

# Closed Tea Gardens in North Bengal: Socio-Political Consequences Among the Tea Labourers of Dooars in Northern Part of West Bengal

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## **Abstract:**

The tea gardens of Dooars region of Northern part of West Bengal has been facing several Crissies since the last two decades. Due to international competitive tea market and globalization, tea gardens of the region had been facing a tough competition in the World market. Several issues among the tea labourers of Dooars region are found such as irregular payment of wages, non-payment or reduction of bonus, non-payment of provident fund etc. Beside this. Due to lack of social security facilities, subsidized food grains, education facilities, healthcare facilities, drinking water facilities, misery and starvation of deaths is increasing day by day in the region. As a result, growing of child labour, human trafficking, out migration took place in this region, The present paper tries to explore the socio-political impacts of closed tea gardens on labourers in the Dooars region of North Bengal.

**Keywords:** Crisis, Tea labourers, Deprivation, Starvation, Underdevelopment

## **Introduction**

Geographically, Dooars located in the northern part of West Bengal, this region has most fertile land and the alluvial flood point of the Himalayan helps to grow tea plantation. Dooars comprises only two districts of West Bengal mainly Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri. At present, more than 450 tea gardens are found in the region and Jalpaiguri district comprises of 150 tea gardens alone. For large scale plantation and spreading industry led to rise labour movement from central India who belonged to tribal communities such as Oraon, Munda who are the largest imported tribal groups in the region.

Tea industry in the northern part of West Bengal especially the Dooars region has been suffering by the world economic crisis in the contemporary period. As a result, many tea estates failed to come back its previous position as they witnessed production and benefit drop. The planter closed many tea gardens without prior notice and blocking labour payment, provident fund as well as gratuity. As a result, thousands of labourers' live and livelihood has undergone through uncertainty.

## **Review of Literature**

**Thomas Ranjan Majumder** in his book entitled as **The Tea Crisis: Unfolding the reality** has explained the crisis of Duncans industries Ltd (DIL). The turbulent phase of Duncans business had started as early as 2000s when it was put under severe economic stress due to diverse financial complexities. Around ten

tea gardens in North Bengal were closed. Most of the Duncans gardens were difunctional although not officially closed. As a result, losing of job in the tea gardens, labourer's children to elderly were going to the rivers for stone crushing job. Some of them were moving to other gardens in search of contractual work, some of them shifted to the nearby towns to manage jobs in construction sector. Many of them were migrating to other state in search of jobs. Beside this, Human traffickers and especially women traffickers were getting active day by day

**Ambika Rai (2020)** in her article titled as **North Life of the Workers in an Abandoned Tea garden in Bengal** had presented the closed and abandonment of several tea plantations of North Bengal that has led to throw the labourers in situations of uncertainty. The workers lost their jobs, and there comes a shift in the nature of their work, from permanent to casual workers. Besides being lost economic security, they are also losing minimum social security they had enjoyed previously prior to the closure of tea estate. The author has presented the reasons behind the closure of tea state particularly from terai region namely Panighata Tea Estate. The tea estate has been closed since 2015. She also tries to deal with the impact of the abandonment and closure upon its concerned labourers. The sudden closure and abandonment of plantation affected the normal functioning of the garden leaving the workers in a situation of uncertainty.

**Rafiqul Islam (2021)** in his article entitled as **Livelihood Realism: A Review on Closed Tea Gardens of Dooars, West Bengal** has discussed about the ongoing livelihood realities in closed\ abandoned tea gardens of Bengal-Dooars (Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar). He argued that tea industry of North Bengal has adversely affected by global economic crisis and local constraints. Many tea estates failed to manage the shock. The management closed many tea gardens. The garden closure and work shut down have been produced a livelihood disaster. Dropout among the school going students, child trafficking, child labour, rally of hunger and starvation death and extreme poverty is the main issues in colonies of closed tea gardens in the Northern part of West Bengal.

