

**CEC Working Paper**

**Behind Closed and Abandoned  
Tea Gardens- Status  
Report of India**

**2007**



**Centre for Education and Communication**



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# Preface

Over the past few years the Indian tea industry is experiencing a crisis that is caused by a multitude of factors both global and local causing rampant incidents of closures and abandonment in many tea gardens in the states of Kerala and West Bengal. Centre for Education and Communication's interventions in the tea sector for over a decade is largely through fact-finding exercises, research and campaign by engaging with various stakeholders of the tea industry especially trade unions.

The objective of this particular exercise was to document the status of closures and abandonment in the tea estates of West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and explore possible alternatives that have been proposed and addressed to such situations of closures and abandonment. Important stakeholders including trade unions and academics were involved in this exercise that was later followed by Regional Consultations on Alternatives to the Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens of India both in Kerala and West Bengal this year.

With due acknowledgment to the ongoing interventions made by the central government, it is critical at this juncture to urgently raise issues and concerns of livelihood, food security of the tea workers and their families of tea estates that are currently locked-out, abandoned and on the verge of closure.

The fate of almost 35,000 workers and their families looms in silence. Such conditions have made the life of the already marginalised and ethnically- disadvantaged communities highly precarious and vulnerable. A concerted effort is required from all quarters of the society and key stakeholders to jointly address and envisage a secure future for the tea workers and their families.

# Introduction

The Indian organised tea sector currently employs for over 1.1 million workers throughout the tea growing states. According to Labour Bureau, GOI Occupational Wage Survey (Sixth Round 2006), the employment of women is 54.24 percent in this sector. The industry is characterized by an enclave estate economy with a resident labour force comprising mainly of the socially excluded and marginalised communities who remain to be relegated even today in independent India. The industry boasts as an organised sector with various legislations in place specially the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, implemented only from year 1954 after efforts put by the trade union movement. Historically, tea plantations were set up as family units for cultivation and production of tea which continues to mushroom with the increasing production by the small tea grower segment in India.

Tea has been an internationally traded commodity since its very inception. With globalisation and trade liberalisation and interplay of various factors both global and local like over-production, fluctuations in global tea prices, increasing competition with countries like Kenya, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and a reinforced cartelisation of tea companies both at the auction centre and international market is leading to a restructuring of the Indian tea industry. Low-productivity of workers, increasing social costs of production and fall in tea prices are some of the reasons given by the management for the overall crisis. In India, this crisis has been manifested through the closure and abandonment of tea estates mainly in the states of West Bengal and Kerala since year 2000. Fragmentation of the estate system vis-à-vis bifurcation of tea estates into plantations (agricultural activity) and factories is one of the major threats that the organised tea sector is faced with. Amidst this, the crisis was marked in few tea estates of West Bengal and Kerala that has affected more than 35,000 workers and their families.

According to the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Report 2004-05 of Tea Board of India, a total of 118 tea gardens were reportedly closed between the years 2000-2005 that had affected 68,442 workers. At present in Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, there are 13 abandoned and closed tea gardens. In Idukki district, Kerala 7 tea estates and 6 factories are abandoned, in Thiruvananthapuram district 1 tea estate and 2 tea factories are abandoned while in Tamil Nadu there are four closed tea gardens. In many of the tea gardens, owners do not declare the tea garden as closed but 'conveniently' abandon them. The company has to apply for closure in order to close a garden. These companies owe huge dues not just to the



workers in terms of Provident Fund and Gratuity dues but also to the respective state governments and concerned banks. An important feature/nature of such closures and abandonment was that the tea gardens would reopen during the peak season and again close during the lean period as in the case of one tea garden in West Bengal that was closed five times during 2001-2006 and on 13 January 2006 it was closed permanently.

Important issues and concerns were highlighted from the reports as documented from field visits to the closed and abandoned tea estates in India. In some of the tea gardens of West Bengal, the Operating Managing Committee (OMC) runs the closed tea estates constituted with the initiative of the trade unions, Labour Commissioner and District Administration. The members are responsible for plucking, selling, payment to workers and managing other activities in the tea gardens. Studies have reported the mis-management of these committees and have suggested proper monitoring of such committees. Sale of green leaf to the nearby tea estates are other forms of alternative earnings for the tea workers as in the case of Darjeeling apart from working in the nearby town as casual labour and migrating off to the cities. The study report from Idukki district, Kerala noted gross mismanagement as the main reason for closure of the tea estates.

