



The Grievous Fettle of Tea Garden Toilers and Their Coeval Social Footing

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ABSTRACT

The famous novelist Leo Tolstoy in his epoch making creation 'Anna Karenina' once voiced – "But every acquisition that is disproportionate to the labor spent on it is dishonest." These famous words of famous novelist are true in the life of labourers in Indian context. Tea Industry is one of the oldest industries in India. In India, the four main tea-producing states are Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Tamilnadu. Tea is also grown in parts of Tripura and Himachal Pradesh. There are more than one million workers in the Tea industry comprising mainly of scheduled castes, tribes and ethnic minorities of which more than 50% are women. But based on a GNRTFN fact finding mission (FFM). "Life without dignity- the price of your cup of Tea highlights the woman rights violations and abuses that India's tea labourers have endured for generations in particular of their right to adequate food and nutrition (RTFN) and related rights." This paper will focus on the life style of tea garden labourers in India.

Key words – Industry, Tea-garden, labourers, work, abuses etc.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper can be-

- i) To highlight the real plight of Tea labourers in India.
- ii) To point out the different hardships and obstacles that these labourer have to go through.
- iii) To Chalk out the pathetic life style of these labourers.
- iv) To point out indifference of industrialists to these ill-fated labourers.

Literature Review

Life of Tea labourers had has been a great subject to deal with. Researchers have their different articles, books, seminar, journal on this topic. One such reputed book is 'The Secret of the Tea Garden' by Trotter in which the essayist beautifully describes the untold story of the labourers in a Tea garden. Another seminal book on this very topic is Jeff Kochler's "Darjeeling- A History of the World's Greatest Tea". The book is a fascinating portrait of the region and a story rich in intrigue and empire, full of adventure and romance, illuminating the historic arcane and changing world of this celebrated tea.

Introduction-

Tea plantation was started at a time when there was no concept of civil rights and slavery was legal in America. The first tea plantation in Darjeeling was established in 1852, during the industrial revolution. The business model with the primary objective of profit maximization. The colonial set up left by the British is still in place run by the neo-colonialists. The tea-workers and their families who have lived and worked for more than 150 years now contributing to both the state and national exchequers for generations have no land rights. Daily wage earners, the main stakeholders have never received the profits in the form of wage or bonus. The labour in the plantation are the most exploited workforce in the organized sector where the licence of the tea Labourers should be aware of their rights and the people who are informed on Labour rights, must guide them. The inspirational story of 4000 odd tea estate workers of Kannan Devan Hills Plantations must be shared as much as possible. In September 2015, the women tea workers

filled the streets of Munnar hill station without any trade union and political leaders. The women workers alleged that the trade union leaders had cheated them and was not working on their behalf but in the favour of the management. The women protest was successful and their demand of 20% Bonus was accepted by the management without any trade union leaders.

The life of the people who live in the tea gardens was altogether a different one, toiling eight hours a day under certain disciplines. So the nature of job they were engaged is more important; to understand their life in the plantations. The planters put the immigrants in the confinement of the tea garden labour 'line' to avoid any kind of outside influences over them. About a century they were aloof completely unknown of the change situation of the country. Many changes take place during this period, the country gained the independence, but very little of the changes were known to them. This was due to the special measure taken by the planters not to allow any influence of the independent movement on them. The tea gardens were a kind of independent states within the country in those days. The managers of the garden enjoyed magisterial power to arrest defaulter or deserter of the garden and to punish them. The poor labourers had to work ten to twelve hours a day but could not earn their wages. Because wages were given on *nirikh* work on completion of a certain limit or work for day. The *nirikh* work was such that even healthy worker could not complete it in till. This way, out of a week they were given the or four day's wages.

A small quantity of and other materials were also provided to them by the management, so that they need not go out to purchase it. Weekly and fortnightly markets were arranged for them inside the garden premises. Permission was different according to the main two seasons of the year. The summer season is used for harvesting seasons of the green leaves and manufacture it. The works of the winter season done on *nirikh* system; tough enough to get full wages; while the summer works sometime allowed with *thika* works; making the workers more harvest. A small number of workers, mostly the males are engaged manufacturing work in the factory during late night when the temperature is suitable the tea. The manufacturing work followed the time bound discipline and without from the factory manager to the shorting rolling *babu* and all the workers are engaged in this continuous process. The extra works provided with extra benefits, called *thika*. In such a busy and detached situation, the life style and the socio-cultural activities they borrowed from their forefathers saw no habituated with hard lives, they could not think about changes in their lifestyle. Gardens remained as private properties and impregnable, so organized protest was impossible. Even the trade union movement came among them lately and only after independence. However, situations changed after independence. The white managers from the tea garden began to replacing their posts to the native managing. The native managers had also no conclude with the Indian national sentiment and more suppressive. So, in true sense, independence could not come to the laboring people of the tea gardens of Assam when the entire country enjoyed it in 1947.

