

Research Article

Closure of Tea Gardens and Displaced Livelihoods: A Study of Women Plantation Labourers

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Abstract

An enclave economy like Tea plantations is a small world, which could be similar to the labour to their home environment yet blended with the local culture and traditions. Therefore the closure of such plantations not only have severe impact on livelihood also limits the exploration of diversification of livelihood in the locality and leads to forced migration, or starvation and death if unable to find an alternative means to survive other than plantations. In the last few years the pivotal role of tea plantations in providing stable and sustainable livelihood to tribal and other communities has tremendously dwindled. Tea industry in West Bengal mainly Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district (North Bengal) has been facing turbulence since 2001. The tea industry in general had to go through crisis emanating out of high competition, price wars in the global markets. This led to the retrenchment and lay-off of workers, and closure of several tea gardens in this region due to their inability to compete. A total of 22 gardens closed down during the years 2001-04, severely hitting the workforce specially women and brought many more gardens at the verge of closure. The present paper attempts to learn, document and identify empirical evidences and experience of the women workers in tea gardens who lost their livelihood due to closure of the gardens in the Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal, with a special focus on the ramifications of the closure on their living and life. A total of four gardens were selected for the study out of the closed gardens in the district. The major emphasis of the research was on identifying the hardships caused to the women workers due to loss of livelihood resulting out of closure. The study included the size of the gardens; the work force; history of the plantations; process of the closure, its impact on emerging life situations of women workers; role of trade unions and functioning of Joint Management Committees in the closed gardens as major aspects of the analysis.

Keywords: Displacement, Women, Labour, Tea Plantation & Closure

HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF THE TEA PLANTATION INDUSTRY IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

According to the Census of India (2001), there were about 402.5 million rural workers of which 127.6 million (31.7%) were cultivators and 107.5 million (26.7%) were agricultural labourers; and 167.4 (41.6%) were in other occupations including household and marginal workers. The Labour Bureau Report (2001) revealed that nearly

50% of agricultural labourers were plantation workers employed in tea and coffee plantations. Historically, the tea industry has been the second largest employer in India. In tea plantations, 1.1 million workers were employed on a permanent basis and the number usually swelled after including casual labourers. The tea industry is about 172 years old and has been playing a pivotal role in terms of contribution to national economy and in the life of workers.

It was almost 175 years ago that the race for growing tea in India began. In the year 1815, an Englishman, Mr. Robert Bruce, is said to have noticed that people in Assam drank a kind of brew made from the leaves of a locally grown plant. It was later in the year 1823, when Major Robert Bruce met with a Singpho King, and was offered tea as a medicinal drink and managed to send some samples of the plant to East India Company's Botanical Garden in Calcutta to get confirmation about tea. The result of the identification was not disclosed for some reason then. Again, Lieutenant Charlton in the year 1831 was refused the identity of the plant when he sent some samples to the Agriculture and Horticulture Society in Calcutta. Finally, Charles Alexander Bruce, brother of Major Robert Bruce, sent some samples in 1834 again, and during the same year on Christmas Eve, the confirmation of tea was declared, specifically called Assam Tea, scientifically *Camellia sinensis* (var. *Assamica*). It was later confirmed by East India Company's 'Tea Committee' that reported in 1934 that "...we are perfectly confident that Tea Plant (In upper Assam) which has been brought to light will be found capable under proper management, of being cultivated and with complete success for economical purposes, and that consequently the object of our labours may before long be fully realized (Information and Cultural Department, West Bengal Govt, 2001: 51) (for further details, consult the author's ICCSR report).

In 1838, the first Indian tea from Assam was sent to United Kingdom for public sale. In 1839, Charles Bruce sent a report to the Horticulture Society (Botanic Garden, Calcutta) where he stated that "...should what I have written on this new and interesting subject be of any benefit to the country and community at large, and help a little to impact the tea forward to enrich our own dominations, and pull down the haughty pride of China. I shall feel myself richly repaid for all the perils and danger and fatigue that I have undergone in the cause of British Indian Tea". Over the years, tea has emerged as the major cheapest beverage for domestic consumption in India. Major tea-growing areas in India are confined to Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Smaller quantities of tea are also grown in Karnataka, Tripura, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Arunachal Pradesh,

Manipur, Sikkim, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Bihar.

According to the Tea Industry (2002) Report, India exports on an average of 180 million kg of tea every year. The total net foreign exchange earned by Indian tea comes from north-eastern states like Assam and West Bengal mostly supported by states like Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, etc. The tea industry provides direct gainful employment to more than a million workers belonging to the backward and socially weaker sections of society. It is also a substantial foreign exchange earner and provides sizeable amounts of revenue to the State and the Central Exchequer. The Indian tea industry had (as on 18.12.2009) 1692 registered tea manufacturers, 2200 registered tea exporters, 5848 registered tea buyers and 9 tea auction centres. The size of tea plantations varied between 500 and 1200 acres. These plantations focus solely on the production of tea, to benefit from the economies of scale. These big plantations are owned by large companies and multinational corporations (MNCs). Table 1 gives the details of the acreage of tea estates.

