

India: After the Floods, a Way Forward for Kerala's Tea Plantation Sector

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The state has an opportunity to re-build a strong plantation sector with the right set of policies for the rest of the country to emulate.

Tragedies sometimes bring out the worst in us. Many of us received absurd WhatsApp forwards warning us about blindly donating to help Kerala flood victims. The voice and text messages claimed that natural calamity had happened because gods were angry at Kerala for being a land of beef eaters and more church-goers than temple-goers. The 'Kerala model' of development, underpinned by education, health and robust public services, has always set an example and become a template for other states to follow. A state should not be begrudged for having better human development indices or for receiving remittances from 'Gulf' countries (of course with majority Muslim populations) or for electing a party with a different political ideology to power.

Notwithstanding the ridiculous forwards from a section of the population that has lost its heart in the cacophony of vicious politics, there were many who came forward to express solidarity and empathy towards the people of Kerala. Kerala received help from all parts within and outside the country. The water level is receding but the woes of the people of Kerala have just begun. The path ahead towards rebuilding Kerala is difficult but not impossible. Kerala must now carefully plan its way forward, and one such area where the state can emerge stronger and set an example for others to follow is the plantation sector.

Tea plantation industry

The commodities sector in Kerala is said to be facing [losses](#) of up to Rs 600 crore due to the floods, and the loss of the tea plantation sector amounts to around Rs 100-200 crore. According to the state's agriculture statistics report (2016-17), 30,205 hectare of plantation area is under tea, of which Idduki district (21,950 ha) has the maximum area under tea. According to the 2011 Indian Labour Bureau statistics, Kerala employs around 40,000 workers daily in 86 tea estates.

A 2017 [study](#) reported that tea estate workers are among the poorest paid in Kerala at Rs 321 a day, compared to casual wage workers who earn between Rs 400-700 a day. None of the workers has any land rights, and they live in dilapidated one-room tenements referred to as 'line rooms'. Although Kerala's, or for that matter South India's, contribution to all-India production is low, it is to be noted that 41% of the South Indian tea (95.95 million kg of 233.65 million kg in 2017-18) amounting to Rs 1521.95 crore is exported to foreign countries. The tea sector is therefore seen as a major source of foreign exchange earning for the producers and for the country.

Tea producers remain quiet when they rake in profits; we only hear of the age-old adage of 'industry in crisis' which is said to be going on since the 1990s due to diminishing profits, emergence of new growers in producer countries, falling or stagnant prices and rising costs of production while the plantation owners lobby for lowering of wages and removing social welfare codes as legislated by

the Plantation Labour Act (PLA, 1951). Tea is a labour-intensive industry, and labour productivity has always been highlighted by most planter associations as a major determinant of yield and cost of production in each country. But land degradation and seedling quality – which also determine yield – have hardly been brought to our notice.

Tea statistics (2005-06) indicate that 39.8% of the tea bushes in North Indian plantations and 47.1% in those in South India are over 50 years old. In fact, the bushes that may well be over 100-150 years old (as 50 years and above is the last age of bush category used in the report) which had been planted by the British, while the economic lifespan of a bush is said to be between 50-80 years. So, instead of stagnating labour wage, planters should focus on improving productivity and quality of the tea by replacing bushes. With old tea bushes, quality and yield is bound to go down and the labour is less to blame for the yield of the tea gardens.

The tea plantation workers are at the lowest rung of the organisational hierarchy, surviving at subsistence wages in difficult working conditions doing delicate work of plucking and manufacturing tea while still being considered as unskilled workers. They are also highly dependent on plantations for food, drinking water, housing, education and healthcare. The enactment of the Plantation Labour Act (1951) ensured that the management would provide these to the workers while also safeguarding the rights of the workers.

Tea planters must invest in replantation and uprooting of old bushes while also developing an efficient labour force. Credit: Julia Maudlin

S.K. Bhowmick in his paper '[Productivity and labour standards in tea plantation sector in India](#)' has explained that despite provisioning of various services over and above the wages of the plantation workers, very few of the tea estates have provided the amenities even at a very basic level, and possibly no plantation in India has implemented all the provisions of the PLA (1951). Not only are wages kept low for the tea workers, their living conditions are also not optimal, thereby impacting their overall health, standard of living and well being.

Globally, due to the opening up of markets and loosening of labour markets, those falling in the poorest section of society are left vulnerable, with bare minimum wages and no social security cover. India's restrictive labour legislations are considered unfavourable for its increasingly globalised economy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pet campaign 'Make in India', which focuses on increasing foreign direct investment (FDI) in manufacturing and thereby requiring loosening of labour standards, should also move carefully. Use of non-standard work practices allows employers to retain a core skilled and permanent workforce as well as access to a peripheral general workforce through casual or contract labour.

This can be clearly seen in the tea plantation workers populations across the country, where there were workers were brought by the British to create a dedicated plantation labour force and whose generations of family members are still engaged in plantation work. While opening up the labour market, we must continue to pay heed to debates around labour policy reforms so as to ensure safeguards for the most vulnerable workers rather than simply focus on the international economic agenda.

The way forward

In Kerala today, tea plantation workers are vulnerable and face displacement due to financial insecurity. Although no loss of lives was reported in the tea estates due to the floods, the workers have lost their livelihood and face hunger, disease and migration as several the plantations were closed especially during the floods. There are reports that when [workers](#) skipped work when their

homes and belongings were inundated by the floods, their daily wages were deducted. The workers have thus been made to choose either to show up for work while leaving their homes in shambles or to re-build and recover what was lost and lose their day's wage. The need of the hour is for employers to help their workers pick up the broken pieces of their lives after the floods rather than just look at their losses, ignoring their years of accumulated profits invested in diversifying their businesses, and [abandon](#) or close the tea estates.

Rather than despair in the aftermath of the flood, businesses should take this opportunity to revamp, restructure and empower the plantation models to enable price competitiveness in an economically viable and environmentally sustainable manner. They must develop mechanisms and institutions to effectively keep track of international market developments and be cautious about price fluctuations instead of blindly running behind profits in order to avoid facing disasters. They must invest in replantation and uprooting of old bushes while also developing an efficient labour force by upgrading the workers' skills and education. They should also focus on providing amenities and wages to avoid facing labour shortages and to maintain a healthy and motivated labour force.

The need of the hour is to provide better financial security to workers to fulfil the goal of 'decent work', along with the adoption of sustainable farming practices to protect the delicate ecology of the region. Kerala has an opportunity to re-build a strong plantation sector with the right set of policies for the rest of the country to emulate. It must work towards an all-inclusive model, as the egalitarian quest of the 'Kerala model' of development was said to have been lost and Scheduled Castes, tribes, fisherfolk and plantation labourers were termed as outliers in the 'model' and continued to remain marginalised.

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