After the independence, the Congress already you have come to know that the people who had been recruited for the tea plantations between 1840 and 1950 belong to the different parts of the country. These states were originally divided into a number of cultural regions with small principalities and therefore the people immigrated carried them varieties of cultural differences. Dialect also varies from region to region, to caste and tribe to tribe; unintelligible to another. With these varieties, they began the life in the plantation, in a similar condition provided by the planters. Initially, they had to face a number of difficulties during interaction with their co-worker. The garden management on their part was successful to find out some persons from among them, who could the tea garden community is composed of two main groups. The tribal people of the hilly tracks of Chotanagpur plateau including its adjacent areas and the scattered castes from the semi-plains of the eastern and central India. They are such tribes with their individual dialects and clans. The originated from the agricultural groups be classified linguistically as several so groups such as Bengali, Bhojpuri, Chhatisgarhi, Kortha, Kurmal and Paar Porgonia, Telegu and Tamil speaking people. In the environment of tea garden, their languages intermixed with each other and at present none can speak the pure regional languages originally belonging to them. This is due to their common living style in the lines of the tea garden.

As part of a larger qualitative study, 16 FGDs were carried out with India's tea industry is one of the oldest private employers in the world. In the North Eastern state of Assam, nearly one in five persons is employed in the plantation sector, relying on estate for employment as well as a range of services including housing, water, health, education, and many facilities that affect the daily lives of worker. This has been historically shaped by the practice, by British companies since the nineteenth century, of coercively bringing low caste (Dalits or untouchable caste), poverty-stricken, landless and tribal (Adivasi or Indigenous) populations from central and southern India to the state, since local agriculturalists refused to work on plantations. Women were key to this process, ensuring social reproduction and regeneration of the workforce, in addition to performing select tasks (like plucking) with greater quality. Once India gained independence, in 1951 a Plantation Labour Act (PLA) legitimize a key – and exploitative-occupational feature of plantations in the colonial era : wages have remained low, because in-kind benefits related to housing and social welfare are to be provided to workers as per the Act. The net effect has been stasis : as the colonial period, tea plantations continue to control the lives of their workers in a parallel governance structure, with little active involvement by the State.

Workers over generations remain landless and landlocked, facing myriad forms of marginalization. While poor conditions of plantation workers and non-compliance of PLA in Assam have been documented by several national and international organizations, far less is known about the health and well-being of women workers. What is known is that more than 50% of the labour force in plantation estates is women as it is believed that "soft hands and nimble fingers of women" are suited for plucking tea leaves. Studies also suggest that women in plantation estates are more likely to have severe anaemia, be married early and have high parity.

The most valued brand of all the tea around the world is our own homegrown Darjeeling Tea which has a tag like “champagne of tea” and some refer to Darjeeling as “Mecca of tea”. The total tea production in Darjeeling is less than 1% as compared to the gross national production. However, the quality of Darjeeling tea has always attracted the international market and most of the premium quality tea are all exported to the foreign countries. DARJEELING word and logo is the first Geographical Indications to be registered in India, under Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999. The DARJEELING logo is copyright protected and registered with the Copyright Act, 1957. Darjeeling word and logo are protected as Geographical.

Economic condition

The tea garden community can be divided into two major groups. (i) The tea garden labors living and working in the tea garden and (ii) the tea garden laborers living in the neighboring villages occupying limited plots of land provided by the planters against a very nominal tax which was under the free gran land. A few of them are also successful acquire lands in the villages and they, permanently engage in agricultural action. The former group is fulltime worker in the garden earn their bread by working for production of tea. The later are named as tea garden laborers depend mainly on their cultivation.

Besides there are two other groups which things than what they required for survival.

The economic condition of the Ex-tea garden laborers is equally deplorable. Many of them use to meet their shortage of food by working in the neighboring gardens during plucking season. Very few could depend on their cultivation. Due to shortage of land a vast number of them become wage earr outside the garden in other industries enterprises. A small number of them drivers, handymen, craftsmen, carper mason worker, iron worker, road labour mechanics, electrician etc. All of them newly emerged skilled workers, but as not trained in the ITI or such institutes, and without a certificate cannot claim for proper placing in the employment. They form the cheap rated artisans under the different enterprises including the plantations.

No Health benefits

Under the plantation labour act 1951 PLA, each tea garden should have health centre with proper medical facilities. However the gardens are remotely located and the health centre the located in the district towns. The workers donot have proper connectivity to this centres. There is maternity benefit schemes available for the female tea garden workers. It has been found that women are engaged in heart jobs even during pregnancy and post-natal period. In spite of this, the poor living condition make this labourous vulnerable to various communicable diseases. According to a research report, the major health problems faced by the laboureres are warn infection, respiratory problems, diarrhea, skin infections etc. In spite of this there are some who suffer from under feeding and some health problems are due to the excessive use of alcohol and tobacco.

Educational problems

Education plays a very pivotable part in building a nation. So, education is not only essential but need too. But the rate of education among the tea labourers is very poor. Because a poverty the men do not send their children to school. The drop out rate in the school is also very high there. The children are forced to do either domestic work or to help their parents at work. In such a condition education become luxury to them. However recently, the education among the tea labourers is increasing day by day. But problems are ther and hopefully they will come slowly to the world of education.

Conclusion

So, from the above discussion it is crystal clear that tea-workers are not receiving adequate living wages and their working conditions are physically arduous. Without protective equipments, those who spray tea-bushes are regularly exposed to pesticides. Female tea plackaers around half of the work force suffer from violations of their human rights. As a general rule, women workers are subject to violations of their maternity rights and benefits and face rampant discrimination at work. The wages they receive are less than those of men. But situations must be changed and both central and state governments must stretch their hands to assist them to restore themselves to the mainstream of peacefully normal life.

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