

Study on Livelihood Crisis and Socio-economic Condition of Tea Garden Workers in Dooars of West Bengal

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Abstract

The tea industry in India is one of the most important agro-based industries in terms of generating local employment and earning foreign exchange. The state of West Bengal (WB) contributes the majority of tea produced in India. The Dooars region, which is located in the Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts of WB, is home to several tea estates where the majority of tea is grown, produced, and processed. The terrain of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, which are located at foothills of the Eastern Himalaya, is dotted with hundreds of verdant green tea gardens and several meandering rivers. The tea gardens are located throughout these two districts and employ a sizable portion of the local population, who are mostly from rural areas and heavily represented in the SC and ST communities. There is a total of 64 tea gardens in the Alipurduar District and 120 tea gardens in the Jalpaiguri District. However, a serious humanitarian catastrophe and several other serious crises still exist behind the scenes in the production of this well-known beverage. Over the past few decades, owing to various socio-economic factors, many tea gardens in Dooars region have been abandoned or shut down. Due to their usual sources of income being lost, the tea garden workers are now at great risk of starvation and malnutrition, putting them in a state of dire socioeconomic calamity. There are hardly any alternative employment opportunities for the jobless tea workers in and around the locality except irregular jobs such as stone crushing, tree leaves collection, daily labour in urban and semi-urban localities etc. As reported, workers are now feeling unconfident regarding their livelihood security in the tea gardens of Dooars. Due to the catastrophic consequences, a considerable segment of the tea garden labour force is presently relocating to other states to sustain their livelihoods. A thorough field study was conducted to evaluate the socioeconomic conditions of the tea garden workers in Dooars and to pinpoint their current livelihood crisis. It also aimed to identify the various factors those were responsible for their current lack of livelihood security, as well as the primary factors that drove their tendency to migrate away from the Dooars tea gardens where they were employed for generations. It was also recommended that in order to maintain the Dooars tea industry in West Bengal, necessary corrective action be taken to eliminate the livelihood migration propensity of the tea garden workers in the region and to enhance their socioeconomic conditions.

Keywords: Tea Plantation; Tea Gardens; Tea Workers; Dooars Region; Livelihood Migration.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, tea is the most widely consumed and least expensive beverage. India has long held the title of largest tea consumer in the world, consuming around 25% of all tea produced worldwide. West Bengal (WB) and Assam produce 78% of the total quantity of tea produced in India, making it the world's second-largest tea producer behind China (Shaktan, 2016). Nearly thirty per cent of the world's tea production is exported from our dear nation, which ranks fourth in the world. Approximately 35 lakh Indians work in over 1,500 tea estates throughout the country, both directly and indirectly (Shaktan, 2016). The growing and manufacturing of tea is one of the most important agro-based sectors in India in terms of creating jobs domestically and earning foreign exchange. WB is a significant producer of tea and a major source of domestic employment in India's tea sector. In the Dooars region, which falls under the districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar in WB, a significant amount of tea has been planted, grown, produced, and processed in various tea gardens. Although Alipurduar had previously been a subdivision within the Jalpaiguri district, the old district was split into two in 2014. The western portion of the split district is now known as Jalpaiguri, keeping the name of the prior undivided district unchanged. The eastern portion of the split district was created as a new district called Alipurduar. The total area of the undivided Jalpaiguri district was 6,245 sq. km., of which tea gardens constituted 1,987 sq. km. (Chowdhury, 2019). In Dooars region of WB, there are 64 tea estates in Alipurduar District (Alipurduar District, 2021) and 120 tea estates in Jalpaiguri District (Jalpaiguri District, 2021).

These two sub-Himalayan districts are primarily comprised of rural population with higher proportion of scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST). The majority of the tribal tea workers working in Dooars region were initially transported there by the British from the Chota Nagpur Plateau to serve as labourers in the tea gardens which were owned by the British at that time. As consequence, the most potential labour force of the tea industry in Dooars region of WB is Adivasi workers.

But in the background, a grave humanitarian crisis is still playing out in the Dooars region of WB, the home of this hugely popular beverage. Over the past few decades, owing to various serious socio-economic issues such as inferior quality of tea production, absence of minimum support price (MSP) for tea in the domestic market, fluctuation of tea prices in national and international markets, stiff competition from other countries, mismanagement, workers' agitation etc., many tea gardens of the region had been abandoned or shut down. As an impact of economic liberalization in India from the early 90s, the tea industry in Dooars region witnessed its acute existence crisis. Due to fall in the production of ageing tea bushes and the production of inferior quality of tea, a good number of tea gardens in Dooars region either became sick or closed down after 2001. As per an estimate, more than 50 gardens were closed between the year 2000 to 2007 directly affecting a large section of tea garden workers (Basu, 2017). Such a hardnosed situation has really brought the tea garden workers in Dooars region of WB into a stage of dire socio-economic disaster by means of losing regular sources of income, which results in serious conditions in their lives including starvation and malnutrition. Even though the tea industry is hyped as the second largest employment provider in our country, but very unfortunately, this industry undermines the basic rights of tea garden workers and deprives workers and their families of mere basic needs in life. In many cases, tea garden workers bring a common complaint against the tea estate that the management is not at all considerate and compassionate about the severe financial crisis in their lives. On the other hand, there are hardly any alternative employment opportunities for the jobless tea plantation workers except for some irregular jobs such as stone crushing, tree leaf collection, daily labour in urban and semi-urban localities etc. The Tea Board continued to see the plantation problem solely from a marketing perspective, failing