**Bidya Rai (2024)** in her article titled as **Social Consequences of the Tea industry of North Bengal** has told that over the years, tea gardens of India have undergone severe crisis due to low productivity of labour, increasing social cost of production, and fall in tea prices, competition in world markets and high domestic consumption, removal of tariff with trade liberalization. With all the crisis, labourers are struggling with the close and non-payment or curtailment of wages, bonus, gratuity, provident fund and others social benefits. He also argued that the working and living condition the workers in most of tea garden is very deplorable and poor that have led to forced migration, malnourishment and even death in sometimes. The conditions of the workers working in the tea garden is worse and insecure and remains unheard and ignored by plantation owners and the government. The author explained in her article the evolution of tea industry in India with special reference to North Bengal.

**Sandeepan Das (2024)** in his article titled as **A Valley of Starvation Deaths: Notes on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Crisis in Tea Gardens of West Bengal** has said tea plantations are the backbone of the economy of West Bengal. About 13 lakh workers directly depends on the tea industry. The workers working in the tea garden have been suffering from widespread malnutrition and starvation deaths since 2001. This period, referred to as a period of 'crisis' on tea plantation following the sudden fall of prices of tea in international market, has witnessed the closure of several tea gardens. The Tea Plantation Labour Act of 1951 has been violated through non-payment of regular wages, provident fund, gratuity, and non-cash benefits. The remains silent in this matter. In his article, the author gives importance on much investment welfare activities, labourers are dying of hunger. He also raised the question that why has the state has been ineffective in addressing the crisis faced by thousands of labourers.

**Objective of the study:**

1. To explore the socio-political conditions of tea laborers in Dooars region of Northern part of West Bengal
2. To know the factors behind the contemporary crisis in the tea gardens of Dooars.

**Research Methodology:** The study is based on Descriptive and Analytical method. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data. The secondary sources data is collected from books, article, internet sources, various report etc.

**Discussion and Analysis:**

**Socio-Political Impacts of Closed tea gardens on Labourers in the Dooars region**

Tea gardens in Dooars faces many problems -low production of tea being used of old machinery, lack of infrastructural development, hunger and starvation of death among the tea workers, lack of basic health facilities, lack of drinking water and cooking-wood, malnutrition, education of children of the tea workers etc. All these issues led to obstacle in the growth of tea estate and yield of the tea gardens. The most important cause of the declining yield in the gardens is the lack of replantation. The tea companies are presently less motivated to invest furthermore due to lack of profit. Another important reason for non -preference of investment is that it is a time-consuming crop. As it takes more or less five years to gain the profit. During the re-plantation period, there is no profit gained. Moreover, the tea companies have to pay the labourers and invest huge amount re-plantation work. As a result, many of tea gardens have been closed and abandoned ff by the tea estate owners. This have been impacted the thousands of lives and livelihood of the tea plantation labourers which compelled them migration from plantations in search of employment in outside of state West Bengal and sometimes in nearby towns. At present, many tea gardens are acutely sick and the number of closed Tea gardens in Dooars region are increasing day by day. The below table shows the closed tea gardens in North Bengal:

**Table: 1**  
**Closed tea gardens in North Bengal**

SI. No.	Name of the tea estates	District	No. of workers	Date of closure
1.	Panighata	Darjeeling	787	10.10.2015
2.	Lankapara	Alipurduar	2521	10.10.2015
3.	Dooteriah	Darjeeling	1252	10.01.2018
4.	Raipur	Jalpaiguri	617	12.09.2016
5.	Rungmook\Ceders	Darjeeling	1463	24.04.2023
6.	Rimatang	Alipurduar	1258	11.10.2023
7.	Dalmore	Alipurduar	1294	15.10.2023
8.	Dalsingpara	Alipurduar	1741	15.10.2023
9.	Kalchini	Alipurduar	1991	01.11,2023
10.	Ramjhora	Alipurduar	949	01.11.2023
11.	Bamandanga Tondoo	Jalpaiguri	1155	08.12.2023
12.	Dekhlapara	Alipurduar	602	04.12.2023
13.	Samsing	Jalpaiguri	945	16.10.2023