However, since post-globalisation, Indian tea exports have been declining with an accompanying decline in foreign exchange earnings. Several reasons can be assigned to this decline e.g., till the 1970s, the United Kingdom was the major buyer of Indian tea, and since the 1980s, USSR became the largest buyer of Indian tea due to the existence of the trade agreement between India

Table 1: Distribution of tea estates by acreage

Size of registered tea estates (hectares)	Numbers (in %)
<10.12	98.2
10.12-50	0.4
50-100	0.2
100-200	0.3
200-400	0.5
>400	0.4

Source: V.N Reddy, Analysis of Tea Industry, Presented at the IUF India Tea Workers Meet, December, 2002

and erstwhile USSR accounting for more than 50% of the total tea exports till 1991 resulting in disadvantaged prices. Owing to the disintegration of USSR and abolition of the central buying mechanism, Indian tea exports suffered a further setback in 1992-1993. However, Indian tea exports to Russia/CIS countries recovered from the setback since 1993 under the Rupee Debt Repayment Route facilities between Russia and India. A depressed scenario again started after 2001 due to changes in consumption patterns, i.e., switch over from CTC to Orthodox as per consumers' preference in the international market and, thus, India lost the Russian market. During 2008-2009, the export share of major plantation commodities in India's total export was 1.7%, significantly low as compared with the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

At a domestic level, one of the major factors for creating crisis in tea plantations and thereafter leading to closures during 2000-2001 was a consistent decline in auction prices of Indian tea. The situation declined to an extent where the selling price (at an auction market) was much lesser than the cost of production, thereby making tea production non-remunerative. The downfall of the tea industry, from the year 2000 continued till 2007 and a large number of tea gardens were closed. This resulted due to lack of a proactive approach of Indian tea industrialists (owners), the indifferent role of the Tea Board, lack of intervention of states like West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Assam and failure of trade unions (particularly in West Bengal) to protect the interests of their constituents. It is important to mention here that the crisis hit small- and mid-range tea plantations severely. Big companies like Hindustan Lever Ltd, Tata Tea, Goenkas, etc., dominated the auction market and were not affected much by the prolonged crisis. These companies, on the contrary, enhanced their profit margins during this period (2000-2008) as per various indicators. Furthermore, the declining price of tea at the primary commodity level could not reduce the price of value added or packaged tea segment. Thus, consumers were paying a high price to purchase tea off the shelf (CEC 2003; NRPPD Report 2010) in spite of lowered auctioned prices.

THE TEA INDUSTRY IN NORTH BENGAL (WEST BENGAL): AN OVERVIEW OF DOOARS/JALPAIGURI

North Bengal is situated in the north of Bangladesh and West Bengal and partly includes Darjeeling hills. The Hoogly River divides West Bengal into South and North Bengal, which are further divided again into Terai and Dooars regions.

The history of the Dooars is very old. According to the current historical research carried out by Dr. Sailen Debnath (2002), an eminent scholar of the region, the Dooars was the seat of the medieval Kamath Kingdom. Kamatapur was a sovereign state right from the middle of the seventh century. It is said that Nalrajar Garh in Chilapata Forest was the earliest capital of Kamatapur; and later due to upheavals it was shifted to Maynaguri, and then to Prithu Rajar Garh before it finally moved to Gosanimari, an ancient port town since the seventh century. Kamatapur was devastated by Hussain Shah of Gaur in 1494, leading to the Koch kingdom, later the Dooars under the leadership of Vishwa Singha. Hingulavas near Mahakalguri in the Dooars was the earliest capital of the Koch kingdom, later shifted to Atharakota and finally to the present Cooch Behar town. Taking advantage of the weakness of the Koch Kingdom over the years, Bhutan took possession of the Dooars (Debnath 2002). Historically, the Dooars region was controlled by the Kingdom of Bhutan when the British annexed it in 1865 after the Bhutan War under the command of Captain Hediya Ali. The area was divided into two parts; the eastern part was merged with Golpara in Assam, whereas the western part was turned into a new district, namely Western Dooars.

Again in the year 1869, the name was changed to Jalpaiguri District. Some part of the region was the western part of the Kamarapura kingdom that later gave rise to the Kamata kingdom in the thirteenth century. The most important dynasty that ruled this kingdom was that of Koch Dynasty. Maharaja Biswa Singh's ancestor was Haria Mandal, an indigenous chieftain of the Koch tribe. The western portion of this kingdom, Koch Bihar, remained unaffected by the great changes that overtook its surrounding provinces in the decade following the

Table 2: Percentage contribution of Northeast India in tea production

Year	Northeast India		South India		All India production (in tons)
	Percentage	Production	Percentage	Production	
2005	73.45903	374.81	26.54097	135.42	510.23
2006	73.03785	364.51	26.96215	134.56	499.07
2007	74.236	381.87	25.764	132.53	514.4
2008	71.43406	390.28	28.56594	156.07	546.35
2009	72.6351	376.09	27.3649	141.69	517.78
Total	72.93988	1887.56	27.06012	700.27	2587.83

Source: Indian Tea Board, 2010.