to satisfy its responsibility to deal with the hard-hitting local conditions even though the centre had the authority to provide relief under the Tea Act of 1953 (Shaktan, 2016). According to the survey conducted by the Labour Dept., Govt. of West Bengal, in 2012, more than 1,000 people had died due to starvation since 2002 in 273 tea estates in West Bengal (Shaktan, 2016). Although the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, under which the majority of tea plantations were built, ensures that tea garden employees would receive guaranteed wages, housing, and medical care, but these are rarely made available in reality (Shaktan, 2016). In a nutshell, the basic rights of tea garden workers in Dooars region of WB are strongly neglected and they are still facing severe problems in their socio-economic life. As a dire consequence of age-old deprivation and negligence, a citable number of tea garden workers had been forced to migrate their livelihoods into alternate employment areas leaving the tea gardens of Dooars region of WB. In the words of an activist working at tea gardens in Dooars, “Tea gardens are also slowly fading along with every worker on the plantation who passes away” (Shaktan, 2016).

2. Background of the Study

Two centuries ago, when the East India Company began looking for an alternate source of tea supply on the international market to compete with Chinese tea, the cultivation of tea in India officially began. In the decade of 1840, English tea planters started the Bengali tea industry in the Darjeeling district. Following the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864-65, the English took control of a sizable portion of the Dooars region from the Bhutan empire (Sarkar S. C., 2013). Richard Haughton, the founder of the tea industry in the Jalpaiguri area, started tea gardening on the Tista River bank close to Gajoldoba in 1874 after the formation of the Jalpaiguri district in 1869. More than 150 tea gardens were grown up in Dooars from 1874 to 1930 (Sarkar S. C., 2013). It is evident that only a small number of the tea gardens belonged to the middle-class Bengali Babu of Jalpaiguri Town; whereas the majority of the tea gardens were owned by English planters (Bhowmik, 1981). The region's physical qualities were nearly completely altered throughout these years by the rapid expansion of tea growing. As a consequence, the majority of the ancient forest vanished, and Dooars' countryside was replaced mile after mile with tea plants (Sarkar S. C., 2013).

After the creation of numerous tea gardens in various areas of the Dooars region under the undivided Jalpaiguri district of WB, a huge number of the labour force was required. However, it was impossible to get enough locals to labour in the tea gardens to meet the demand (Sarkar S. C., 2013). Local people in the then Dooars region had not even shown their keen interest in working in the tea gardens. Initially, the local people of Dooars region hated to work in the tea garden. Moreover, the local people held enough bargaining scope due to the scarcity of working forces to work in tea gardens. During that time, the population density in these areas was likewise woefully inadequate (Sarkar S. C., 2013). Nearly all of the labourers hired during the first several years of the Dooars tea plantation operation were Nepalis from the nearby Darjeeling hill district. It quickly became apparent that the labour pool of Nepalis was insufficient to fulfil the expanding demands of the tea gardens (Sarkar S. C., 2013).

Under such a circumstance, the planters had to look elsewhere for the supply of labour force in the tea gardens of Dooars region. Within seven years after the first tea garden was established in Gajoldoba in 1874, a stream of tribal workforce from the Chhotanagpur plateau began migrating to the tea gardens of Dooars to escape from their dire economic situation. Under the direct control of the colonial state, this manifested as a sizable migration that was encouraged and planned by the tea planters of Assam and the two northern districts of Bengal (Sarkar S. C., 2013). In the years that followed, the population increased

quickly, and over time, a sizable immigrant labour force was developed. While a sizeable component of the labour force in the Dooars' hilly tea estates was still made up of Nepali immigrants from the Darjeeling district, the vast majority came from far-off Chhotanagpur and the Santal Parganas (Sarkar S. C., 2013). Therefore, the majority of the workforce in numerous tea gardens in Dooars region of WB is the migrated Adivasi workers from Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas, followed by Nepali workers whose forefathers migrated from Nepal and settled in the hills and foothills of eastern Himalaya.

The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 applies to the tea plantation industry as a whole. Most of the workers in the tea gardens of Dooars are unionized. There is a total 32 recognized unions in various tea estates in WB (Lhamu, 2015). In the Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts of WB, the tea sector has undergone numerous changes during the previous few decades. A significant number of tea estates have been abandoned or shut down in the area. Older operating tea gardens provide tea with lesser quality and higher production costs, which puts the Dooars region's tea industry in a worse position on a national and worldwide scale (Chowdhury, 2019). The tea industries in the Dooars are struggling with a number of major issues, including lack of long-term development planning, labour force issues, difficulty in maintaining quality by small tea growers, a continuous drop in tea prices while incurring high production costs, the absence of MSP of tea in the domestic market, a slowly increasing rate of household demand, and competition from foreign tea producers, which are disrupting the economic status of the region (Paul, 2016).