This crisis has not just affected the owners of the tea estates who are recuperating from their losses but as far as the workers and their families are concerned, they are thrown into worse-off situations of extreme vulnerability especially women, children and the aged. Lack of basic infrastructure like medical, education and other facilities and overall earnings have resulted in deaths due to starvation, suicides and have compelled children to drop-out from schools. There has been a tremendous increase in out-migration of a specific age-group from families of tea workers in search lucrative jobs in cities and nearby towns from the tea growing areas. The remaining population of tea families are mainly the aged and infirm and young children thereby leaving them to situation of total helplessness and deprivation. The reports have highlighted the fact that such crisis have caused tremendous burden on women workers to run their households.

In lieu of alternatives for employment for the tea workers and families, talks have been going on to run tea gardens as eco-tourism enterprises as in the case of Darjeeling, likewise a recent foreign intervention of conversion of tea gardens into golf course in the Dooars and Terai areas of West Bengal are in the making. Utilisation of fallow-land of tea estates for horticulture and cultivation of other crops are being discussed by the Tea Board. More concerted efforts were made by the central and state governments to address the issues of closures and abandonment.

The Government of India appointed the Ferguson Committee to point out the problems and causes of closures and abandonment. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) cleared a Special Purpose Tea Fund (SPTF) in Jan 2007 under the Budget of 2006-07. The amount is estimated to be Rs 4,716 crore over a 15-year period. A process of constituting a Department of Plantation by the Union Minister of Commerce is still in the pipeline. It was very recently announced by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry that nine tea estates have reopened in Kerala and one in West Bengal consequent to the rehabilitation package announced by the government. This package provides for restructuring of the outstanding bank dues, provision of fresh working capital, waiver of outstanding dues to Tea Board and

settlement of Provident Fund dues in installments.<sup>1</sup> However, it is not clear, how government will ensure the proper utilisation of the funds without a transparent monitoring mechanism of the Special Purpose Tea Fund (SPTF) in place that involves trade unions. Evoking various provisions within the Tea Act of 1953 by the government could be an important measure to be considered urgently by the concerned authorities. Formation of workers' –run cooperatives is being raised from many quarters as part of livelihood alternatives for the tea community.

The independent articles provide detail reports from the field from the states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu on the situation of closed and abandoned tea estates along with articles on alternatives as suggested by key stakeholders of the tea industry. This compilation aims to bring forth debates and generate common action plan for reviving the conditions of the tea plantations workers whose lives have been jeopardised as a result of international trade, monopolisation of tea companies in price fixation and fragmentation of the estate system and an overall apathy of important stakeholders of this industry.

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<sup>1</sup>“Nine Tea Gardens Reopened following the Rehabilitation Package Announced by Government” (Press Release, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Press Information Bureau, 16 Sept, 2007, New Delhi. For more details see [www.commerce.nic.in](http://www.commerce.nic.in))

# Condition of the Workers in Closed Tea Gardens: A Report on Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal

Renuca Rajni Beck

## Profile of Closed Tea Gardens in Jalpaiguri District

### *Objectives of the Study:*

The prime objectives of the present study are (1) to have an understanding of the gravity of the problem of closure or abandonment of tea gardens in Jalpaiguri district, one of the largest tea-producing districts in North Bengal, (2) to assess the impact of the closure on workers, particularly, on women workers, and (3) to examine the role of state, trade unions and the workers themselves in this time of crisis.

### *Methodology*

The data for this report has been drawn through short visits to two large closed tea gardens in Jalpaiguri. During field visits we interviewed local trade union leaders, members of Operating and Managing Committees (OMC) and workers. In addition, we interviewed one of the senior most trade union leaders in the district and the region who is also the Convenor of the Coordination Committee of 15 major trade unions with an organisational presence among tea workers in North Bengal.

Getting access to the tea gardens and the tea workers is a very difficult proposition unless the researcher has some prior connections. In the course of our field visits, we felt that the garden management and the trade union leaders running the garden (in the case of closed gardens) are generally suspicious of outsiders, particularly of researchers and media. Getting access to ordinary workers is also difficult, particularly in the days of their distress, as they are not in a mood to talk to outsiders. However, one can approach workers relatively easily provided researchers are personally known. Gaining the confidence of the people who are at the helm of the garden is crucial in order to get any authentic information.

