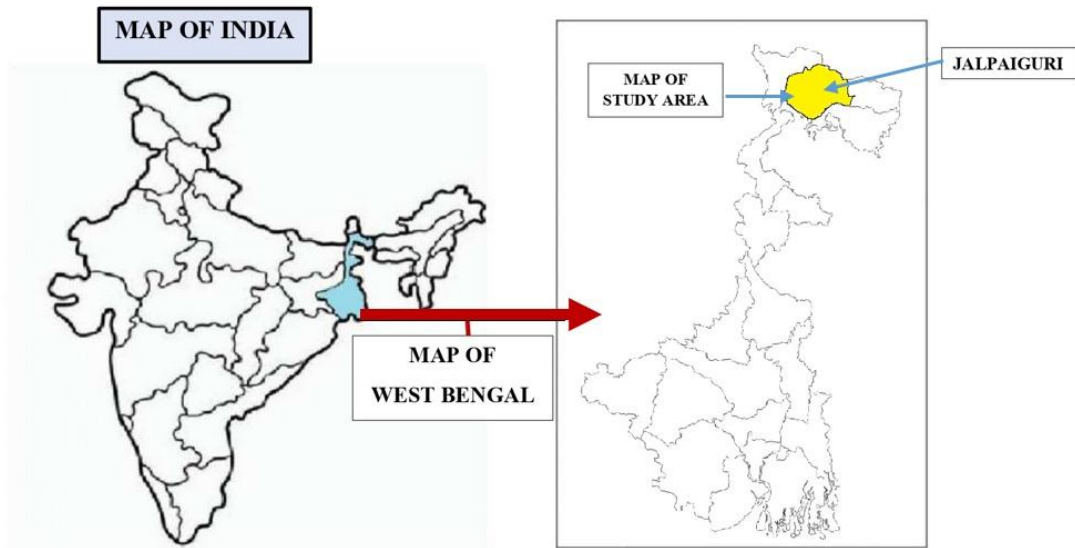
I. Introduction:

India is the second largest tea producer in the world. Indian tea is one of the best in the world due to its strong geographic indications, heavy investment in tea processing units, continuous innovation, expanded product mix and strategic market expansion. Survey 2018, total 6.37 billion hectares of land have been cultivated for tea production in India. India is also among the top tea consuming countries in the world, with 80% of the tea produced in the country being consumed by the local population. The northern part of India is the largest producer with about 83% of the country annual tea production in 2021-22, with most production coming from Assam, followed by West Bengal. Assam Valley and Cachar are the two tea growing areas in Assam. In West Bengal, Dooars, Terai and Darjeeling are the three main tea growing regions. The southern part of India produces around 17% of the country's total production, with the main producing states being Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. In terms of employment, the tea industry provides direct employment to more than 1 million people (10 lakhs) in India. Through its back and forth connections, another 10 million people (100 lakhs) derive their livelihood from tea. In north-east India alone, the tea industry employs around 900,000 people (9 million) in permanent roles. It is also one of the largest employers of women among organized industries in India, where women make up almost 51% of the total workforce. Data from the Tea Board of India shows that there was a decline in employment over the period 1950-1969 with the change in employment during the decade 1950-59 being -3.08% while the change in employment over the next decade was -11.52% in 1960-69. However, over the next three decades, 1970-79, 1980-89 and 1990-99, employment increased by 10%, 74%, 15.66% and 20.47%, respectively. During the next decade 2000-2009 there was an increase in employment of only 4.12%. What is worrying, however, is that tea plantation employment in India has not changed at 1,259,950 since 2006 according to Tea Board of India data. Tea has historically been a highly seasonal product in India, with employment peaking in the latter/early months of the year. According to an informative note by Luis Pinedo Caro on a study conducted by the ILO (International Labor Organization) entitled "Wages and Labor Conditions in the Tea Sector: The Case of India, Indonesia and Vietnam", first published in 2020, shows seasonality is lower in the latest available data and employment levels are consistently higher and lower throughout the year.

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Historically, tea has been a highly seasonal product in India, with employment peaks in the last months/first months of the year. However, according to a Background note prepared by Luis Pinedo Caro on a study conducted by ILO (International Labour Organization) titled, “Wages and working conditions in the tea sector: the case of India, Indonesia and Viet Nam”, first published in 2020, seasonality is shown to be lower in the latest available data, with more even and lower employment levels throughout the year. The study however estimated that, at the national level, the tea sector remains relatively small in terms of overall employment share in India.

The North Bengal Tea Industry production areas are in the North Bengal region of West Bengal State, in Eastern India. It includes tea estates and facilities in the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Kishanganj and North Dinajpur in West Bengal. North Bengal has about 450 tea gardens spread out in the Darjeeling Hills, Terai, and 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 Jalpaiguri district are members of the Dooars Branch of the Indian Tea Association (DBITA).





Research problem:

1. The various facets of the decline of the tea industry which pertain to close down of tea gardens, trade union movement, lack of institutional supports etc among the tea labourers are the inability to combine work with household and child rearing responsibilities in case of women.