Many tea garden labourers in this region have already begun to migrate away from the tea gardens in Dooars and into other places in search of employment as a result of the closure of numerous tea farms. It is reported that some have even moved to other states in search of alternative livelihood opportunities (Chaudhuri, 2015). The shutting down of the tea garden has also amplified the alcohol addiction among the male members (Ansari, 2019). As a result of the rising unemployment in tea gardens during recent past, hundreds of tribal girls, primarily teens, have vanished in recent years from the poverty-stricken, declining tea plantation areas of Dooars. These young women have become victims of human trafficking after being evicted from their homes due to poverty and their desire for a better life (Sarkar B. C., 2017). On the other hand, gardens' inability to generate respectable income has been attributed to several problems by planters. According to the management of tea estates, low yield, price below the cost of production, lack of MSP of tea in the domestic market, aged bush, large debts, low labour productivity, and working capital restrictions are the causes of the tea plantations' diminishing earnings. In the Dooars region, problems including illiteracy, alcoholism, forced migration, and trafficking are now widespread among the people still working in the tea gardens. Changes in the structure are needed since human rights are consistently violated on tea farms (Basu, 2017).

3. Review of Existing Literature

Reviewing the existing literature on the topic, it has been observed that several studies have so far been conducted on the socio-economic status of tea garden workers in Dooars region of WB, some of these are quoted below:

(Surjapada Paul, 2012), in their study on the health and economic scenario of tea plantation workers of Dooars, WB, minutely identified that the poor housing conditions, inadequate sanitation, and a lack of clean water were all evidenced by the study on current dwelling types.

(Sarkar S. C., 2013), in his study on the condition of tea garden workers of Jalpaiguri District, crucially observed that the harsh control strategy of the tea planters left the labourers in the tea gardens indefinitely

miserable and forlorn. They experienced hardship due to the low cost of work, high cost of daily necessities, scarcity of food, disease brought on by malnutrition, death, oppression, exploitation, physical abuse, etc.

(Lhamu, 2015), in his study on closed tea gardens, crucially observed that the fundamental rules of the Tea Plantation Labour Act had been openly broken by tea gardens. The need for provisions for creches, hospitals, ambulances and home repair services were now a thing of the past.

(Paul M. , 2016), in his study on problems, prospects and challenges of tea entrepreneurship in Jalpaiguri, closely observed that the majority of the tea farms were quite remote and old in Jalpaiguri district, which resulted in high production costs. Here, the workers in the tea industry were severely underprivileged in every area, including pay, food, medication, education, etc.

(Roy, Women Labour in the Tea Gardens of West Bengal : Changing Orientation and Emerging Challenges, 2017) in her study, women labour in the tea gardens of WB, robustly identified that the tea belt was gradually being devastated, and traffickers were using tea gardens as reinless hunting grounds.

(Mamata Gurung, 2018) in their study on employment structure in tea plantations of WB, minutely perceived that the fundamental needs of the family of tea workers cannot be met by the wages of tea gardens in WB. One of the main reasons of poverty, and a widespread issue among households of tea workers, was a lack of livelihood, either as supplemental or alternative income sources.

(Md. Faiyaz Afjal, 2019), in their study on the socio-economic condition of tea garden workers in Dooars, WB, significantly noticed that the tea garden workers in North Bengal were lagging behind in terms of education, proper water supply and per capita income. The health status of the workers and medical facilities is not at all satisfactory. Engagement of Child labour was also high in tea estates of north Bengal.

(Uday Das, 2021), in their study on closed tea gardens of Dooars, WB, significantly noticed that the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 slowly began to fall apart, and today's tea labourers lack even the most basic of social and civic amenities.

4. Research Gap

1. As of yet, no research has been conducted to determine and evaluate the main factors contributing to the dread experienced by labourers in the Dooars region's tea gardens.
2. Various reports suggest that the socio-economic status of Dooars tea garden workers is highly precarious, but relatively few research have evaluated and pinpointed the core causes of their predicament.
3. As of now, the majority of research has focused on tea garden labourers in Darjeeling Hills of WB. The precarious situation of tea garden labourers in Dooars region (foothills of eastern Himalaya) of WB has received very little research attention.
4. As of yet, no research has been done to evaluate the many variables causing workers from Dooars tea estates to migrate, nor to determine what corrective actions should be taken to control this trend.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the present socio-economic status and existence crisis of the tea garden workers in Dooars region of WB.
2. To identify prime responsible factors affecting the socio-economic conditions of the tea garden workers in Dooars region of WB.

3. To evaluate the main reasons why labourers find it difficult to work in the tea gardens of Dooars and to pinpoint the many elements that contribute to the workers' recurrent tendency to migrate out of the tea gardens in Dooars of WB.
4. To recommend corrective actions that should be taken to stop the tendency of workers from the tea gardens of Dooars to migrate in search of alternate livelihood opportunities as well as to provide improved socio-economic conditions for the tea garden workers in order to preserve the tea industry in Dooars region of WB.

6. Materials and Methodology

6.1. Materials:

The basic frame of the undertaken study was constructed on the basis of an intensive literature survey and extensive field survey. The objectives of the study had been attained based on both primary and secondary data collected from various sources including empirical analysis of field survey data and literature survey analysis. The data used for empirical analysis were collected from field surveys in the form of personal interaction, interviews, group discussion and answers to structured questionnaires. Both quantitative and qualitative primary data were collected during the field survey. The quantitative data were collected through questionnaire surveys. Both closed and open-ended questions were set out for the survey purpose following a stratified simple random sampling technique. Qualitative information were collected through personal interaction, group discussion and interviews by keeping essential notes in the notebook and on the laptop during the field survey.