battle of Plassey in 1757. However, it was invaded in the latter half of the eighteenth century, prompting a formal treaty of alliance with the British in 1775. At the end of British rule in India in 1947, the state acceded into the dominion of India and merged with the Union of India in 1949 (ibid). The oldest and the most established tea industry in North Bengal and even in India is in the Dooars, which includes Jalpaiguri as a major centre. Tea cultivation and procuring is also the major agro-industrial sector in North Bengal (ibid). Tea alone generates an annual turnover of 8 million USD, which is more than the turnover of the tourism industry (Tea Industry Report 2011) in this area. There are around 350 tea gardens in the North Bengal region, which provide employment to about 3.5 lakh people. These gardens produce around 200 million kg of tea out of the total 830 million kg produced annually in India. At present, large-scale tea plantations in the areas are 277, whereas small growers are approximately 2500 and bought-leaf factories are about 70 in numbers (ibid).

The northeast has always held a significant position in the production and sales of tea in the auctions market of India (Table 2). These regions especially North Bengal, Kolkatta, Siligudi and Jalpaiguri together have been leading in production and sales of tea collectively when clubbed with Northeast India and compared with Northeast India's contributions vis-a vis ALL India (Table 3). A perusal of the data in the following tables corroborates the findings:

As is obvious from the above data, Bengal has a pivotal place in the production of tea in India especially in the

Table 3: Percentage of West Bengal contribution vis-a-vis that of northeast in all India's sale value of tea

Year	Percentage of Northeast India
2005	80.49383675
2006	79.44047045
2007	81.16568413
2008	78.23348203
2009	79.00503387
Total sale value (%)	79.48925505

Source: Indian Tea Board, 2010.

northeast. The tea industry in this region not only provides economic stability but also plays a major role in contributing towards the employment and social life being an enclave economy.

PLANTATIONS: AN ENCLAVE ECONOMY

A plantation economy is characterised by a large congregation of workers all employed in the production of one particular type of crop. Thus, a plantation economy is often referred to as an enclave economy as it is characterised by certain types of activities, which are self-sustaining and self-sufficient predominantly based on one kind of economic activity. This activity can give birth to allied business activities like packaging, transportation and small informal markets to meet the requirements of basic needs of the people in these areas. An **enclave economy** like plantations is a small world, which could be similar to the labour to their home environment yet blended with the local culture and

traditions (for further details of enclave economy, refer the ICSSR report).

FOCUS OF THIS RESEARCH PAPER

This research was undertaken to learn, document and identify empirical evidences and experiences of women workers in tea gardens, who lost their livelihood due to closure of the gardens in the Jalpaiguri District of North Bengal, with a special focus on the ramifications of the closure on their living and life.

According to the District Magistrate, Jalpaiguri (reported at the end of 2003), there were 183 tea gardens in the Jalpaiguri District. Of these, twenty-two were closed/abandoned or sick. However, on the basis of availability, convenience and willingness of workers in these gardens, a total of four gardens were selected for this study out of the closed gardens in the district. The major emphasis of this research was on identifying the hardships caused to women workers due to loss of livelihood resulting out of closure of gardens. This study included the size of the gardens, the work force, history of the plantations, process of the closure, their impact on emerging life situations of women workers, role of trade unions and functioning of Joint Management Committees in the closed gardens as major aspects of the analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed at developing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of 'loss of jobs' on affected women workers in tea plantations. It was based more on *an interpretative approach*, using observation and in-depth interaction with women workers as one of the major tools. The workers' experiences in their real-life situations post closure was documented and considered a major source of primary information. **Convenience sampling** was used for surveying the affected workers.

CLOSURE OF TEA GARDENS AND RESULTANT LIVELIHOOD CRISIS IN JALPAIGURI, NORTH BENGAL, DURING THE YEARS 2000-2008

In the last few years, the pivotal role of tea plantations in providing stable and sustainable livelihood to tribal and other communities has tremendously dwindled. The tea industry in West Bengal, mainly Jalpaiguri and

Darjeeling districts (North Bengal), has been facing turbulence since 2001. The tea industry in general had to go through crisis emanating out of high competition, price wars in the global markets. This led to retrenchment and lay-off of workers, and closure of several tea gardens in this region due to their inability to compete. A total of twenty-two gardens closed down during the years 2001-2004 (refer Table 5), severely hitting the workforce especially women and brought many more gardens on the verge of closure (District Magistrate Report 2004).

**Table 4: Closed tea gardens, North Bengal
(highlighted gardens are part of this study)**

S No.	Name of the tea estate	Location (block)
1	Looksan Tea Estate	Nagrakata
2	Carron Tea Estate	Nagrakata
3	Red Bank Tea Estate	Dhuguri
4	Surendranagar Tea Estate	Dhuguri
5	Dharanipur Tea Estate	Nagrakata
6	Raipur Tea Estate	Sadar
7	Kathalguri Tea Estate	Dhuguri
8	Chinchula Tea Estate	Kalchini
9	Ramjhora Tea Estate	Madarihat – Birpara
10	Bamandanga and Tondoo Tea Estate	Nagrakata
11	Majherdabri Tea Estate	Alipur Doar 2
12	Chamurchi Tea Estate	Dhuguri
13	Samsing Tea Estate	Matiali
14	Raimatang Tea Estate	Kalchini
15	Dheklapara Tea Estate	Madarihat – Birpara
16	Rahimabad Tea Estate	Birpara
17	Srinathpur Tea Estate	Alipur duar 2
18	Mujnai Tea Estate	Birpara
20	Kohinoor	Alipur Duar
21	Jogesh Chandra Tea Estate	Mal
22	Toorsa Tea Estate	Kalchini
23	Bhamonbari	Jalpaiguri
24	Kalchini Tea Estate	Kalchini block

