

# Despair and defiance - Tea-garden workers in India: history & present struggles

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**Tea-garden workers in India and the oppressive conditions and obstacles in mobilising.**

***This article is a part of the web-exclusive series from our latest issue 'Labour and its Discontents' (March 2015).***

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India's tea sector is driven in large part by Assam and West Bengal, which account for over 70 percent of the country's tea production. There are at least one million tea workers employed on more than 1000 tea gardens in these two eastern states. The 150-year-old tea industry is one of the region's economic pillars, and contributes to the livelihoods of up to seven million people.

West Bengal, the largest tea growing state in India after Assam, is known for producing Darjeeling tea. More than 21 percent of India's total tea production comes from here. In the north of the state in areas such as Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars, there are around 270 gardens employing upwards of 260,000 workers. Major companies such as Tata Tea, Williamson Magor Group, Goodricke Group and Duncans Group are heavily involved in the state's tea industry, and the Williamson Magor Group is investing USD 20 million in order to expand its market presence.

The rolling tea estates of north Bengal hide the realities of malnutrition and starvation-related deaths. More than 100 people have reportedly died in five closed tea gardens since January 2014. However, the current Trinamool Congress (TMC) government in the state, like its predecessor the Left Front government, refuses to acknowledge that these deaths are related to difficult working conditions. Unofficial estimates put the death toll of workers and their families in Dooars and Terai at more than 1000 since 2002.

The tea industry - one of the most profitable industries in the country - has enriched plantation owners while tea-garden workers have remained impoverished. They currently receive a daily wage of INR 122 (USD 2) per day. In comparison, the wage rate for workers in West Bengal under the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme is INR 174 (USD 3), and the minimum wage set by the state government for agricultural labourers is INR 206 (pending revision). It is a particularly unfortunate situation considering that the pay received by plantation workers, who are assumed to be part of the organised sector, is even lower than the wages in the unorganised sector.

The lack of a fair wage standard in the tea industry that keeps pace with changes in day-to-day economic realities means that tea workers are paid the lowest wages in comparison to any other workers in the organised sector. Employers have neglected to develop a fair structure of wages mandated by the last Central Wage Board for Tea Plantation Industry in 1966. Their real wages – which are not linked to the rising Consumer Price Index – have stagnated over the last 50 years, leading to growing distress, migration and unrest.

### **Rampant violations**

The Plantation Labour Act 1951 (PLA) was created to establish certain social and economic rights for workers in various plantation sectors. The Act attempted to address the rights of workers, many of whom are descendants of millions of indentured workers forcibly uprooted from their native lands and brought to plantation areas. Under the Act, the responsibility of ensuring decent working and living conditions falls on plantation owners. However, a detailed survey conducted by West Bengal's labour department of the state's tea gardens tells a different story, revealing evidence of mismanagement and abominable labour practices. The major findings of the survey include the following: six tea estates have not provided any housing for their workers; 51 tea estates have not provided housing to half or more of their workers; 44 tea estates do not have any latrine; and workers in 12 Dooars region tea estates live without any electricity.

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Furthermore, tea workers face problems with drinking water supply, both in terms of quality and quantity. Access to healthcare is also a major concern: out of 273 tea estates only 166 have hospitals, and of these, only 56 have full-time residential doctors and 116 do not have a nurse on site. Workers in 113 tea estates experience even worse healthcare access as these estates do not have a primary health centre.

The above-mentioned statistics and other findings of the report clearly indicate that tea-garden owners run their operations as they see fit, violating all rules and the basic provisions of the PLA. Basic provisions of housing and upkeep, toilets, crèches, drinking water, medical facilities and electricity that are mentioned in the PLA have fallen by the wayside.

A number of tea gardens in the region regularly fail to deposit the amount deducted from workers for their provident funds. According to the report, 41 tea estates did not deposit any amount for contributions to provident funds in 2012-13. In 46 tea estates, the total due to provident funds from workers' contribution was INR 17.1 crore, while in 55 tea estates, the total due to provident funds on the part of management contributions was INR 33.7 crore. Further, 22 tea estates did not pay gratuity to any workers from 2009-10 to 2012-13. While workers toil away, management and owners have benefited from an atmosphere of silence and inaction on the part of the government.