Secondary data were collected from the Tea Board of India (TBI), Tea Association of India (TAI), Dooars Branch Indian Tea Association (DBITA), Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Govt. of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Govt. of West Bengal, Ministry of Agricultural Marketing, Govt. of West Bengal, Ministry of North Bengal Development, Govt. of West Bengal, Office of the District Magistrate, Jalpaiguri District, Office of the District Magistrate, Alipurduar District, Reports of the concerned NGOs, Reports of the previous researchers, Reports of electronic and print media, published papers in Journals, published articles in Newspapers, internet sources etc.

Collected data were organized, classified, compiled and analyzed using standard statistical techniques with the help of computer software and were represented by various cartographic techniques. Compiled analysis of data had been interpreted appropriately to find out the specified areas of objectives.

6.2. Field Survey and Sample Selection:

I conducted the field survey for the purpose in two phases for which I had randomly chosen a total of thirty-eight (38) Tea Estates in the Dooars region of WB, which included large, medium and small size tea estates in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar of WB. For the purpose of collection of primary data from the field survey, personal interaction, group discussion and questionnaire survey were conducted with the managers and other officials of tea estates, ex and present workers of the tea estates, relatives and neighbours of tea garden workers, leaders of the tea garden workers' union etc.

During the two phases of my field survey, out of the 38 chosen Tea Estates, twenty-five (25) estates were located in Jalpaiguri District and thirteen (13) estates were located in Alipurduar District. As male workers in the tea gardens are mainly engaged in the tea plantation process and female workers are mainly engaged in plucking of tea leaves (i.e. two leaves and a bud), a good gender balance was maintained during sample selection.

Details of the total thirty-eight tea estates surveyed during two phases of my field visit are shown below under Table – 1 :

Table – 1 : Details of Tea Estates surveyed during two phases of the field visit							
Name of the Tea Estate visited	Located in the District of WB	Area of the Tea Estate (in Hectares)	Area of the Tea Garden (in Hectares)	Avg. Production per Hectare	Interacted with TE Officials	Total No. of workers in the Tea Estate (TE)	No. of Tea workers interacted with
1. Phaskhawa TE	Alipurduar	261	140	2,200 MT	Yes	580	12
2. Chunia Jhora TE	Alipurduar	498	240	1,600 MT	Yes	574	10
3. Rydak TE	Alipurduar	1,415	736	2,000 MT	Yes	2,400	16
4. Turturi TE	Alipurduar	472	294	700 MT	Yes	484	07
5. Jainti TE	Alipurduar	828	412	2,100 MT	Yes	900	14
6. Rahimabad TE	Alipurduar	713	287	1,600 MT	Yes	740	08
7. Kartika TE	Alipurduar	625	338	2,000 MT	Yes	867	10
8. Dhawljhora TE	Alipurduar	609	447	1,800 MT	Yes	730	09
9. Rungamuttee TE	Jalpaiguri	1,428	772	2,400 MT	Yes	2,300	15
10. Manabari TE	Jalpaiguri	522	292	1,200 MT	Yes	478	07
11. Bagrakot TE	Jalpaiguri	809	489	1,900 MT	Yes	1,200	12
12. Ranichera TE	Jalpaiguri	1,227	715	2,200 MT	Yes	1,200	11
13. Kumlai TE	Jalpaiguri	612	403	2,100 MT	Yes	1,257	10
14. Chengmari TE	Jalpaiguri	1,852	1,365	2,200 MT	Yes	2,000	15
15. Damdim TE	Jalpaiguri	1,362	738	2,400 MT	Yes	1,500	11
16. Puthorjhora TE	Jalpaiguri	567	369	2,200 MT	Yes	680	10

17. Indong TE	Jalpaiguri	740	484	1,200 MT	Yes	930	18
18. Kilkote TE	Jalpaiguri	632	431	1,300 MT	Yes	780	13
19. Odlabari TE	Jalpaiguri	623	484	1,700 MT	Yes	655	10
20. Matelli TE	Jalpaiguri	1,046	730	1,800 MT	Yes	1,050	12
21. Meenglas TE	Jalpaiguri	929	618	2,300 MT	Yes	1,100	14
22. Sylee TE	Jalpaiguri	1034	591	1,800 MT	Yes	1,000	07
23. Bainguri TE	Jalpaiguri	1057	658	1,700 MT	Yes	1,240	09
24. Bhatpara TE	Alipurduar	1,251	632	1,800 MT	Yes	950	14
25. Chuapara TE	Alipurduar	934	690	2,100 MT	Yes	1,200	17
26. Dima TE	Alipurduar	956	743	1,600 MT	Yes	1,250	15
27. Mechpara TE	Alipurduar	752	516	1,400 MT	Yes	820	11
28. Raimatang TE	Alipurduar	663	535	1,200 MT	Yes	850	12
29. Washabarie TE	Jalpaiguri	698	438	1,900 MT	Yes	800	10
30. Ellenbarrie TE	Jalpaiguri	382	230	1,700 MT	Yes	370	08
31. Leesh River TE	Jalpaiguri	1,030	635	2,300 MT	Yes	1,300	13
32. Zurrantee TE	Jalpaiguri	743	510	1,750 MT	Yes	880	09
33. Toonbari TE	Jalpaiguri	259	154	1,200 MT	Yes	280	05
34. Soongachi TE	Jalpaiguri	1,052	640	1,400 MT	Yes	1,000	12
35. Aibheel TE	Jalpaiguri	1,508	828	2,200 MT	Yes	1,500	14
36. Chalouni TE	Jalpaiguri	779	563	2,000 MT	Yes	975	12
37. Nagaisuri TE	Jalpaiguri	964	630	1,800 MT	Yes	1,250	15