14.	Sonali T.E.	Jalpaiguri	407	30.12.2023
15.	Ambootia T.E.	Darjeeling	826	10.10.2023
16.	Chongtong TE	Darjeeling	980	28.09.2023
17.	Nagri TE	Darjeeling	813	28.09.2023
18.	Moondakotee TE	Darjeeling	861	24.09.2023

**Source: Annual Report, Tea Board India,2023-2024, Kolkata**

The closed tea gardens in North Bengal can be classified as three categories- some have been closed for more than one decade(Dekhlapara, Kathalguri, Ramjhora, Dalmore, Ringtong, Panighata, Tulsipara, and Demdima), some closed tea gardens were taken by the government but no proper improvement(Dharanipur, Surendranagar, Redbank, Hila), and some tea gardens are in process of liquidation(Rungmookh,-cedars, Rangaroon, Pandam and Mahua). Beside this, a lot of sick tea gardens are under constant threat of abandonment by the management (Gangaram, Nageshwari, Kumlai, Bagrakote, Peshoke Kallej Valley, Kilkott, Garganda, Dhumchi para, Grasmore, Naya Saylee, Sikharpur-Bhandarpur, Rahimabad, Patkapara, Mujnai, Kamala, Denguajhar (Sarkar,2019)

The suddenly closure of the tea garden led to labourers into a state of poverty and helplessness. It is noted that with the closure of the plantations, labourers lose all the benefits or rather minimum benefits they received before its closure and abandonment. Although the Tea Plantation Acts 1951 makes it compulsory for the employer to provide those facilities, but in reality, the labourers were not provided any support from the village panchayat.

There was no qualitative improvement in the life of the tea labourers. A life of the misery becomes order of the day and every day's companion of the tea labourers. Due to the crisis in the tea gardens, owners of the tea estate of North Bengal packed up and locked out the tea gardens throwing the labourers into a misery. All these issues resulted in joblessness, desperation, hunger, poverty and malnutrition among the tea labourers and their families. The labourers and their families are facing into miserable situation of acute vulnerability, mainly women and children. Lack of basic needs such as healthcare facilities, education and employment facilities led to the impoverished situation of the tea labourers which resulting in malnutrition, starvation of death and even suicides. This poverty induced by the closing or abandonment of tea gardens has compelled children of the tea labourers to drop out of school (Rai,2024)

Another most significant socio-political impacts of closed tea gardens in North Bengal are the growing of child labour. According to Centre for Worker's Management (CWM), there are two types of child labour in tea gardens – i) inside tea garden as plantation workers ii) outside the tea plantation for wages. Child labour inside plantation work involves their parents in fulfilling productivity quota to avoid wage deductions and in assisting parents with household job and child care mostly performed by the girl child. On the other hand, child labour outside the plantation work involves the girl child as domestic workers either employed locally else trafficked to big cities. Male children in the closed tea gardens are employed as helpers in shops and restaurants, construction labourers as well as factory labourers. Although, the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 and article 24 of the Indian constitution prohibits child labour, but yet it is still prevalent in the tea gardens of Dooars region of North Bengal. Beside this, in most of the tea garden of Dooars region, hunger, poverty, and unemployment and illiteracy, drop out among the school-going children, malnutrition and diseases are common phenomenon among the tea labourers which further resulted in trafficking of children and women in a large scale (Ibid,2024)

**Conclusion**

Over the last two decades, tea industry in Dooars region have been facing acute crisis. The impact of this crisis is clearly revealed in its worst form in the socio-economic perspective of the Dooars region of Northern part of West Bengal. As a result, a sizeable number of tea gardens have been closed throwing of thousands of labourers lives in uncertainty. The tea labourers who were dependent on the garden for live and livelihood have been worst victims. A lot of pledges and promises is given by the state government as well as central government. But in vain, after winning the election, it goes to the cold storage. The socio-political conditions of the tea labourers had been never changed.

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