

Employment Structure in the Tea Plantations of West Bengal

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Abstract

This paper analyses the trends in labour employment in the tea plantations of West Bengal using secondary evidences. Descriptive statistics has been used to analyse the secondary data. The findings suggest that the main reason behind high engagement of women workers is that work in the tea plantations are to a large extent gender specific. In fact, it is a means to depress the wages and also indicates the presence of feminised labour in tea plantations. The wages of the tea plantation workers are appallingly low. Such meagre wages cannot fulfil the basic needs and achieve fair standard of living, so the socio-economic needs compel the other family members to join the labour force. The management have used the large pool of surplus labour to their advantage by drawing them from the permanent worker

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households since few employment opportunities exist outside the plantation system. The result of which is the high incidence of casual labour. Although 'outside workers' have been increasingly used in the tea plantations all over India but the calculated data shows even more widespread casualisation of the workforce in the tea plantations of West Bengal. The creation of different categories of workers has fostered the development of a highly segmented labour market and led to casualisation of the workforce.

Keywords : *Casualisation, employment, labour, livelihood, women workers.*

Introduction

The tea industry is one of the oldest organised industries in India having a long history of more than 160 years. It plays a significant role in the economic development of our country by generating foreign exchange and employment. The tea industry differs from other industries due to its socio-economic structure, characterised by heavy dependency on manual labour and use of less advanced technology. Plantations are mostly located in backward and rural areas thus providing livelihood and employment to the rural population (Joseph and George, 2010). Most of the plantation workers are unskilled and the plantation industry directly employs more than 2 million workers in India out of which women form 50 percent of the total workforce (Labour Bureau, 2008-09).

Amongst the major tea producing states in India, Assam accounts for the highest average daily employment in tea plantations and has the highest number of women workforce (Labour Bureau, 2014). In addition, the female workers outnumber the male workers across tea producing states. The dominance of women workers is the most striking feature of the plantation industry and is probably responsible for raising national average sex ratio in organised employment (Joshi, 1976). Lack of education, training, skill, low self confidence and low level of exposure to the outside world has caused the workers to be very dependent on the employers. Dismissal from their current employment basically means loss of livelihood as they do not have sufficient livelihood option.

An overview of Tea Plantations in West Bengal

West Bengal presides over 24.8 percent of the total tea cultivation area and produces 26.7 percent of the total tea production in India (Tea Board, 2015). Tea is grown in five districts, namely, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Coochbehar and Uttar Dinajpur. The three hill sub-divisions namely Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong and Mirik of Darjeeling district produce orthodox tea, which is globally known as Darjeeling tea. Darjeeling tea is globally renowned for its aroma and flavour. Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district produces mostly CTC variety of tea and the tea gardens in the region are categorised as Terai Gardens. The tea gardens in Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Coochbehar districts adjoining Terai region, are known as Dooars Gardens. Thus, the northern part of West Bengal specialises in the production of tea, has three major tea producing regions, namely, the Darjeeling hill, Terai and Dooars.

Labour, Employment and Productivity

A profile of the labour force engagement is given in Table 1. It shows that the compound annual growth rate of labour employed from 1950 to 2004 has been negative and lower than the overall (whole India) figure. This clearly indicates that the highly labour intensive tea industry has failed to generate employment for the increasing labour force in recent years.

Table 1: Average Daily Number of Labour Employed in Tea Plantations of West Bengal during 1950-2004

Plantation Region	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2004	CAGR
West Bengal	329034	197165	200280	218848	248671	253459	262672	-0.42%
All India	948598	845166	759646	846659	986781	1210055	1257610	0.52%

Source: Calculated from the data given in various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India

Note: CAGR- Compound Annual Growth Rate

Table 2: Tea Plantations in West Bengal

Year	No. of Tea Estates	Area in Hectares	Average Plantation Size	Plantation Workers	Average Workers per Plantation
1950	296	79641	269.1	329034	1112
1960	303	82331	271.7	197165	651
1974	297	88224	297.1	199793	673
1980	305	93497	306.5	218848	718
1990	347	101170	291.6	248671	717
2000	1540	107479	69.8	253459	165
2004	8709	114003	13.1	262672	30

Source: Calculated from the data given in various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India.