38. New Glenco TE	Jalpaiguri	551	350	1,200 MT	Yes	750	09
Total No. of Tea Garden Workers interacted with during both phases of field survey							436

A total of 436 tea garden workers (including retired workers) of various ages, genders, literacy levels, faiths, castes, and domicile origins were engaged throughout the aforementioned two rounds of the field study.

Primary and secondary data collected from both phases of the field survey through personal interaction, group discussion, questionnaire survey and from various research papers and reports have been subsequently systematically arranged, compiled and analyzed by using standard statistical techniques with the help of Minitab computer software and are represented by various cartographic techniques and finally rationally interpreted for achieving objectives of the undertaken study.

7. Observations and Findings

1. Overall Observations and Findings:

According to the literature review, a sizable number of tea gardens in the WB region of Dooars had either been closed or declared sick for a variety of causes, including as low yields and productivity, labour unrest, mismanagement, strike, lockout, and financial loss. During the field survey, it is witnessed that most of the tea gardens in Dooars region have resumed their operation in recent times as an outcome of a joint effort of the State Govt., Tea Garden Owners' Association and various Trade Unions of tea garden workers. A thorough field survey conducted in several tea gardens in the Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar Districts (i.e. the Dooars region) has shown that the ownership of tea estates is currently leased out to the individual or corporate entities for a maximum of thirty (30) years by the Government of WB through the concerned district administration. On the other hand, the tea leaves plucking code and plant production code (PPC) in various gardens are guided and monitored by the Tea Board of India (TBI). Plucking of tea leaves from gardens should remain halted from December 15 to February 19 every year as per guidelines of TBI to procure better quality and quantity of yields from tea gardens. The lifetime of a tea plant is 80 to 100 years on average if it is planted with British seeds; in other cases, the lifetime of a tea plant is 40 to 50 years on average, as reported by managers and workers of most of the chosen tea estates. It is also reported by almost all the managers of chosen tea estates that new seeds of tea bushes should be planted replacing old bushes at least in 20 hectares of land within the tea garden every year to obtain continuous substantial qualitative yields from tea bushes. But, unfortunately, as per the opinion of managers and workers of most of the chosen tea estates, said replacement guidelines are not generally followed by most of the tea estates. As a result of these careless actions on the part of the garden owners or lessee, the per hectare yield from the tea gardens is steadily declining, which has a catastrophic consequence for the Dooars tea sector as a whole.

During the field surveys, it is significantly witnessed that tea garden workers are mostly from the tribal community having an ancestral link with the Chota Nagpur Plateau of Jharkhand. They are mostly illiterate, economically and culturally very backwards. Social awareness among the tea garden workers in Dooars is also significantly very meagre and a citable number of them are still out of the orbit of beneficiaries of various Governmental support and social security schemes.

From the field survey, it is also closely observed that workers working in the tea gardens as tea leaf pluckers are remunerated by tea estates on a daily wage rate basis; whereas the majority of workers working in the factory and office of the tea estates are remunerated by monthly rated basis. Even the

veteran workers working in the tea gardens for a long period are also paid on a ‘no work no pay’ basis under the daily wage rate system. As a consequence, workers of tea gardens in Dooars region are entitled to receive a maximum of twenty-six (26) days’ wages per month, excluding four (4) Sundays in a month. Though daily rated tea garden workers are entitled to enjoy fourteen (14) days of Sick Leave and fourteen (14) days of Earned Leave per year with full pay; whereas, monthly rated workers working in the factory and office of the tea estates are entitled to enjoy fourteen (14) days Sick Leave, thirty (30) days Earned Leave and nine (9) days Casual Leave per year with full pay.

With effect from 01.01.2022, workers working in various tea gardens in Dooars region are getting daily cash wages @ Rs. 232 per day up to 23 kgs of tea leaves plucked per day from the garden. For the quantity of tea leaves plucked over and above 23 kgs. per day, workers are entitled to get an additional incentive wage @ Rs. 8 per kg. of tea leaves plucked over 23 kgs. Per day. Generally, wages to the tea garden workers are paid in cash by the employer tea estate at fortnightly intervals.

Apart from cash wages, workers are also entitled to get Provident Fund, Annual Bonus, and Leave Wages from the tea estates. Some of the tea garden workers have been provided residential accommodation in the form of staff quarters by the employer tea estates at free of cost along with the free supply of water. According to managers of some tea estates, garden workers are getting substantial worth of perquisites in addition to cash wages and thus, the total remuneration paid to garden workers including perks comes to Rs. 354 per day. But it is also evident that all the tea garden workers have not been provided rent-free residential accommodation by their employer estates. Although the tea garden workers have been living in the staff quarter provided by the employer estates for generations, yet they don’t have any property right on the property where they are living generation after generation. It is also witnessed during the field survey that some employer tea estates in the Dooars region of WB have set up mobile creche services accompanied by a lady attendant, during working hours, for the infant children of the women workers working in their tea gardens. On the contrary, it has also been observed that the major proportion of tea estates do not make an effort to set up such creche facilities for the infants of women workers who work in their tea gardens.

