

Women workers' predicament in North Bengal tea plantations



Source : www.ft.com

Tea plantations in colonial India: An overview

- The broad history of plantations in India began as a colonial enterprise in the two primary tea growing belts- in the Northeast and in the South. The conventional tea producing states are Assam and West Bengal in the East and Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the South with production now coming from states like Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Sikkim.
- Tea plantations were set up in Darjeeling (1859) and Jalpaiguri (1879) during the colonial period. Migrants were brought as resident captive labour to work in remote and isolated plantation enclaves. With specific characteristics of both industrial and agricultural labour, the nature of plantation labour was unique in itself.
- The workforce primarily comprised of Tribals (Adivasis) and dalits (Nepalis). Adivasis now categorised as Scheduled Tribes namely Oraons, Mundas, Santhals were brought as indentured labour from the Chottanagpur Plateau. Whereas, Nepalis namely Kamis (blacksmiths), Damais (tailors) and Sarkis (cobblers) now categorised as Scheduled Castes migrated from Nepal.
- Chottanagpur region was seen as a favourable 'labour catchment area' for cheap labour. By the 1860s, an organized system of labour recruitment brought two-thirds of the total plantation labour from the Chottanagpur region.
- The recruitment of the workers in the early stages was family-based. This led the planters to employ a large number of women workers to keep the wages depressed and contain the male labour force.
- At present in West Bengal there are 2,62,426 designated permanent workers engaged in 273 tea estates in the three tea growing regions of Terai, Dooars and Darjeeling in North Bengal (Labour Report 2014, Govt. of West Bengal).

Women workforce

- The Labour Bureau (2012) data reflects that 55.9% of the women were employed across tea plantations in India. Between 1995–2010 the proportion of women workers



2010



1995

54.7 %

49.5 %

in tea plantations increased from 49.5% to 54.7%, but in terms of absolute numbers it has almost halved from 12,20,452 to 6,29,995 workers.

- Women's employment in tea plantations was pivotal for two reasons:
 - 1) To perform the dexterous task of plucking the 'two leaves and a bud'.
 - 2) To contain the male labour force in plantations.

Labour legislations and its status

- The Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951 is a key legislative intervention that seeks to specifically regulate the conditions of workers in plantations specifically growing crops such as tea, coffee, rubber and cinchona.
- The Act seeks to provide the permanent workers and their dependents with provisions of housing, medical amenities, education, electricity and other benefits.
- Various other legislations such as the Trade Union Act 1926, Workmen's Compensation Act 1923, Factories Act 1948 and Maternity Benefits Act 1961 are applicable to the tea plantation sector.
- The tea industry today is faced with a severe economic crisis. The crisis had begun in the 1990s, but its impact on the lives of the workers continued in the 2000s, leading to many hunger and starvation deaths and closure of many tea estates in West Bengal (Gothoskar 2012).
- Many of the closed tea estates came under the ambit of Central govt. schemes such as the Financial Assistance to Workers in Locked-out Industrial Units (FAWLOI) and Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) during the crisis period.
- Overall, data as per the Government of West Bengal on FAWLOI showed that the number of locked out units in West Bengal increased from 219 in 1999-2000 to 256 in 2000-2001. It increased substantially till 2004-05 with 276 locked out units.





Source : www.rainforest-alliance.org

Deplorable conditions of work

- Women are faced with the double-burden of work at home as well as in the field. Most of the permanent workers are single earners in the households as their men are engaged in work that is irregular in nature.
- Although the tea plantation industry is said to be in the organised sector, most of the entitlements do not reach the workers. Non-payment of provident fund and gratuity dues by the tea companies has been found to be a common trend.
- Despite equal wages between men and women workers, the latter continue to face hardships due to:
 - 1) Lack of control over their earnings.
 - 2) Lack of decision-making power.
- Wage determination in Bengal tea plantations happens through tripartite mechanism, whereas in southern India, the minimum wages notification is applicable. Revised daily wages for tea plantation workers currently in West Bengal is Rs. 176 per day. Under rural employment guarantee, the MGNREGA revised wage rate at Rs. 191 is higher than the daily wage rate in tea plantations.
- The incentive wage system or the extra leaf price (e.l.p) is a classic example of how exploitation of labour operates. Women workers are compelled to stretch work for longer hours to earn an extra income. The wages paid under the e.l.p system is abysmally low, dehumanising and devaluing the labour of plantation workers.

Absence of women's representation in trade unions

- Maili Chettri, a tea garden worker from Dooars started a union in 1946 and struggled for workers' rights in the tea plantations in Dooars, West Bengal. At that time, the tea garden workforce had joined the larger struggle of the peasants and tribals in the Tebhaga movement throughout North Bengal.
- Studies have shown that union affiliation and/or membership of plantation women workers is influenced by male relatives to such an extent that even a change in membership is influenced by the family members.
- Formation of separate women's committees has no doubt directly addressed issues and concerns of women workers in tea plantations, but there is a more urgent need to

incorporate them into the mainstream.

- The Munnar event (Jasmine revolution) of September 2015 in Kerala was unprecedented in the history of India's tea plantation sector. Bypassing traditional trade unions and ignoring their own menfolk, the women workers of Kanan Devan Hills Plantation Limited, struck work for nine long days and finally secured their key demand: 20% bonus. The agitation proved that women are neither subservient nor are reluctant to take over the batons of leadership from their male counterparts.



Source : www.youthkiawaaz.com

New tensions, crisis and out-migration

- Individuals, families and relations who were brought to labour in the harsh climatic and geographical locations in the plantations by their own kinsmen (sardars, arakatis, kanganis) across India are now facing a situation of precariousness and restlessness.
- Low wages, mounting expenses, strikes, *bandhs* and lockouts in tea plantations were and continue to affect workers. Many are left with no option, but to migrate in situations of distress especially during the crisis period faced by the tea industry.
- In recent decades, tea plantations have become a prime hunting ground for recruitment of young women to work as domestics in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Gurgaon, Noida, Mumbai.
- Within the sylvan setting of tea plantations, workers continue to live in conditions of poverty, malnutrition, uncertainty and continued segregation from the local population.