

LIVELIHOOD DILEMMAS AMONG THE TEA WORKERS OF DOOARS, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Tea industries in Dooars have come across series of troubles owing to decreasing demand of tea in the international market and due to poor quality of tea that has been produced over the years. The failure of tea industry presently has really hampered the livelihoods of the workers dependent on tea. Sudden shut down of some of the tea industries have left remarkable repercussion on the lives of the tea dependent families and have really affected their socio economic conditions. The present study is an attempt to highlight the condition of tea dependent families in Dooars. The household interviews have been taken in four closed tea estates and their changing livelihood conditions have been analyzed. The need for immediate interventions by the government has been the findings in order to prevent the tea dependent families from being the victims of poverty and other forms of exploitations.

Keywords: Dooars, livelihoods, poverty, exploitations

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Introduction

Dooars in northern part of West Bengal is very well known for greenery due to its forest cover and tea plantation. Tea has remained the important source of the livelihood for the people since the colonial era. Most of these labourers were hired from other parts of the country. These labourers were permanently engaged in tea plantation activities. The colonial masters had provided them the food and shelter that would be just enough to retain their souls with very less sufficiency. However after the colonial government left the country these industries were then run by the companies that had sufficient funds to run the business. The companies then reformed different policies in order to continue the activities for the long run. Initially, the companies had made a good investment in terms of providing the basic necessities for the tea labourers like food, shelter and medicines. The companies had enough profits in the initial stage of their undertakings of these tea estates. It even provided timely bonus to the labourers as a part of their profits.

However, in the long run these companies when suffered loss due to various reason of poor demand of their tea in the international markets and poor quality of tea being produced due to old tea bushes and other increasing cost of labourers due to rise in the prices of goods in the markets, these companies then shifted their focus on the other profitable businesses thereby leaving the poor labourers and old tea bushes in their own places. The plights of these industries have hardly been heard nor being taken care even by the managing committees. The problems of the tea workers have worsen over the years. The problem of malnutrition today is very common among the children and the death due to starvations in different tea estates of Dooars has been very common. Hardly any initiatives have been taken by the concerned authorities to improve the conditions of these poor labourers. There are very few alternatives available to them in terms of meeting their basic necessities owing to closure of tea estates and poor skills available to them to get employment elsewhere.

Review of Literature

Chakraborty S. (2013) writes the problem of increasing human trafficking after the closure of Tea Estates in Dooars. The failure of managing authority and unavailability of funds among the tea industries have led to rise of such activities due to which the children have often become the

victim of it. The crises of the tea industries and their sudden closure have been detailed in his work. He highlights the plight of the tea workers and their situations which pushes them to opt for such activities despite knowing the negative consequences.

Bhowmik S. (2005) tried to reflect the growing conflict between the managers and the employee among the tea Estates of North Bengal. His article focuses on the scenario of tea industries. The frustrations among the tea workers union and the tea authorities due to the low wages paid for their work was reflected. The article examines the nature of internal politics among the managerial authorities and their impact on tea industries resulting in workers strike was clearly shown. The article had the prime focus on the workers of the tea estates whose livelihood depends on the functioning of the tea industries had always been in the disadvantaged sides. The plights of tea workers were clearly shown and the dynamics of tea industrial functioning were reflected by Bhowmik in his article.

Bhowmik S. (2015) tries to highlight the conditions of tea workers of India. Despite being one of the largest industry providing employment to million of permanent workers, tea industries have always failed to pay the appropriate wages to the workers and has remained the lowest paying industry among the formal sector industry in India. His article tries to analyse the nature of inequalities that exists in Indian tea among the workers and tries to focus the role of the state agencies to bridge the gap between the nature of work and pay.

Munshi I, (2012) in the collection of essays tries to highlight the problems of tribal population across India. The book analyzes the nature of hardship that the tribal population have come across in the process of development. The loss of land and livelihoods of the tribal in India who happen to the population living in the belt of resource abundant region of India have been displaced from their homelands making them more insecure across the countries. The tea dependent family today mostly are the adivasis who had been forcefully thrown away from their ancestral lands of Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and the region around Chottanagpur Plateau. The deprivations of these populations in India have still been existing with the recent being the tea exploitations. The book clearly portrays the livelihood scenario of adivasis in India makes the question on development and deprivations that exists at the cost of tribal livelihoods.