It is also pointed out during the field survey that a good number of tea garden owners have failed to deposit their own and workers’ contributions of provident funds into the Employees’ Provident Fund Account of the Govt. Moreover, a substantial number of ex and existing tea garden workers have claimed, during the field survey, that a considerable amount on account of provident fund, annual bonus and leave wages are still long overdue to the workers from a citable number of employer tea estates.

Though the issue of labour migration in the tea gardens of Dooars region of WB is a normal phenomenon, but the issue of the sharp increasing rate of livelihood migration tendency of workers from the tea gardens of Dooars during the recent time has also been witnessed during my field survey. A citable number of workers have already begun moving to other sectors, even in other states, in search of alternative livelihood opportunities leaving their ancestral work in the tea gardens of Dooars. In the near future, the growing labour migration rate in the Dooars region's tea gardens could be interpreted as a direct sign of an extreme human labour problem in the Doors region's tea gardens if it is not appropriately addressed by the government and tea estates.

Tea garden workers of the Dooars region have been working in the garden for generations. Older workers used to take retirement from the garden work after recruiting his / her newer generation as garden workers. Such a replacement system of workers in the tea gardens of Dooars region is known as ‘Badli System’. Thus, once one member of a family joins as a tea garden worker, future generations of that family

automatically possess the right to become tea garden workers by said Badli System of worker's replacement. Thus workers of any particular tea garden have become perpetual workers of the said tea garden in Dooars.

2. Regarding the Socio-economic Condition of tea garden workers:

The findings of the field survey analysis demonstrate that there are numerous important factors contributing to the shockingly poor social and economic status of the tea garden workers in Dooars. A portion of these reasons have stemmed from the ideas involved in policy development, while other reasons have emerged during the execution phase, which are categorically discussed below :

1. Low Wage Rate: Low wage rate payable to the tea garden workers is one of the prime reasons for their distressful socio-economic condition. Till the year 2021, the daily wage rate payable to the tea garden workers in WB was fixed by the Labour Department of the State Govt. @ Rs. 202 per head only. By a joint meeting held on 02.02.2022 between the State Govt., Tea Garden Owners' Association and various Trade Unions of garden workers, the wage rate payable to the daily rated workers working in the tea gardens in WB had been increased from Rs. 202 to Rs. 232 per head with effect from 01.01.2022 (Vide Momo No. 48/06/Co-ord/LC, dated 14.06.2022).

Whereas the minimum daily wages payable to the workers of Bought Tea Leaf Factory in the state of WB has been fixed by the Labour Department of the State Govt. at Rs. 355 per head for Zone A and Rs. 322 per head for Zone B with effect from (w.e.f.) 01.07.2022 (Vide Memo No. 108/Stat /2RW /9/2022 /LCS /JLC, dated 06.07.2022); whereas the minimum daily wages payable to the workers engaged in other agricultural sector in the state of WB has been fixed by the Labour Department of the State Govt. at Rs. 284 per head without food and Rs. 264 per head with food w.e.f. 01.07.2022 (Vide Memo No. 109/Stat/1/ RW/8/2022 /LCS /JLC, dated 06.07.2022); yet it is astonishing reality that the minimum daily wage rate payable to the tea garden workers is fixed by negotiation between the State Govt., Tea Estate Owners' Association and Trade Unions of garden workers at Rs. 232 per head only!

2. Illiteracy: It has been closely observed during the field survey that the majority of tea garden workers in Dooars region of WB are illiterate. It is evident from the data obtained from the extensive field survey that the tea garden workers of 30 years of age or above are mostly illiterate. Due to their illiteracy, they are not loud enough in support of raising their legitimate claims before the authorities and consequently, they have been deprived of getting basic rights and amenities in the tea estates year after year. As a dire consequence, the socio-economic status of tea garden workers is remarkably poor and pathetic even in the era of globalization and economic liberalization.

3. Pattern of Employment: Despite the fact that workers have been working in the tea gardens of Dooars for generations, but still they are remunerated by their employer tea estates on a daily rated wage payment system. As per the words of managers of chosen tea estates, a good number of workers working in the tea gardens are the permanent employees of the estate; yet they are remunerated by a daily wage rate system on 'no work no pay' basis. It is really wondering evidence that even permanent tea garden workers have been remunerated at a daily wage rate based on their actual attendance in the tea gardens year after year.

4. High Rate of Labour Absenteeism: High rate of absenteeism has been observed among the tea garden workers in Dooars region. As reported by managers of chosen tea estates during the field survey, almost 35% absenteeism per day, on average, has been observed among garden workers. This may be due to the lazy instinct of workers or due to apathy to work or due to their strong addiction to liquor or due to

the pressure of their domestic work. As workers in the tea gardens are paid on a ‘no work no pay basis’, such absenteeism ultimately costs the earnings of workers.