Tables 2 and 3 reveals that since 2000, the growth in the number of tea estates has been phenomenal but there is a sharp decline in the average plantation size from 269.1 hectares in 1950 to 13.1 hectares in 2004 and average number of workers per tea estate from 1112 in 1950 to 30 in 2004. Despite having low productivity of 24634 kg per tea estate and large plantation area measuring 114003 hectares in 2004, the worker employed per hectare is the lowest that is 2.30 but the productivity per hectare is 1882 kg and productivity per worker is 817 kg which is also the highest compared to all the years.

Table 3: Productivity of Worker in the Tea Plantations of West Bengal

Year	Tea Production (in Th kg)	Productivity per Tea Estate (in kg)	Worker per hectare	Productivity per hectare (in Kg)	Productivity Per worker (in Kg)
1950	81464	275216	4.13	1023	248
1960	81523	269053	2.39	990	413
1974	118028	397401	2.26	1338	591
1980	133185	436672	2.34	1424	609
1990	149753	431565	2.46	1480	602
2000	181536	117881	2.36	1689	716
2004	214541	24634	2.30	1882	817

Source: Various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India.

Category and Composition of Workers

The labour force constitutes of four categories of workers viz: male, female, adolescents and children¹. The Child Labour (Abolition & Regulation) Act, 1986 prohibited the employment of children below 14 years of age, so now there exists only three categories of workers. Before the implementation of the Act, children were another source of cheap labour and were paid half the adult wage. The employment of children workers was the characteristic feature of the plantation system. From the table it can be seen that up to 1990, children workers were employed on the tea plantations and in fact they outnumbered the adolescent workers. The children workers in fact outnumbered the adolescent workers. Table 4 shows that the share of women workers has increased from 46% in 1961 to 51% in 2004. The annual compound growth rate of women workers (0.93%) is the highest when compared with the annual compound growth rate of the total labour force (0.71%). Plantation sector accounts for the largest female organised employment and is probably responsible for enhancing the national average sex ratio in organised employment (Joshi, 1976). Women's docility, dispensability and low absenteeism makes them very attractive to employers. The main reason behind the high employment of women is that work in the tea plantations are to a large extent gender specific (Mukherjee, 2007). Plucking of tea leaves is the most important activity in the tea plantations. Women workforce is exclusively engaged in the plucking of tea owing to their nimble

fingers and greater dexterity. As a matter of fact, widespread employment of women workers by the planters is to keep the wages depressed (Bhowmik, 1982) and high employment of women workers does not entail higher productivity per worker or per hectare, however, it is an indication of the presence of feminised labour in tea plantations.

Table 4: Category-Wise Average Daily Number of Labour Employed in the Tea Plantations of West Bengal, 1961-2004.

Year	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
1950	-	-	-	-	329034
1961	90285 (47)	89854 (46)	6384 (3)	6988 (4)	193511 (100)
1974	85278 (43)	95557 (48)	6667 (3)	12291 (6)	199793 (100)
1980	97374 (45)	100388 (46)	9005 (4)	12081 (5)	218848 218848 (100)
1990	114003 (46)	119889 (48)	5821 (2)	8958 (4)	248671 (100)
2000	118177 (47)	128399 (51)	6883 (2)		253459 (100)
2004	122983 (47)	133702 (51)	5987 (2)		262672 (100)
CAGR (%)	0.72	0.93	-0.15		0.71

Source: Various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India

Note: Figure in the bracket indicate the percentage in the total labour force. For the year 1950, data on labour employed was not available for the categories of workers. Hence, the CAGR for male, female and adolescent workers is calculated from the year 1961-2004.