Source: Tea Garden Association, 2009

Table 5: Dues of workers of closed tea gardens (highlighted gardens are part of this study)

Name of the garden	Provident Fund	Gratuity	Salary/Wages and Others	Total
Looksan TE	7704792	1198614.79	19889644.96	28793051.75
Carron TE	6998633	834240.15	9184551.46	17017424.61
Red Bank TE	9524000	5757300	20048700	35330000
Surendranagar TE	3250400	2359700	6977700	12587800
Dharanipur TE	3321500	1687600	6680200	11689300
Raipur TE	4500000	3300000	7610000	15410000
Chinchula TE	10595111	2219629	10388981.92	23203721.92
Ramjhora TE	6827667	1385147	3817934	12030748
Bamandanga Tondoo TE	12516636	1524439.1	1000000	15041075.1
Chamurchi TE	9214317	4234260.06	24729215.3	38177792.36
Samsing TE	18600627	10000000	not known	28600627
Raimatang TE	16899938	2809628	19033586	38743152
Dheklapara TE	8100000	1100000	1455000	10655000
Kalchini TE	15616564	2685093.25	31249112.21	49550769.46
Kohonoor TE	4983238	3079281.68	5883496.18	13946015.86
Mujnai TE	5349408	1501829.88	6775937.59	13627175.47
Srinathpur TE	800000	500000	320000	1620000
Rahimabad TE	40000	30000	150000	220000
TOTAL	144842831	46206762.91	175194059.62	366243653.53
Dues per worker	8439.74	2692.39	10208.25	21340.38
No. of months of wages	6.56	2.09	7.93	16.58

Source: Tea Garden Association, 2007.

Between the years 2002 and 2004, the industry went through a severe phase of crisis as owners of tea plantations claimed that the falling exports of Indian tea had resulted in massive losses and lack of demand. To cope with the situation, they resorted to wage cuts and retrenchment of workers. Lockouts were also enforced by plantations on workers in the years 2003 and 2004 to cope with the situation. In the Jalpaiguri District alone closure rendered 21,000 permanent workers jobless and affected about 95,000 people. Each of the gardens reported massive liabilities owed to the workers. In eighteen gardens (as per the information collected by the researcher), workers were to be paid together Rs. 144,842,831.00 as Provident Fund arrears (both employers and employees share), Rs. 46,206,762.91 as

gratuity and Rs.175, 194,059.62 as salary, wages and other benefits (refer Table 5). The total dues to workers was Rs.366,243,653.53, amounting to Rs.21,340 per head or about 17 months of wages at of Rs. 45.90 per day (Source: Indian Tea Garden Association (ITA) 2009, North Bengal section). These lockouts were illegal as no prior notices were given to the workers. The Payment of Wages Act, 1936, and other labour laws were also violated, as the owners failed to settle workers' dues.

Surprisingly, many owners simply abandoned tea gardens and absconded. Workers were left behind to fend for themselves with no means of earning a livelihood, as they had no expertise or capital to run a tea garden on their own. The closure of the gardens cut them off from the outside world aggravating their livelihood issues due

to uncertainty. This led to hunger, starvation, electricity and water disconnection due to non-payment and a struggle to survive in drudgery. This situation exposed vulnerable women workers to trafficking agents. Many families were fooled by them and also lost their children to trafficking. The abysmal economic situation can be observed even in open tea gardens where workers survived in destitute living conditions. The owners by claiming losses and cutting down on employee benefits that they were supposed to provide inflicted further misery on them (for details, refer the ICSSR report of the author).

Along with the plantation owners, the Central and State Governments also were liable for their inaction and apathy towards poor workers. The government had failed in setting up a committee to revise the minimum wages for workers since 1957. It also failed in ensuring that the rights of workers were not violated. Failure of trade unions, their multiplicity/rivalry and conflicts also led to lack of action on their part to confront issues of closed gardens and help workers survive. Poor bargaining power and confused ideology for vested political motives led workers to mistrust these age-old unions, particularly associated/represented by the Central or State government political establishment.