2. The majority of the workers are tribal, mostly Santhal, forcibly inducted from contiguous regions, especially Bihar, generations ago. They live and work in the gardens and have no other source of income in case of abandonment. The labour unions in every garden have fought relentlessly for years for deriving benefits from the close fist management. But tea garden owners opine that the extra expenditure, to better the conditions of the workers, increase cost of production which ultimately minimises the profit margin in this industry.

3. The Dooars region tea industry suffered a critical period from 2012 to 2015; during the time 14 of the 156 registered tea gardens in Dooars closes their doors, effectively abandoning resident workers and their families. Nearly 100,000 people were affected by the closures, deprived of food ratings, wages, health care and transportation to and fro for their children from the school.

4. Some of the residential labourers who earlier had agricultural background were suddenly brought under the industrial ways of life. This has an important consequence on their socio economic life by bringing rapid transformation of their traditional social life.

5. Tea prices remain a major concern for the industry, not having kept pace with increasing costs. The growth of the smallholder sector poses a number of challenges such as a lack of awareness of good agricultural practices and the safe use of agrochemicals.

6. Liquidity challenges amid high wages, falling demand and prices are brewing trouble for the "champagne of the teas" Indian tea market's prized possession, Darjeeling tea often called the "champagne of the teas", has been struggling over the years to maintain its place in the international markets

7. A considerable number of tea gardens have gone sick due to lack of infrastructure, modernization and efficient management.

8. The problem of storing premium quality tea has always been there. Due to delay in transportation and lack of storage facilities, the processed tea gains moisture from the atmosphere and deteriorates in quality

9. Pest problem is another major issue. Along with the mosquito bug, a disease called the bacterial black spot has also affected many plantations in Jalpaiguri Tea Estates.

10. Most of the tea garden labourers are basically from the “adivashi” community and the local people, mainly Nepali. These people are the most exploited ones in the tea gardens. Most of them work as part-time labourers as per production and requirement and peak season. A small proportion of these workers is also engaged in factory, office etc. Adult males and females are equally employed. Though child labour is not prevalent, yet in few remote gardens children are employed in plucking, weeding, hoeing, and nursery work.

Objective of the study:

The major objective of the research work is to find out the present situation of the tea industry in Jalpaiguri district in respect to their production and area under tea gardens. The attempt is made to analyze the deciding trend of the tea industry in the study area with a view to understand its impact on the worker's life. Thus the objective focuses on:

1. To study the history and origin of tea plantation and growth and development of tea garden as well as tea industry.
2. To analyze the declining trend of the tea industry in the study area region with a view to understand its Impact on the workers life.
3. To uncover the problems and associated constraints in tea industry.
4. Finally, to extend appropriate suggestions for the development of tea garden and tea industry and also suggest some remedial measures to improve the present socio economic conditions of tea workers of the study area.

II. Methodology:

The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. Necessary secondary data pertaining to various socio economic attributes of tea workers and also for tea industry are drawn from the following sources:

1. Census of India, 2001, 2011.
2. District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri district, 1951-2011.
3. Various publications of books, journals, articles, unpublished research papers etc.
4. Tea Statistics, 2014-2015, Tea Board of India, Kolkata.
5. Tea Digest, 2015.

The primary data or information is collected through an extensive field work among the different tea plantations of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, after preparing a suitable schedule. The primary information is collected by using stratified random sampling techniques. In view of the absence of most of data for micro level study, extensive schedules are prepared to cover the important aspects of the tea workers as well as tea industry of the study area.

The methodology that was adapted for the present study mainly concerned itself in three areas:

1. Selection of the tea gardens:

For this study the gardens which have been mainly studied are located in the block of Jalpaigurisadar, Nagrakata, Dhupguri and Maynaguri.

2. Selection of respondents

The respondents were divided into two categories and respective interview schedules were prepared for them:

- 2.1. Interview schedule for the respondents
- 2.2. Interview schedule for the garden managers.

3. Besides, the data and relevant information are also collected from the trade union leaders through the interview method in the selected tea gardens.

Hypothesis:

The present work tries to assert the truth or falsify of the following propositions:

1. The socio-economic conditions of the small tea gardens are poor than the big ones in the study area.
2. The standard of living the tea laborers getting better in the tea gardens in which tea processing facilities are available.
3. Income of the workers is negatively co related with the age of the tea bushes.

4. Higher accessibility in tea garden indicates the higher level of development of tea gardens and altogether with the tea industry.

III. Review of literature:

To get a better insight into the impact of the decline of tea industry, a brief review of available important studies has been outlined in this section.

The book, "History of tea industry in India", by Sir Percival Griffith, in 1967, describes the history of Indian tea industry and its different aspects like tea production, labour recruitment, ownership etc.

TusherKantiGhosh, in his book, in 1987, "Tea garden of West Bengal" and "Contains history of tea plantation of West Bengal", describes the tea land policies, rules and regulations etc, and the problems faced by tea labourers.