Nature of Employment

In the tea plantation depending on the nature of employment, there are two kinds of workers: permanent and temporary workers. During the peak season, when there is sufficient amount of flush and extra hands are needed, the managements hire temporary workers to meet the seasonal needs of the plantation (Kar, 1984). The management have used the large pool of surplus labour to their advantage by drawing them from the permanent worker households since few employment opportunities exist outside the plantation system. The result of which is the high incidence of casual labour (Bhowmik, 2011). Besides wages the benefits admissible to permanent workers are: (1.) Free housing accommodation, (2.) Contribution towards Provident Fund, (3.) Free medical care, (4.) Leave with wages, (5.) Provision of firewood, (6.) Subsidised ration and free tea leaf, (7.) Bonus and (8.) Gratuity. The temporary or casual workers who work for a maximum period of 150 days can avail the benefits 3, 4, 6 and 7.

Apart from the permanent resident workers and the temporary or casual workers there has emerged a new category of ‘*outside*’ workers who are hired as permanent outside workers and temporary outside workers (Sankrityayana, 2006). From Table 5, it is evident that the share of outside workers has been increasing

while the share resident workers show a decreasing trend. In the outside worker category, it is noticed that the share of temporary workers has been on the increase. The annual compound growth rate of outside workers for West Bengal is 2.72, which is higher than that of the resident workers 0.21. In West Bengal, temporary outside workers increased from 8% in 1965 to 25% in 2000 but fell to 11% in 2004. However, the annual compound growth rate of outside temporary workers is 2.61, which is lower than that of outside permanent worker that is 3.04. On the other hand for the rest of India's tea growing states the annual compound growth rate of outside workers is 2.61 and for the resident workers is 0.50. The temporary outside workers increased from 5% in 1965 to 40% in 2000 but fell to 19% in 2004. The annual compound growth rate of outside temporary workers is 3.29, which is higher than that of outside permanent workers that is 1.38.

In the overall comparison between the West Bengal tea plantations and the rest of India's tea growing states, it is seen that the annual compound growth rate of outside workers is highest in West Bengal that is 2.72. Although outside workers have been increasingly used in the tea plantations all over India but the calculations show even more widespread casualisation of the workforce in the tea plantations of West Bengal. This phenomenon enables the tea estates to carry smaller amount of labour force on permanent basis. To avoid the financial liabilities, outside workers are employed who are entitled only to draw the money wage and none of the statutory non-wage workers do. They are easy to hire and fire as and when necessary. Employers now use the existence

of casual labour to depress the general wage levels. Thus, there was the creation of different categories of plantation workers that fostered the development of a highly segmented labour market (Sankrityayana, 2006).

Table 5: Category of Resident and Outside Workers during 1965-2004

Year	Resident Workers		Outside Workers				Total Outside Workers	
			Permanent		Temporary			
	West Bengal	All India*	West Bengal	All India*	West Bengal	All India*	West Bengal	All India*
1965	202865 (93)	596076 (86)	3791 (2)	43550 (6)	11054 (5)	55845 (8)	14845 (7)	99395 (14)
1972	204961 (94)	539536 (83)	4318 (2)	39847 (6)	8175 (4)	69446 (11)	12493 (6)	109293 (17)
1980	211145 (92)	551002 (81)	6221 (3)	37979 (6)	11339 (5)	94836 (13)	17560 (8)	132815 (19)
1990	223483 (92)	474763 (79)	4672 (2)	35254 (6)	14019 (6)	88043 (15)	18691 (8)	123297 (21)
2000	198849 (55)	637378 (67)	12083 (5)	73754 (8)	42527 (40)	245132 (25)	54610 (45)	318886 (33)
2004	220332 (84)	723418 (73)	12200 (5)	74292 (8)	30140 (11)	197228 (19)	42340 (16)	271520 (27)
CAGR	0.21	0.50	3.04	1.38	2.61	3.29	2.72	2.61

Source: Calculated from the data given in various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India