5. **Lack of General and Social Awareness:** As most of the tea garden workers are still illiterate and socially as well as economically backward, they have been suffering from a lack of general and social awareness. They don't even have any idea about their fundamental rights as provided by the Constitution of India. Such backwardness regarding general awareness in social life is of course one of the significant reasons behind their pitiful socio-economic status.
6. **Indifferent Outlook of the Management:** The management of most of the tea estates shows a very indifferent attitude on the issue of workers' upgradation and upliftment of their living status. Workers' problems within the tea estates are not even properly addressed by the management, which ultimately affects the socio-economic condition of the tea garden workers.
7. **Lack of Adequate Scope of Education:** Very few tea estates in Dooars region have established educational institutions for the basic and advancement of learning for the children of tea garden workers. As a result, educational scopes for the children of tea garden workers are confined within the educational institutions established by the Govt. in nearby or remote locality, as the case may be. But, due to unfavourable terrain, Govt. aided/sponsored educational institutions are generally located at distant places from the majority of tea gardens. On the other hand, the essentiality of widespread education among the children of tea garden workers is not widely campaigned and encouraged by the management of tea estates.
8. **Lack of Medical Facilities:** Medical facilities in the tea gardens are exceptionally poor. Though some of the tea estates have established medical centres for the tea garden workers, but most of them lack from presence of qualified doctors and nurses and even adequate essential and lifesaving medicines. As a result, tea garden workers are dependent on the Health Centres/Hospitals set up by the Govt. in nearby or remote locality, as the case may be. But, due to unfavourable terrain, Govt. Health Centres/Hospitals are generally located at distant places from the majority of tea gardens. Accordingly, the vital issue of medical treatment facilities for the workers of tea garden workers has been seriously ignored.
9. **Unfavourable Terrain:** Being the foothills of the eastern Himalayas, Dooars region is located in an unfavourable terrain with numerous crisscrossed hilly rivers and surrounded by dense forests. The region itself lags behind due to its topographical reasons. As a consequence, dwellers in this region are still being deprived of modern amenities, scopes and facilities.
10. **Lack of Development in the locality:** Dooars region, which is basically the foothills of eastern Himalaya, is an underdeveloped region within the state of WB. Due to the existence of numerous crisscross rivers surrounded by dense forests and hills, roadway infrastructure has not yet been satisfactorily developed in many places of Dooars region. As a consequence, very few means of livelihood other than daily rated workers in tea gardens are available to the people living in and around the tea gardens area of Dooars.
11. **Lack of Awareness regarding Governmental Schemes:** Owing to their illiteracy and ensuing ignorance, tea garden workers are unaware of the numerous government welfare and support programs that are available to them, including the 100-day work program, the Kanyashree scheme, the Laxmi Bhandar scheme, the Swatha Swathi scheme, etc. As a result, a sizable portion of the tea garden labour force in the Dooars region is no longer eligible to receive benefits from these types of government welfare schemes.

12. **Weak Implementation of Rural Employment Scheme:** There are very limited employment opportunities in the tea garden areas of Dooars region. People of tea garden areas are now very reluctant to work in various rural employment schemes of the Govt., as the disbursement of payment from such schemes generally gets very delayed.
13. **Child Labour:** Child labour working in the tea gardens of Dooars region was also very high; though in recent days, engagement of child labour in the tea gardens has been reduced. The senior workers working in the tea gardens do not let their wards study further due to their financial crisis, lack of awareness and illiteracy; rather, they encourage their children to work as workers in the tea gardens. Consequently, children of tea garden workers are forced to work in the tea gardens as workers at an early age leaving their studies.
14. **Women Trafficking:** Human trafficking, especially women trafficking, is very common in the tea gardens of Dooars region. Immense poverty level, high illiteracy level, remoteness of the terrain and lack of administrative monitoring etc. are the strong responsible factors behind afloat of women trafficking in the tea gardens.
15. **Affinity towards Liquor:** Due to lack of education, general awareness and alternative engagement opportunities, most of the tea garden workers, especially male workers, are strongly addicted to the habit of drinking alcohol. As a consequence, shortage of money in the family is a permanent issue for the tea garden workers in Dooars region.
16. **Unhealthy and Unhygienic Household Environment:** Due to financial distressful conditions, lack of awareness, illiteracy, etc., most of the tea garden workers live in unhealthy and unhygienic household environments.

3. Regarding Livelihood Migration Tendency of tea garden workers:

Analyzing the information obtained from field survey, it transpired that, though the issue of livelihood migration tendency among the tea garden workers in Dooars region is a normal phenomenon, but it has been sharply increasing in recent years. A significant number of workers have been migrating from the work in tea estates in search of alternative livelihood options in as well as outside the locality. Even yet, they have already started to relocate to different states in quest of alternate employment opportunities. It is closely observed that the livelihood-shifting trend among the Nepali workers in the tea gardens is significantly higher than the tribal workers working in the tea gardens in Dooars.

The primary factors, found during the survey, that have been linked to the recent rise in the livelihood migratory propensity of tea garden workers in Dooars are written below:

1. The wage rate in other sectors is much higher than that in the tea gardens of Dooars.
2. In no way is the increasing trend in wages for tea garden workers enough to keep up with the rising trend in market pricing.
3. The majority of workers in the tea gardens are paid on a "no work, no pay" basis under a daily wage rate system. Even the labourers who toil in the tea gardens year after year receive compensation under a daily wage rate system that operates on the tenet of "no work, no pay.". The newer generation of tea garden workers has been greatly disinclined to work in the Dooars tea garden due to this wage payment system.
4. One of the main causes of the decision of tea garden workers to migrate from the Dooars region for employment is the lack of a lucrative incentive scheme for them.
5. Frequent closure of tea gardens in the region.