### **Difficult conditions**

At a time when domestic demand for tea is soaring and retail brands are selling tea products at high prices, workers are being paid a pittance and find themselves in a spiral of destitution. The prized gardens of the Darjeeling hills are exporting orthodox tea and also different varieties of organic tea that sell at premium prices. Collusion between tea companies and the government has led to suppression of wages in the industry. According to media reports, workers' families and trade unions, such dismal wages have contributed to the wholesale migration of workers, particularly men,

out of the gardens, resulting in severe absenteeism ranging from 25 to 40 percent of the workforce.

Wages have stagnated while living costs have increased sharply. Workers' savings are almost non-existent, increasing their insecurity and vulnerability, and many are forced to take on extra work to supplement their wages. With a large portion of their earnings going to procure bare necessities, workers find that they have little money left for expenditures such as clothing, healthcare and school fees. Additionally, the rise in food prices over the past decade has forced a reduction in the amount of food consumed because workers simply cannot afford to buy what they need. As a result, there is widespread malnutrition, and medical studies have found that a majority of the children living in tea estates are underweight.

The tea workers face the additional threat of owners closing or abandoning tea estates. Tea gardens are large and often geographically isolated, making their workers completely dependent upon them for their livelihoods. When owners abandon estates, workers are left to starve. The threat of closing down a garden is conveniently used by the owners to neutralise demands by workers for their legitimate dues.

A recent report by the Right to Food and Work Campaign-West Bengal states:

*"The procession of death remains unabated in the closed tea gardens. We had reported yesterday of 3 persons we had met in Bandapani Tea Gardens who were near death. Unfortunately, the first news we have got this morning is of the death of Mukesh Goala, one of these three persons. It has induced in all of us a feeling of great helplessness and anger at the injustice of life in the tea estates, where on the one hand owners make huge profits, paying a measly wage of Rs. 95 to workers, abandoning gardens with impunity and on the other hand young men like Mukesh Goala die untimely deaths due to hunger and poverty. The death remains unregistered in any official record and unmarked, part of many such unknown tragedies that take place here every day."*

The team visited several closed tea gardens and identified three people who were close to death. They also made it clear to the Minister of Food and Civil Supplies in West Bengal that these "are only the people we were able to meet during our brief visit. There are many such other people and a complete survey by the Government would help to identify other such people." However, the government remained a mute spectator.

### **A means of accumulation**

The earliest traces of plantation, known as latifundia, were present during the Roman Empire and produced wine and olive oil for export. The modern plantation came into existence with the expansion of European colonial powers into the 'New World'. Werner Sombart, an influential German economist and sociologist in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, argued that plantations were the first truly large-scale capitalist organisations in human history. According to Sombart, the plantation economies of the New World helped spark the capitalistic engines of Europe.

In India, the first attempts to plant tea were undertaken in 1774, during Warren Hastings' rule as governor general of Bengal. However, the experiments with the Chinese seeds did not produce much of a result. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Bruce, an employee of the East India Company, came across native tea plants growing in the upper Brahmaputra valley. Although according to another account, it was the Assamese nobleman Maniram Dewan who introduced Robert Bruce to the plant in 1823. Dewan was also the first Indian planter, for which he earned the wrath of the British. He was later executed on charges of conspiracy and participation in the 1857 Sepoy rebellion. As experiments with native bushes and the Chinese seedlings were carried forward, it was the former

which flourished while the latter struggled to survive in the intense Assam heat. Subsequent plantings used seedlings from the native tea bush, and the first tea made from indigenous Assam leaf was shipped to London in 1838 and sold at auctions.

***Tea production on plantations represented the first large-scale capitalist enterprise introduced by the British rulers.***

This led to the establishment of a successful plantation industry in Assam's Brahmaputra valley. Along with its expansion into other districts of Assam, such as Cachar, organised cultivation began in Darjeeling in the mid-1850s. Interestingly, the Chinese tea variety thrived at higher elevations of 2500 to 6000 feet. The East India Company pushed into the Himalayan foothills of Terai and Dooars. At the same time, tea plantations picked up in the Nilgiri Hills of the Madras Presidency in southern India.

Both in Assam and in the areas of Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars in Bengal, tea production on plantations represented the first large-scale capitalist enterprise introduced by the British rulers. The plantations depended on industrial bureaucratic structures, but also combined elements of pre-capitalist exploitation of the tea-garden labourers. Despite the fact that plantations employed wage labourers, the system of recruitment, retention and utilisation started with an institutionalised apparatus driven by extra-economic coercion.