Significance of the study:

The study basically tries to understand the plight of tea workers in Dooars region of west Bengal. The failures of the tea industry to function smoothly have left its workers unemployed resulting in number of poverty related consequences. The poverty coupled with unemployment in the region has made the tea workers vulnerable to different forms of exploitations. The study thus aims at focusing the major livelihood related issues of the tea workers and tries to draw attention of the planners and policy makers to provide secure means of livelihood choices to the tea dependent families.

Objective of the study

- To understand the changing socio economic conditions of closed tea industries in Dooars
- To highlight the problems associated with livelihood shifts among the tea dependent families in Dooars.

Database and Methodology

The work is based on mixed approach which makes use of both primary and secondary sources of data. Household survey in four closed tea Estates have been collected to understand the socio economic condition of the population. Thus the primary data forms the base for understanding the nature of livelihood dependencies among the tea dependent families collected from 30 sampled household in each tea Estates through random sampling technique. Socio economic data of the households have been collected and their nature of livelihood change over the years has been analyzed. Interviews with the elder members of the family also form the source of data in order to understand the ground reality and the problems associated. Besides this, the article analyzes the nature of locational advantages taken by the tea dependent families by shifting their occupation in different non tea activities. Hence the article makes use of mixed approach in understanding the dynamics of livelihood among the closed tea industries in Dooars.

About the study area

The study has been conducted in four closed tea estates namely Dheklapara Tea Estate, Bandapani Tea Estate, Madhu Tea Estate and Birpara Tea Garden. Dekhlapara tea estate has remained non functional since 2001 (Since 15 years), Bandapani Since 2010 Madhu Tea Estates

Since 2012 and Birpara Tea Estate Since 2014. There is however no clear cut year of shutting down of these industries as in the last phase of its closure it was frequently opened and closed in different time periods.

Besides this there are number of tea estates in the region which have remained shut down since number of years. Tea Estates like Ramjhora, Dalmore, Jay Bir Para, Bharnobari. Dalsingpara etc have been in constant phase of closure and openings due to poor financial conditions of the tea industries to pay their labourers. Thus the region that has been selected for the study area shows similar pattern of functioning of tea industries whereby the labourers dependent on it have been constantly suffering and their socio economic conditions deteriorating over the past few years.

Table 1. Occupational Scenario of Tea Labourers

Name of the Tea Estate	Sampled Household	Remittance	Mining and Quarrying	Daily wage labourers in towns
Dheklapara Tea Estate	30	14	08	04
Bandapani Tea Estate	30	11	10	06
Madhu Tea Estate	30	10	08	12
Birpara Tea Garden	30	12	06	10

Source: Field Survey, February 2017

The data above highlights the occupational structure of tea dependents households among the closed tea workers in Dooars. The sample size comprises of 30 households in individual Tea Estates and their dependencies on different occupation have been shown. The data reflects that there has been high dependencies of households on remittances from urban migration. Mining and Quarrying has been the other forms of livelihood sources for the labourers after closure of the tea industry.

Lastly there has also been the dependency on daily wages of the people in nearby towns as casual labourers. The most important aspects of data is the level of household dependency on

activities that are not secure. Almost all the household has been dependent on the activities that can generate only the square meals without having any options for saving. These forms of informal source of livelihood do not grant any forms of security (social, economic, medical etc) to the labourers dependent on them. However the unemployment has left no options for this population to opt for other livelihood choices.

Migration and Livelihood

There has been rapid out migration of these poor labourers from these tea estates. Poverty has made these undernourished labourers to migrate in urban spaces where the nature of their exploitations have been very high. The table 1 shows the dependencies of the households on the remittances from the urban areas. The data shows that 35 to 40 percent of the household in all four tea estates have at least one member have migrated and sends remittance to the family. Dekhlapara has the highest percentage of household dependent on remittance followed by Birpara and Bandapani. Dheklapara has remained closed since 2001 for which there has been rapid migration of the population to urban areas. The main source of livelihood for the population in Dheklapara has been the remittances sent by the family members. The member to send the remittance often happens to be the children in their school going age. Thus the patterns of youth migration from Tea Estates to different urban area have remained very high in Dooars.