6. Gradual decrease in per hectare yield in tea production in gardens and gradual decrease in profit as a consequence, are the influencing factors for the tea garden workers in support of their livelihood migration decision from tea gardens of Dooars.
7. Uncertainty about whether tea estates will continue to operate in future is also one of the key influencing factors in support of employment migration decisions of tea garden workers.
8. Fear psychosis of losing jobs from the tea estates among the garden workers.
9. As the new generation of tea garden workers is gradually becoming educated, they are no longer interested in working as daily labourers in tea gardens like their ancestors.
10. There is relatively little opportunity for alternate forms of income generation in Dooars region during the seasonal unemployment period. Although various rural employment schemes of the Govt. are being partially implemented in the tea garden areas of Dooars, but the locals are very hesitant to work as the payments from these schemes are typically disbursed very slowly.
11. Indifferent attitude of the management of the tea estates in improving the standard of living of tea garden workers is also one of the key influencing factors in support of their employment migration decision.
12. Lack of promotional and incremental facilities in the tea gardens has utterly distracted the younger generation of tea garden workers from working in the tea garden.

Here are some of the key areas that the tea garden workers of Dooars have been rapidly moving to in search of better jobs. :

1. Most of them prefer to work as helpers to the Mason in the southern part of India, especially in Kerala, leaving the work from tea gardens in Dooars.
2. A significant portion of tea garden workers of Dooars have chosen to work in the tea gardens of nearby Assam, Karnataka, and Kerala as garden workers.
3. Some workers in the tea gardens of Dooars are choosing to leave their jobs and pursue alternate livelihoods in the area, such as cutting stone or boulders.
4. Leaving their jobs as tea garden workers in Dooars, some workers opt to work as day laborers in the district town or nearby town.
5. A few tea garden workers are choosing to leave their jobs in the tea gardens in Dooars to work in factories in the urban area outside of their home region.

8. Conclusion and Suggestion

The conducted study makes it clear that the socioeconomic condition of tea garden workers in the Dooars region of WB is still appallingly bad. Tea workers' living conditions, access to basic utilities, financial situation, level of awareness, and access to medical and educational resources, among other things, are still far from satisfactory. The daily wage rate in the tea gardens of Dooars is significantly lower than that of workers in other sectors of the economy.

On the other hand, Workers of the tea gardens of Dooars are anxious about the future of their means of subsistence. Consequently, they have been gradually moving away from tea gardens and toward other sources of income, both inside and outside of the region. Key influencing factors for tea garden workers' employment migration decisions include low wage rates, frequent closures of tea gardens in the area, uncertainty about the future operations of tea gardens, and fear of losing their jobs from the tea gardens. Instead, they have preferred to work as helpers to the Mason in the southern part of India, especially in

Kerala, to earn wages at substantially higher rates than the wage rate that they were receiving working as tea garden workers in Dooars.

The project's outcome has led to the strong recommendation of the following corrective actions to improve the socioeconomic situations of tea garden workers, manage their tendency to migrate in search of better livelihoods and safeguard the tea industry in the Dooars region of WB as a whole. :

1. The wage rate payable to the garden workers must be revised at once at least up to the wage rate as prescribed by the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
2. The existing 'no work no pay' basis of payment of wages to the tea garden workers should be replaced by a lucrative incentive system of wage payment with a minimum guaranteed monthly wage payment.
3. The Govt. / appropriate authority should ensure that all payments due to the tea garden workers have been released on time by the tea estate authority and that should be regularly monitored by the Govt./appropriate authority.
4. The Govt./appropriate authority should ensure that all outstanding payments due to the tea garden workers should be released by the tea estate authority within a reasonable time limit.
5. The Govt./appropriate authority should ensure that both the employer's and employee's contributions towards the Employees' Provident Fund Account, have duly been deposited by the employer tea estate into the Employees' Provident Fund Account on a regular basis and such deposits should be closely monitored by the Govt./appropriate authority.
6. On-time release of post-retirement benefits of the tea garden workers should be ensured by the tea estate authority and that should be closely monitored by the Govt.
7. The public distribution system in the tea gardens of Dooars region should be strengthened by the Govt.
8. All necessary steps should be urgently taken to reach the benefits of various social security schemes of the Central and State Govt. among the tea garden workers.
9. Adequate medical treatment facilities free of cost or reasonable cost for the tea garden workers and their families should be ensured by the concerned tea estate and the Govt.
10. The essentiality of mass education should be widely campaigned by the Govt., Tea Estates, NGOs, etc. among the garden workers.
11. Widespread educational facilities and arrangement of adequate free educational institutions for the children of garden workers should be made by the concerned tea estate and the Govt.
12. Awareness regarding rights protected by the Indian Constitution and facilities provided by the Govt. for the marginal and SC / ST people should be intensively campaigned among the tea garden workers.
13. The concerned tea estate should take all appropriate corrective action to improve the living conditions of garden workers.
14. Transportation facility between various tea gardens in Dooars region and local District Headquarter and the nearest Railway Station should be upgraded as far as practicable.

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