Starvation deaths were common and intermittently discussed and reported in plantations. In January 2004, a report on the situation in tea plantations was filled in the Supreme Court as part of a Writ Petition 196/2001 (a case on the Right to Food and Work). This led the government to take specific measures to provide food and work to workers in closed gardens. In addition, special efforts were also made by the administration to find new employers or to persuade old employers to reopen plantations. Repeated visits were made to the closed tea plantations on behalf of the Supreme Court to monitor whether the government was actually implementing schemes and programmes for the survival of the workers that it had promised to deliver in the plantations. Those who visited these pockets of unemployment near starvation felt that neither the government nor the major mainstream political parties were much concerned. This apathy made workers lose hope and faith in the efforts to help them stay alive.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CLOSURE IN AN ENCLAVE ECONOMY

Closure of a tea garden has always been a double-edged sword. The common perception is that when tea-plucking stops, thousands lose their jobs. In reality, tea leaf-processing activities stop too and tea-factory workers also lose their jobs in hundreds. The years 2001-2005 were the worst phase of the tea industry in North Bengal as low prices at tea auctions, insufficient capital for modernisation, fall in production, surplus workers, huge 'non-productive' expenses towards wage and benefits, etc., compelled many small- and medium-sized planters either to abscond overnight leaving their workers and gardens unattended or to declare a closure. As an offshoot of the market downfall, the attitude of garden owners also changed in the last one decade and they handed over on lease the gardens to the 'promoters/operators' who had no prior experience in this industry. These mercenaries were driven by motives of profit within a short span of time (for details, see the ICSSR report).

The new contractors (promoters) resorted to methods that maximised profit, but were detrimental to the tea industry. They used excess fertilisers and pesticides to enhance leaf production, which adversely affected the soil and the capacity of bushes in the long run and shorten the production cycle. They neither looked after the existing bushes nor did they take up fresh planting activities. Crores of rupees that they got from the Tea Board (Government of India) and as loans from banks and financial institutions were siphoned off. Whereas it was mandatory to submit production figures to the Tea Board as per the Indian Tea Act, 1953, these owners defaulted intentionally or submitted fabricated figures. Tacitly supported by the State Administration, these new set of operators never bothered about workers but always intended to open more and more gardens to make fast money. As a result of the new people taking over the gardens, tea-plucking activities resumed while the factories remained closed and turned into graveyards. Machines were removed as 'junk' while sponsored pilferage was rampant (NESPON 2007). Many closed gardens were reopened by these mercenaries during the period 2003-2005 in order to make a quick buck. Table

Table 6: List of closed and reopened tea gardens in North Bengal (2003-2005) (highlighted gardens are part of this study)

Name of the tea estate	Status on 15 September 2005	Date of closure	Date of reopening	Period of closure
Looksan Tea Estate	Under liquidation		Under liquidation	Not known
Red Bank Tea Estate	Abandoned	March 2003	Managed by OMC	Do
Surendranagar Tea Estate	Abandoned	March 2003	Managed by OMC	Do
Chamurchi Tea Estate	Closed	April 2004	Closed	Closed for 1 year and 5 months
Ramjhora Tea Estate	Closed	10 August 2002	Closed	Closed for 3 years and 1 months
Kathalguri Tea Estate	Closed	22 July 2002	Closed	Closed for 3 years and 2 months
Dheklapara Tea Estate	Reopened	22 August 2003	Closed	Closed for 3 years; reopened recently
Carron Tea Estate	Reopened	August 2003	11 February 2004	6 months
Dharanipur Tea Estate	Reopened	March 2003	February 2005	1 year and 11 months
Raipur Tea Estate	Reopened	17 October 2003	10 March 2005	1 year and 5 months
Chinchula Tea Estate	Reopened	20 November 2003	25 June 2004	7 months
Bamandanga and Tondoo Tea Estate	Reopened	16 September 2003	17 June 2004	9 months
Majherdabri Tea Estate	Reopened	19 January 2003	16 January 2004	1 year
Samsing Tea Estate	Reopened	25 November 2002	19 March 2004	1 year and 4 months
Raimatang Tea Estate	Reopened	1 October 2003	3 March 2004	5 months
Kalchini Tea Estate	Reopened	1 October 2003	3 March 2004	6 months
Kohinoor Tea Estate	Reopened	10 April 2003	7 January 2004	9 months
Mujnai Tea Estate	Reopened	14 April 2004	11 October 2004	6 months
Srinathpur Tea Plantation	Reopened	31 August 2002	11 January 2005	5 months
Rahimabad Tea Estate	Reopened	17 April 2002	4 May 2004	2 years and 1 month
Jogesh Chandra Tea Estate	Reopened	22 April 2003	8 May 2005	2 years and 1 month
Toorsa Tea Estate	Reopened	October 2001	8.12.2003	15 days

Source: Tea Garden Association, 2007.

7 below gives the data relating to opening–closure–reopening resorted by these mercenaries.

As can be surmised from the preceding data (Table 6), frequent closures, reopening or re-closure instilled a feeling of high insecurity among thousands of workers in these gardens. Unpredictability of jobs and loss of livelihood drove workers into depression and migration to other states (mainly all major cities in the country). Their past experience was that being at a meagre subsistence level, if they did not move, they were destined to face starvation, illness led untimely death or suicide. These observations of the researcher are in

consonance with findings of several earlier studies (Action Aid Report 2004; IUF 2005; NESPOL 2007).