Casual labourers in sand quarrying and mining activities

The failure of the tea Estates to manage efficiently and provide timely and continue payments have and their sudden closure has led to crisis of employment among the tea workers. Most of the tea workers from this region today work as a casual labourers in activities like sand mining and quarrying, they work as wage labourers in an around the households that can afford to pay and also as labourers in urban markets. More than 500 labourers travel everyday to River Teesta for quarrying sands to earn their living. These are the casual labourers who get paid for their eight hours of work at the rate of Rs 150-180 (based on the gender and the health of the workers).

These workers are insecure in different forms. Insecurities resulting from poor wages, to insecurities of daily wage haunt these labourers every day. Despite of their efforts, they do not

get sufficient food and basic necessities to meet their daily needs. Table 1 shows the dependency of household in mining and quarrying activities and the figure remains very astonishing when we analyze the actual households dependent on it. 25 to 30 percent of the households in all the tea estates earn their living as labourers from sand mining sites. The seasonality of work and the nature of hardship that remains in sand mining activities can easily explain the helplessness of these labourers which really needs good attentions from the authorities concerned.

Children as a victim present Scenario

The most important of all is the upcoming generation of these tribal families that suffer due to insufficiency in meeting the school needs of the children. A large number of children of the distressed tea Estates of this region have gone missing. Household poverty pushes these children away, state inaction pushes them further away (Chakraborty S. 2013).

There have been rapid dropouts of the tribal children in the past 10 years. The dropouts of children have been very high among the age group 15 -18 when these children are ready to appear for their High Schools due to increasing cost of basic school needs. The major reason has been due to failure of parents to provide tuitions for their children, and problems associated with travel cost.

The engagement of children in service activities in the local markets has been high among the tribal population from these tea estates. Problems of human trafficking and other forms of insecurities have increased rapidly over the years among the children from these regions. Household poverty is thus a causal factor in childhood adversities in general and child trafficking in particular (Chakraborty S. 2013)

Survival strategies and its consequences

The tea labourers have been trying to find several survival strategies however these have always been the loss in the long run. The local leaders of different tea estates have been trying to manage the industries by their own by employing the labourers in plucking the fresh leaves and selling it to different industries that are functional. However, due to poor quality of the leaves

due to unavailability of chemical fertilizers and improper management skills, there has been constant failure of these strategies in every tea estates.

The government on the other have recently been providing the cash of Rs 1500 per month for the households in closed tea Estates for the permanent workers which however are very meagre to sustain the family of five or more. The workers instead demand for the reopening of tea industries then to wait for Rs 1500 from the government.

The problems have become more acute among the families with more dependent members. Most of the families with more dependent members have their children employed in informal activities. The situations have turned so worst that even the children about to write their board exams opt for working as casual labourers due to their acute poverty. These forms of dropouts not only hampers the present conditions but also affects their future resulting in underdevelopment and growth of frustrations among the youths thus hampering the society at large.

Major consequences of prevailing insecurities

There has been constant struggle for livelihood generation among the tea labourers. The failure to meet their basic necessities has not only hampered their present conditions but also has resulted in series of negative consequences among the region inhabited. The decreasing level of literacy among the children from tea family, increasing level of human trafficking, poor health and hygiene, changes in demographic structure due to rapid male migration from the families and other forms of livelihood insecurities have been the major consequences of the failure of the tea industries and the authorities concerned. The planters put the notices and disappear without clearing the huge arrears of unpaid wages and provident fund contribution to the plantation workers (Chakraborty S, 2013). These insecurities are the major forces that have been growing among the tea workers over the years. There has been an urgent need to take up these issues to overcome the problem of tea dependent families.

Conclusion

The livelihood dilemmas of tea workers have been multiple and the measures taken by the authorities have been very poor. The tea dependent family have been facing numerous hardships to attain the means of living. Poverty makes the family more insecure and exposes the children to different forms of insecurities. The ways to attain the daily household needs have been very limited due to their poor skills and health conditions. High dependencies on insecure means of living are making them more vulnerable in the long run. Futures of the tea dependent family today in Dooars have been in absolute darkness. Rapid dropouts and poor health conditions have further pushed these future population groups in more insecure livelihood vulnerabilities. The need for immediate attentions from the concerned authorities and providing them the livelihood opportunities is of prime importance to protect their present and future generations to come.

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