The tribal background of the present researcher and some pre-existing kinship ties with some workers in both Samsing and Bamandanga-Tondu gardens was of assistance in this endeavour. Access to the leaders of the OMCs was possible only because fieldworkers had

friends in the area who had some political influence and who knew some of the leaders of the OMC personally. The OMC in a closed garden has been constituted with the direct mediation of the district administration (Block Development Officer, SDO (Sub-Divisional Officer) and the District Magistrate, the labour department of the government and the trade unions. The committee consists of members from the office staff (*babus*), the representatives of the trade unions and the representatives of the workers. The OMC is constituted following guidelines prepared by the labour department, although the provisions are not strictly followed. Although the Committee is male dominated, it is not difficult to find some women members as well and some are reportedly vocal in the committee meetings. The Committee has to meet regularly, work transparently and ensure workers' participation but the provisions of regularity and transparency are often violated and often a close coterie of local leaders control the decision making process and run the OMCs in collusion with a section of the district administration. One of the senior trade union leaders confessed to us that corruption has crept into the body of the OMC which, in turn, deprives the workers of their legitimate dues.

On reaching the garden with some of my friends I had to introduce myself to the leaders who had been informed about my visit the day before. The leaders were sitting at a place close to the garden office. I had to explain the purpose of my visit with care and patience and it was only then that they started speaking. In both gardens, we decided to meet the OMC members first and then the workers. Since the OMC members were sitting together we could gather and crosscheck information. We had a session lasting longer than two hours with the members of the OMC in each garden and then spent another day talking to the workers. After interviewing the leaders of the OMC, we did some case studies of workers. In Samsing garden we had to visit twice in order to get access to the workers.

Besides the OMC members, the office staff and the workers we have sought information from the office of the Assistant Labour Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, and a senior trade unionist, who is the Convenor of the Coordination Committee of 15 trade unions. We could also interact with few leaders in Samsing Tea Garden.

In Bamandanga-Tondu Tea Garden (TG) we talked to the garden *babu* and members of the OMC. In addition, we had a brief discussion with the police officer of Matelli police station about trafficking and rescued girls.

### ***Profile of Tea Gardens in Jalpaiguri District***

Jalpaiguri is one of the districts of West Bengal which experienced an early growth of tea gardens. The growth of gardens and tea industries happened at the initiative of British planters in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the growth continued until 2000. Thereafter, one can see the much talked about crisis in the tea industry. There are 154 set gardens, which are large and registered, of which 13 have declared either closed or abandoned in Jalpaiguri district. In addition, there are 3,000 to 4,000 new gardens from small to medium size, ranging between 50 and 200 acres. In the last 60 to 70 years nearly 4000 new gardens have been opened. These gardens do not have the Commerce Department's No Objection Certificate (NOC). Only approximately 1000 gardens are registered. Privately owned small gardens have no factory of their own. Bought Leaves Factories (BLFs) are buying green leaves and making made tea. There are around 70 BLFs in North Bengal. They are profiting hugely by buying green leaves cheaply. They do not

have any responsibility towards the labourers as they are not paid any type of bonus or gratuity and do not have a Provident Fund.

In 154 registered gardens in Jalpaiguri district about there are about 1,75,000 permanent workers and an almost equal number of *bigha* workers. The size of the work force in new gardens will be around 3 lakh.

***Overall Profile of closed tea gardens in Jalpaiguri District (West Bengal)***

From the Office of the Labour Commission, Jalpaiguri district we could gather that there are 13 closed tea gardens at present, which affect the life of about 25,000 workers, with almost equal representation of male and female workers. Here is a brief profile of the closed and abandoned gardens in the district.