IMPACT OF CLOSED TEA GARDENS ON WOMEN LABOUR FORCE: FEW OBSERVATIONS

The impact of loss of livelihood was severe especially on women workers as out of total workforce about 52% were women planters in this belt (Bhawmik, 2004; Talwar *et al.* 2005). These women have been extensively involved in plantations work for their livelihood for many decades. Surprisingly enough, they have been kept

away from active unionisation (Talwar et al. 2005) all these years. In many cases of small gardens, they were not paid sanctioned wage rates, reproductive and medical benefits. Owing to the closure of gardens, thousands of them lost their primary means of livelihood as planters. A significant number of them were the sole bread earners of their families and faced starvation and premature deaths due to loss of means of livelihood. According to a report based on a medical survey (Action Aid Report 2004), the number of deaths due to starvation had increased substantially after the closure of tea estates, adding to the miseries of the mountain life full of hardships. It has been reported that the average calorific intake of an individual dropped from a high of 2,763 calories per day, when the estates were operational, to a low of 203 calories per day. The above study further reported that the workers were found severely underweight due to malnutrition, and lost the energy for physical work and mobility. A huge increase in the consumption of tea flowers, wild tubers and bamboo shoots was reported, in extreme cases, a few children were fed with only water (CRY 2004; Mitra 2004). The crisis of closure of these tea gardens endangered social and community life in the mountains, manifested in increasing violence both at the domestic level and at the workplaces. Growing incidents of stealing and quite a few cases of rape, murder, girls trafficking, etc., were reported in gardens like Ramjhora Tea Estate, Birpara Tea Estate, Lankapara, Dimdima, Tea Garden, etc. (Birpara Police Station Data 2010). In the event of job loss or uncertainty, there was a lot of out-migration from the plantations to towns in the vicinity and urban centres, leading to new squatter settlements in Darjeeling city and in other neighbouring towns (Sarkar and Lama 1986).

Unimaginable misery was inflicted on women workers for no fault of theirs by the closure of gardens as their livelihood got snatched, and as they were already below the sustainable level of existence they were driven to desperate means to keep their body and soul together. This overt failure of the public as well as private systems of employment and apathy of the State machinery, NGOs and so-called other leaders (socio-political) to the devastation which these workers and their families

underwent including the psycho-physical trauma was unparalleled with any other experiences in their life.

Under the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREGA) scheme, workers were entitled to get 100 days work. However, during field visits, it was observed that these work sites that were scattered in several places across the garden and surroundings GP (Gram Panchayat) and forest areas were often meaningless. It could be construed as symbolically implemented to meet the requirements of the scheme (NAREGA). At places where people needed work the most, it was not available, signifying half-hearted implementation. Getting the promised 'work for 100 days an year' is a far-off dream. At the ground level people said, "We were getting work" even when in reality they got 20-80 days, instead of 100, during a year. However, 100 days full work was also made available but at a few places. Some construction or collecting sands from the river bed, a few culverts in the forests were constructed more to show that agencies created some work, whereas this manpower could have been utilised for actual developmental work or infrastructural improvement. Furthermore, while introducing the schemes, hundreds of people died in these gardens during the closure and hundreds of them left for work elsewhere to earn a livelihood to support their families, which were left behind in the gardens. NAREGA's 100-day programme was not effectively implemented in the plantations including the four gardens (Ramjhora, Kathalguri, Kalchini and Raimatang) covered under this study. However, NAREGA had the potential to substantially benefit the garden labour if it was executed properly through grass root level of governance (GP). Interestingly, there was no campaign or publicity of the scheme to create awareness among actual beneficiaries (displaced workers). Eventually, it became another 'instrument of relief' in the hands of political parties, bureaucrats and the Panchayats to play with. It resulted more as a scheme for further dehumanising the downtrodden and an attempt as perceived by the researcher to replace rights by relief (dole).

In an area where the annual starvation deaths were on a rise, it was expected that 'Below Poverty Level' or BPL

cards would be made easily available to the affected populace. However, surprisingly, on enquiring it was found that not even 25% of the residents were issued these cards, which could have given them some hope to survive. It was also found that the rate of food grains sold to BPL cards holders was the same as charged for the non-BPL customers. Holders of BPL cards were entitled to free treatment through the nearest government hospitals/dispensary or healthcare centres. By denying cards to below BPL persons, they were deprived even of the legal social security benefits to which they were entitled (consult of other ICSSR report).

Medical relief was mostly run by civil society initiatives like welfare organisations since rural health centres were scarce in plantations. Implementation of the National Old Age Pension (NOAP) Scheme was also lopsided as many destitute elderly persons never heard or benefited from this scheme. The researcher hypothesises that most of the governmental schemes look very good in intention and on paper but were very poorly disseminated and implemented. It is a subject matter for further research and even investigation by the concerned authorities.

Closure and sickness in North Bengal particularly in the Terai-Dooars region of West Bengal, malnutrition, starvation deaths, disease, joblessness and child (especially girls) trafficking were not newsworthy any longer. Rights of the workers were slipping away only to be replaced by the current buzz word – ‘RELIEF’. The NGOs, some silently and some conspicuously, did their bit. The government also provided several relief (**NREGA, FAWLOI, BPL card issuance, etc.**) **schemes, yet the crisis had already converged into catastrophic proportions and was spreading faster than implementation of relief measures.** In a crisis of such magnitude, the need for relief cannot be undermined and those providing it were probably doing so from their genuine humanitarian concerns.