The initial workforce in Assam's tea gardens was made up of the Bodo Kacharis and others among the local Adivasi population. However, the rapid expansion of the tea plantations in Assam and Bengal led to an acute shortage of labour. To keep up with growing demand, the British forcefully imported labour from the Chota Nagpur, Santhal Parganas and Nepal. People from Oraon, Munda, Santhal and other Adivasi communities were brought in as indentured workers. Since the initial days, workers in the plantations were engaged and recruited through agents known as arkattis. These arkattis trapped poverty-stricken Adivasi people from the western parts of Bengal, and the eastern parts of what were then known as the United Provinces and the Central Province. Earlier, the colonial state had attempted to establish control over the forest resources in India, which Adivasis had depended on for their livelihood for generations. Under British control of forests, Adivasis were forced out of areas they relied on for resources and sustenance. Dispossessed and severely immiserated, they were then coerced into migrating for work on tea plantations. These workers not only worked on plantations, but they also cleared thick forests to pave way for the tea gardens.

The colonial government framed laws to expedite an unrestrained supply of labour to the planters. It tied workers to the plantation initially for three years with the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act 1859. Under the Act, a breach of contract by workers could result in severe penalties and even imprisonment. Formalised during the period from 1863 to 1882, the Special Act of Assam enabled planters to arrest any 'recalcitrant' or 'insubordinate' worker without the possibility of recourse. The tea workers were kept secluded and their movement was restricted in the estates, and any attempt to run away invited severe punishment, including public flogging. They were subject to inhumane conditions, an unhygienic environment, exposure to diseases and inadequate food. Even the government-appointed Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1906 admitted that:

*"Many of these coolies had been recruited on false representations and were quite unfit to stand the climate. They were unable and unwilling to work, the speculator however, could not afford to wait, and he was often bound by the terms of the lease to clear one-eighth of his grant within five years. The result was that gross cruelty was frequently resorted to. The flogging of coolies for doing short work was common and absconders when recovered were also flogged. Hill men were rewarded for arresting absconders and the amount of the reward deducted from the absconders' pay. Between 1<sup>st</sup> May 1863 and 1<sup>st</sup> May 1866, 84,915 labourers were 'landed in the tea districts: out of these*

*considerably over 30,000 had died by 30<sup>th</sup> June 1866. Between 1<sup>st</sup> July 1865 and 30<sup>th</sup> June 1866, 9,147 labourers died and 8,187 deserted. As it is certain that the majority of the deserters died, the deaths on a total labour force of about 40,000 are estimated to have exceeded 11,000 in a twelve-month.”*

The nature of capital accumulation in the plantations is the beginning of what Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg would term as ‘capitalist accumulation with forms of slavery and serfdom’. In this case, even if the relations of production were capitalist, the mode of exploitation was quite often pre-capitalist.

Plantations around the world are enclaves and India is no exception. British planter administrators were absolute lords enjoying certain quasi-judicial powers supposedly for the maintenance of the law of the estates, a tradition taken over by the Indian capitalists and their bureaucratic managerial apparatus – though the extent of non-economic coercion has reduced to some extent. The estates function in a way that makes them almost a ‘complete world’ around which the workers’ lives evolve and revolve.

The plantation system’s special requirements with regard to labour led to the imposition of a mode of control and authority over workers. This, in turn, produced characteristics among tea workers that differentiated them from other wage labourers. Since its inception, the plantation production system needed an uneducated, docile, low-paid and guaranteed supply of labour, a trend that continues even today. Famished and mostly illiterate, they are virtually chained to their gardens with rare opportunities for job mobility. They are also separated from dominant and ‘mainstream’ populations of the state, and are at the receiving end of bias, prejudice, cultural contempt and caste hatred. With nowhere else to go, tea workers represent an isolated population condemned to remote economic enclaves.

Another factor which keeps workers tied to the gardens is the monopoly over land maintained by plantation owners. Workers do not have entitlement over lands where their roots go back centuries, leaving them at the mercy of planters and dependent on company housing. The owners take advantage of this weakness, particularly when workers decide to leave the job or retire. In these cases, children or other family members are made to compulsorily work in order to retain shelter.