ShariatBhowmick (1981), in his book "Class formation in the plantation system" describes the origin of the plantation labour force and the plantation system that is related to work, wage and level of living etc. He also tells us about the social life of the Adivasi and the trade union movement in Dooars region.

The study on "Role of Women Workers in the Tea Industry of North East India" by Navinder K. Singh in 2001 potryaed various social, cultural and functional activites of female tea workers in details. The study dwells on the exploitation of the women workers and suggests social empowerment for them.

The book entitled, "Human resources development for industrial workers: with special reference to tea industries", by Bishnu Prasad Sahu, in 2004, focuses on the migration pattern of the tea workers of Barak Valley, Assam.

The book, "Evolution of land grants and labour policy of government: The growth of the tea industry in Assam, 1834-1940", by Muhammad Abu Siddique, in 1990, potryats the development of tea industry in Assam, with particular emphasis on government policy with regards to the supply of land recruitment of labour.

The study "Industrial Relation in Tea Plantation: the Dooars Scene", by Prasanneswarib(1984), describe the condition of labour relations in tea gardens of North Bengal with special reference to the gardens of Dooars region.

Limitations of the Study:

The limitations of the present study are restricted to 20 tea gardens and limited to the workers and the families of these gardens. The study is limited to the Plantations industry located in region of Jalpaiguri district. There were problems in conduction of the interview of the respondents from the Indegenous ethnic groups as some of the respondents spoke only in Adivasi language and had very little knowledge of other dialects. Most of the respondents claimed that there were no child workers in their employment but during field work encountered several of them. Furthermore, the management was hesitant to provide information on the exact data on a number of subjects like the workers in the tea gardens, the gender distribution, financial data and so on.

Several aspects of tea workers are studied as a result of decline of tea industry is the study area. The following table will give a proper pictures in this regard.

Table – 1
Types of workers in selected Tea Gardens

Field Workers	Factory Workers
Permanent 86 .%	Permanent 74 %
Temporary 14 %	Temporary 26 %
Total 100 %	100 %

Source: Based on field survey

Table – 2
Monthly income pattern of worker of selected Tea Gardens

Income Range	(Percentage) %
< Rs. 2000	30 %
Rs. 2000- Rs. 4000	50 %

Rs. 4000- Rs. 6000	15 %
Rs. 6000 & above	5 %
Total	100 %

Source:Based on field survey

Table – 3
Monthly Expenditure Pattern of workers

Monthly Expenditure	(Percentage) %
< Rs. 2000	30 %
Rs. 2000- Rs. 4000	60 %
Rs. 4000- Rs. 6000	8 %
Rs. 6000 & above	2 %
Total	100 %

Source:Based on field survey

Table – 4
Annual saving pattern of workers in the selected Tea Gardens

Saving per month (in Rs)	Number of household	% of household
UptoRs. 1000	20	3.28
1000 – 2000	13	2.14
2000 – 3000	15	2.47
3000 – 4000	10	1.64
No Saving	550	90.47
Total	608	100.00

Source:Based on field survey

Table – 5
Indebtness of workers in selected Tea Gardens

Reason for indebtness	Number of workers	Percentage of workers (%)
Low Wage	60	55.04
Medical Treatment	25	22.194
Marriage Ceremony	5	4.58
Festival Expense	15	13.76
Other Reason	4	3.68
Total	109	100.00

Source:Based on field survey

Table – 6
Migration of worker to other place for other job.

Region	Percentage (%)
Out side the Country (Specially, Nepal, Bhutan, Dubai, etc .)	12 % 68 %
Out side the state	20 %
Out side the district	
Total	100 %

Source:Based on field survey.

IV. Conclusion and suggestions:

The tea industry is one of the most important agro based industries. The history of tea industry in India goes back to 1820 when tea plant was discovered growing wild in Assam. In 1835, the first tea plantation was started in Assam by the British Government. Gradually West Bengal was found suitable for tea cultivation and experimentally tea Plantations were established. The tea producing areas in West Bengal are Darjeeling, Dooars and Terai regions. Tea growing areas are suited in Jalpaiguri district. The tea industry is a labour intensive one. Workers play a significant role in enhancing overall productivity in the tea industry as they are involved at every stage of production starting from the nursery development to the final preparation of the packets. But the socio economic condition of the workers of the tea industry is still awfully bad mainly due to suppressive measures of the managements for more than a century. The habits of drinking alcohol, gambling etc. are rampant among the plantation workers. Low wages, dilapidated housing conditions, inadequate drinking water, absence of health

care facilities available and alot more are vexed problem in the tea gardens of the district. The present study seeks to analyse the socio economic condition of tea garden workers of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal.

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Keywords:

Tea Industry, North Bengal, Decline, Employment, Dooars, DBITA, Wage, Livelihood, ILO, Adivasi, Terai, Agroboard Industry, Nepali, Tea Board, Gender, Child labour.

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