Among twelve labour lines (a labour line means a row of houses/quarters of the workers and their families) in Ramjhora Garden, the supply of water and electricity was not available. However, with the help of an NGO, a self-help group and Public Health Engineering (PHE) in 2008, water taps were installed but were not located at

convenient distances (enclosed Annexure). Moreover, the quantity of water supplied was not adequate to meet the basic needs of the workers and their families. The water crisis was atypical across all closed gardens and sometimes in a few open gardens as well.

To mention the intervention of civil society, particularly, NGOs, CRY (Child Rights and You), Kolkata had partnered with local NGOs called Jagaron and Swadhikar, which were fighting for empowerment of workers in tea gardens and against violations of their rights. The environmental issue was also a key concern particularly in villages located in forests and facing elephant/human encounters. Uttar Bangal Jharkhandi Sangharsh Samity, a local trade union with a strong presence in the Kalchini tea gardens of Jalpaiguri, was handling a project of Swadhikar. The live project helped us understand the structure under which the NGOs were operating. An NGO with a national or an international presence generally operated in a particular area in collaboration with a local NGO of that area (Birpara and Kalchini Block). The local NGOs were specialised to operate in the area, whereas the national NGOs provided the backing of large resources and infrastructure. In this case, Swadhikar and Jagaron were the local NGOs operating in the Jalpaiguri area. They carried out all activities at the ground level, while **CRY** (an international NGO) was providing them financial support. Sometimes, NGOs tend to get bogged down by issues that they are advocating and failed to look at the macro picture and the constraints faced by various stakeholders. It is important to consider the position of all stakeholders. In this case, we observed that the owners and managers had their own constraints to work with and it was difficult for us to make a definite judgement about the owners.

In fact, the government has almost realised that tea garden owners were bearing a lot of social costs for the plantation workers and were contemplating to share around 50% of it. Similarly, accusing public system managers and the government of negligence without understanding the constraints that they work in by NGOs would be unfair. It is true that India strives to be a welfare state, but achieving it is a far cry with insurmountable

constraints. Instead of pointing fingers, NGOs should try to work in collaboration with the public system departments and the private sector to better serve the interests of workers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aforementioned observation asserts an overt display of power politics, trans-generational poverty and neglect of sustainable means of livelihood, wretched conditions of living of the labour class, failure of the state to protect labour interest, vested interest of trade union leaders, owners and managers, lack of means of education and skill acquisition, poor governance at the local level, and interplay of all these factors resulted in extremely poor conditions of survival for tea garden workers, a majority of whom were women labourers. The descriptions of the prevailing conditions in tea gardens vividly bring out the wretchedness of living in these places and the continuous struggle for survival in spite of all the odds stacked against life.

Basic amenities like housing, electricity and drinkable water supply were inadequate. Poor hygienic conditions including drainage and sanitary system in the labour lines (dilapidated residence for workers) caused water-borne diseases like gastroenteritis and cholera, diarrhoea, etc. throughout the year. A sizable percentage of workers suffered from anaemia, tuberculosis and malaria confirming poor malnutrition and vulnerability while living in the lap of nature. It was described by the village folks and workers in the gardens that harsh working conditions, low calorie intake, drinking habit among the adhvasis/workers rarely left 1% of the population in tea gardens active after 60 years of age.

While visiting the open gardens during field visits, what intrigued the researcher's mind was that workers applying pesticides were not provided with protective uniforms or masks to protect themselves from the ill effects, and it could be dangerous for their chest (lungs) and stomach as well. Mostly adhvasi workers at the end of the day were happy with "hariya" (a local Brue) and a little frugal meal at night. Since colonisation, the lifestyle in the gardens has remained just the same, frugal and simple. These workers were exploited many a times (as candidly shared by the non-workers (staff) in informal

discussions) as supervisors would often reject quite a few kilograms of tea leafs from the collected lot by a worker and therefore reduce their wages as these were linked to the weight of collected leaves and there was no mechanism to protect the workers. The extraction of additional work during the peak season of plucking (which was on an average of 200 kgs during February) was usually not paid to these women workers. For temporary workers, any small act of indiscipline against management led to denial of work and subsidies for a period of a week or more.

Education for workers' children was available till primary level only, and beyond this there was no support or avenues enabling these to complete school education. Furthermore, the medium followed in the school was Hindi or Bengali, which forced children to discontinue education as it was not their specific (tribal) mother tongue spoken at their home and by community, thus resulting in seclusion from the mainstream education. In addition, their ethnicity and social marginalisation prevented them from accessing reservation facilities in educational institutions. Workers trans-generationally have remained tied to the tea gardens, and their fate seems to be akin to the bonded labour even though not labelled so officially. Many children were forced to shift to the main township like Birpara or Shiliguri to do informal unskilled job like helpers and gatekeepers. Rarely a family's child was enrolled in a graduate programme, which was more out of volition and self-help rather than any aid/help from the community or the plantation owners or the government.