Note *: excludes West Bengal

Figure in the bracket is the percentage of resident workers and outside workers in the total labour force

Methods of Wage Payments

Time-rating and piece-rating are the two common ways of remunerating labour services in the tea gardens. Time-rate system pays the worker according to the amount of time spent in plucking whereas in the piece-rate system workers are paid according to the quantity of leaves plucked. The piece rate system is not applicable in the case of factory workers despite being daily wage earners. They work for eight hours a day to earn the daily rate of wages (Field Survey, 2018). In West Bengal the piece-rating modes are ‘thika’(task) and ‘doubly’(extra task). In the Dooars and Terai regions of West Bengal, wage payments are generally made on the basis of ‘thika’ and ‘doubli’. The ‘thika’ is the first task fixed for the morning and ‘doubli’ is the second task set out for the afternoon. The ‘doubli’ is smaller than ‘thika’ but the rates are the same for both. The dearness allowance is paid for both ‘thika’ and ‘doubli’ (Mukherjee, 2007). In the Darjeeling hills, the entire work is paid on ‘thika’ basis as the workers are engaged in fine plucking, two leaves and a bud. It takes around six to eight hours to complete the task. The workers are entitled to earn ‘extra leaf price’ for every kilogram plucked above the base quota. Every worker, whether permanent or temporary, young or old, experienced or inexperienced, receives the same wage (Field Survey, 2018).

The wages of the daily-rated tea plantation workers are revised in every three years through Wage Agreements. At present the workers are paid Rs. 132.50 per day and their wages are due for revision since 01.04.2017 which is less than the prescribed

National Floor Level Minimum Wage (Rs.176 per day). Workers are also entitled to food grains at concessional rates. The subsidy forms a part of the worker's wage. A worker is entitled to weekly ration of 1 kg rice and 2.26 kg of wheat at the rate of 0.40 paisa per kg. For every bonafide adult dependent in the age group of 12 to 18 years, 1 kg of rice and 1.44 kg of wheat and for every bonafide minor dependent in the age group of 2 to 12 years 500gm of rice and 720 gm of wheat is provided at the same rate. These rations are linked to the worker's attendance. If a worker is absent from work, the wages and rations are deducted proportionately (Government of West Bengal, 2011). Even after taking the subsidised food grains into consideration, the wages of the tea workers in West Bengal are significantly lower compared to that of the South Indian tea plantation workers.

Conclusion

The income of the tea workers in West Bengal is insufficient to meet the basic needs of the family. Lack of livelihood, either as supplemental or alternative income sources has been a common problem among the tea worker households and is perceived to be one of the major causes of poverty. Hill areas are particularly vulnerable to poverty due to their inaccessibility, fragility, marginality and diversity. Especially vulnerable are those with very little land, the landless, and through them their dependents. Majority of the rural population are employed in the tea gardens and working in the tea garden is already the livelihood of last resort. The lack of access to education, training and other skills explains their dependence on labour-intensive activities and

their dependence on employers. The temporary or casual workers who constitute a bulk of the labour force cannot reap the benefits of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951.

The trade unions should play an active role by coercing the management to switch the casual workers into the permanent work force. Moreover, they should improve wages by pursuing a wage-bargaining strategy in solidarity, weighted in favour of the working class and in favour of fulfilling the norms set by the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 while also ensuring at least National Floor Level Minimum Wages for the workers. The study exclusively focuses on the employment structure in the tea plantations and in the course of study certain limitations were faced mainly Tea Statistics were unavailable after the year 2004. This study could be taken as a beginning and there remains further scope for studying other issues to enable a deeper understanding of myriad problems the tea plantations workers are faced with. Besides, the government's employment schemes and anti-poverty measures should be implemented effectively to benefit the poor tea workers in the area and to incorporate them in the developmental process.

Notes:

¹ Male and female workers are adult workers who are above 18 years of age. Adolescents are workers between 16 to 18 years of age and children are workers between 12 to 16 years of age (Tea Board of India, 2004).

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