### **Role of trade unions**

Attempts to unionise started during the freedom movement, and management recognised the first tea worker’s union after Independence. The initial period witnessed collective struggles with workers winning a number of rights like those guaranteed in the PLA, pensions and gratuity, bonuses and minimum wages. The period between late 1940s to late 1960s witnessed militant labour actions and strong resistance led by workers, which faced violent opposition and repression from the combined forces of the post-Independence Indian government and colonial planters.

However, things changed with the coming to power of the Left Front government in West Bengal. The workers were totally absorbed by the unions owing allegiance to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, but the unions themselves turned into agencies of the ruling parties that had decided to appease owners to the detriment of workers. A classic example of this is the wage agreement of 2005, where the interests of workers were sacrificed despite the significant extent of unionisation – with Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) as the main union – and the state being led by the Left Front government. Not only was the wage increment minimal, but owners and the West Bengal government introduced a provision linking wages to productivity. Such a system of wages compels workers to deliver an agreed productivity level to earn their basic daily

wage. If they fail to achieve the desired productivity, there is a cut in the daily wage. In the case of picking tea leaves, putting targets in place has had harmful consequences. Tea pickers, who are usually women, often take their children to assist in the work in order to meet targets. This has contributed to the return of child labour in the industry.

### ***The wave of militancy faded as many of the unions capitulated in February 2015.***

The position of women in the industry and their relationship to trade unions is also instructive. Though women form over 50 percent of the labour force in tea plantations, the industry maintains an oppressive gender hierarchy. Women are rarely seen in supervisory positions of staff or sub-staff, and their presence is overwhelming at the lowest paid level of work. Until the Equal Remuneration Act 1976 was passed, women were paid lower wages than men. Not surprisingly, women's participation in trade union activities has been low, and one rarely finds them in leadership roles. The divide between women and men prevails in every aspect of the workers' lives, and this unfortunately hinders the involvement of women in trade unions.

### **Reneging on renewal**

The tea gardens of Dooars and Terai witnessed an upsurge led by Adivasis initially under the banner of Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad (ABAVP) since 2010. In fact, it is Adivasi identity that has been associated with experiences of oppression and marginalisation but also resistance over generations. This upsurge toppled established unions and created new militant ones, including the Progressive Tea Workers Union (PTWU), making a kind of assertion not seen in a very long time. Due to strong pressure from the grassroots expressed through the new unions, for the first time a strong joint fight for the implementation of minimum wages emerged in 2014. In an industry otherwise fragmented by numerous unions and fraught with inter-union rivalry, a joint struggle was conceived with a successful strike in November 2014. The unity forged by almost all trade unions in the midst of adversity was also a significant development. Workers' demands for minimum wages in the industry resonated across the gardens and estates.

However, the wave of militancy faded as many of the unions capitulated in February 2015. With the exception of the Progressive Plantation Workers Union (PPWU), the other unions signed a wage agreement with the government and owners. This agreement entails meagre wage increases for the period from 2014 to 2017. After more than a year of struggle and eight tripartite meetings where the unions held their ground, it was unfortunate to see unions, owners and the government once again signing an agreement that in effect provides similar starvation wages to tea-plantation workers. Even with the increase of wages, it comes nowhere close to the consistently articulated demand by the workers for minimum wages. Nor does it even put the wages of tea-plantation workers on par with wages in other sectors.

By signing an agreement that brings little benefit, the unions have not delivered for their rank-and-file members even after a period of struggle and sustained efforts to highlight the demand for minimum wages. The only face-saver is the formation of a committee by the state government to forward the proposal on minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act 1948. However, in the absence of any deadline, the terms of the committee are vague.

In an industry that is synonymous with some of the worst labour practices in the country, the struggle for better working conditions is necessarily a long one. Given the prevailing situation, a number of mobilisations are likely to galvanise in the coming months and years. The crystallisation of forces from below seems to be the key for tea workers in their quest for dignity and justice.

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\* Labour and its discontents - Himal Southasian Vol 28 No 1. 21 APRIL 2015:

<http://himalmag.com/despair-defiance-tea-garden-workers-india/?currentPage=all>

\* This article is part of the web-exclusive series from our latest issue 'Labour and its Discontents'.

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<http://himalmag.com/announcement/labour-and-its-discontents/>

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