Interestingly, cohesion among the communities was non-existent and economic and ethnic factors dominated their life and divided them, thus leading to subclasses within a generic class called the working class in the tea gardens. In other words 'haves' vs 'have-nots' was the situation leading this community to fragmentation and segmentation. Endowed with geographical separation, fragmented ownership structure and subdivisions among themselves evoked many 'anti-isms' suiting the government, the local administration, owners and unions.

The researcher faced a precarious situation, which was predominantly hostile and full of unexplainable tensions,

doubts, frustration and lack of trust in the gardens due to loss of livelihood resulting from frequent closures. Why interview? Why even talk; what will happen after that? What has happened so far? How was this study going to help them immediately? These were the questions asked to the researcher and her team. As such the pre-determined methodology required revision, and hence, convenience sampling was brought in, self-help groups and trade unions were contacted and also snowball or referral techniques were used to reach out to the actors to collect primary information for this project. This study was conducted during the political and economic crisis resulting out of loss of livelihood due to mismanagement, frauds, greed and aftermath of globalisation and the failure of various agencies to save workers from the clutches of disaster after disaster.

An interesting observation the researcher would like to mention here is that through analysis of newspapers, interviews and watching local news channels during field visits, it became obvious that during the crisis period, a series of 'high'-level committees were constituted, meetings were held at the state and central level and bureaucrats visited the 'affected' areas of North Bengal tea gardens. The Honourable Central Minister, the Chief Secretary and top-level Tea Board officials were part of the visits, which rendered no relief to workers. News of reopening of gardens with 'central assistance' made rounds after rounds and captured main titles of all prime news channels and news papers (Telegraph, Star Ananda news Channel, etc.) in North Bengal; this appeared more like a publicity blitz. Hundreds of crores was promised to be in the pipeline for the gardens. It reminds the researcher of the age old cliché — "making an industry sick was a profitable business". Large disbursements by the Left Government also happened quite a few times to address the crisis but miserably failed to reach the real beneficiaries and made no dent on their life situation.

The researcher observed here that over the decades, the response of our polity and bureaucracy to confront challenges of mass suffering has more or less remain static: announce visits, constitute committees, rope in unions, declare relief packages, impress media that everybody is concerned about the sufferers and give

some speeches in the affected areas, have photo shoots and then move on to the next crisis believing the earlier one has been controlled or has gone away. Perhaps we need to learn that wishful thinking and real actions are two different things and peoples' sufferings cannot be wished away by banking simply on theoretical inputs. Our handling of crisis of any kind in society is replete with examples of our above approach to tackle them. Amazingly, no real/final data were available about the closed gardens, workers who lost livelihood or schemes for beneficiary with multiple agencies supposed to provide the same for policy making. What were the complete policy plans and strategy to capture and to intervene in the crisis? Lack of availability of the past managements profile of these units; frequent reasons of closure and change in ownerships; actual amounts of outstanding dues/loans, etc. were not available in the public domain at all (e.g., Kathalguri).

The malaise seems to be much deeper than a simple loss of livelihood on closure of a garden. Focusing on reopening of a garden through providing finance was like missing the wood for trees. Reopening in itself was important, but it was probably not going to resolve any real issues unless all the other attended problems were suitably addressed. The questions benignly raised in this study may seem academic, but they in fact have socio-economic politico ramifications. The plight of the workers especially women and the industry was very precarious. A chunk of this industry has always been in a state of flux in the last more than a decade, bordering on chaos and disorder. Planters were adamant not to adhere to the wages and benefits to be provided to the workers under PLA, as it resulted in lesser profits and more liabilities. According to them, PLA was a main hurdle not permitting them unbridled power to run the gardens the way they wanted to even by denying the basic minimum wage and living conditions. If trends are to be believed based on our experience during field work, PLA is viewed as an obstruction rather than benefactor of workers. A sad state of affairs as PLA is more violated than enforced in the gardens.

The most prominent factors perpetuating turbulence in the tea industry emerging out of this study were:

declining influence and role of trade unions in industry and workers' life situations, political rivalries, squabbling and shifts in party politics, fragmentation of and rapid changes in ownership leading to lack of accountability and concern for gardens upkeep and maintenance, uncared and un-nurtured bushes in the gardens for years, low levels of productivity, widening gap among workers' unity due to ethnic conflicts, political affiliations and short-term gains, disputes on chronically sick and closed gardens among tripartite committees, inefficient handling of whatever meagre recourses, frequent closure–reopening–closure leading to extreme uncertainty among women workers and loss of livelihood, conditions of abject poverty and consequent shortening of life span, sicknesses both fatal and nonfatal, a variety of exploitation on and off by powerful actors and hopelessness, as well as helplessness among the workers.

The researcher suggests that to find a way forward out of this monumental mess, the government with the Indian Tea Association should constitute a study group comprising prominent citizens, legal minds, social activists and big players from the tea industry like TATA to provide actionable guidelines after field visits and confabulations with women workers and families. These should be implemented by the civil society, i.e., an NGO or a one-man Commission of Supreme Court Judge appointed by the Centre with adequate infrastructure and powers to save this industry from further ruining degeneration and precious lives and livelihood of poor working women in plantations..

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