- i. **Kathalguri Tea Estate:** The suspension of work declared by the management with effect from 22.7.02 is still continuing. Approximately 1,475 workers are affected. A meeting was held in the office of the ADM, Jalpaiguri on 24.7.06, which was attended by the representatives of the trade unions, labour department and the district administration, but nothing positive was achieved.
- ii. **Ramjhora Tea Estate:** The suspension of work declared by the management with effect from 10.8.02 is still continuing. Approximately 1,102 workers are affected by the closure. A meeting was held before the DM, Jalpaiguri on 25.7.06.
- iii. **Redbank and Surendranagar Tea Estate:** Workers alleged that the management has abandoned the garden whereas the management claimed that they were not allowed by the workers to enter the garden. The garden is presently under the possession of the official liquidator of the Kolkata High Court from 18.2.05.
- iv. **Chamurchi Tea Estate:** The trade unions reported that the management left the garden on 24.4.04, affecting 1,400 workers. A meeting was convened before the Additional Labour Commissioner (ALC) Jalpaiguri on 14.8.06 but no one appeared on behalf of the management.
- v. **Raipur Tea Estate:** Trade unions reported that the management left the garden on 5.7.05, affecting 587 workers. The last joint conference was called on 25.1.06 in which the management did not appear. The ALC Jalpaiguri convened a meeting on 14.8.06 but no one appeared on behalf of the management.
- vi. **Bamandanga-Tondu Tea Estate:** The management declared a suspension of work from 18.11.05, affecting 1,174 workers. A separate meeting with the management was convened on 11.8.06 by the ALC, Jalpaiguri, but no one appeared on behalf of the management.
- vii. **Samsing Tea Estate:** The management declared suspension of work from 28.11.05, affecting 1,900 workers. A separate meeting with the management was convened on 14.8.06 before the ALC, Jalpaiguri, but no one appeared on behalf of the management.
- viii. **Chinchula Tea Estate:** The trade unions reported that the management left the garden from 30.11.05, affecting 1,360 workers. Last meeting was held in the office of the DLC, Jalpaiguri, on 21.3.06. The management did not attend.

- ix. **Shikarpur-Bhandapur Tea Estate:** Trade union sources say that the management left the garden from 18.10.05, affecting 1,527 workers. The ALC, Jalpaiguri had convened a meeting on 14.8.06, but no one appeared on behalf of the management.
- x. **Bharnobari Tea Estate:** The management declared a suspension of work from 29.12.05, affecting 2,250 workers. The last meeting was held at the office of the DLC, Jalpaiguri on 21.3.06. The management did not attend the meeting.
- xi. **Malnady Tea Estate:** The management declared a suspension of work on 19.12.05, affecting 286 workers. The last meeting was held on 9.8.06, in the office of the DLC, Jalpaiguri.
- xii. **Kalchini & Roymatang Tea Estate:** The management allegedly abandoned the garden on 28.2.06, affecting 3,000 workers. The last meeting was held in the office of the ALC, Alipurduar, on 18.4.06.
- xiii. **Dheklapara Tea Estate:** The management allegedly abandoned the garden on 11.3.06, affecting 602 workers. The last meeting was held in the office of the ALC, Birpara on 21.7.06.

### ***Abandoned Tea Gardens***

Of the tea gardens we have termed closed, the following gardens can be categorised as abandoned:

1. Raipur T. E.
2. Shikarpur-Bhandapur T. E.
3. Kathalgirui T. E.
4. Ramjhora T. E.
5. Kalchini & Roymatang T. E.
6. Samsing T. E.
7. Bamandanga-Tondoo T. E.

### **Profile of the Closed Tea Garden Company**

Closed and abandoned tea gardens were under the ownership of different companies.

- a. Bharnobari T. E. – Khaitan Company
- b. Shikarpur-Bhandapur T. E. - Kanoy Goshti Company
- c. Raipur T. E. - T. P. Roy (Roy Company)
- d. Kathalgiuri T. E. - Goenka Company
- e. Ramjhora T. E. - Bansal Company. The Government of West Bengal has cancelled the lease for this Company.
- f. Samsing T. E and Bamandanga-Tondoo T. E. – S. P. Agarwal & Company.

We could not collect information about all companies that own closed or abandoned gardens. However, a look at the profile of the companies suggests that none of them has sustained experience in running tea gardens or reputation in the industry. They came into the trade in search of easy money. They did not have the professional or technical expertise to run the garden successfully in the long term. According to a senior trade unionist, these companies did not know how to face the competition in the international market when the markets opened up significantly after 2000. These companies siphoned off much of their profit while investing very little on the sustenance and expansion of the

gardens. Despite the fact that yields start to decline when bushes become more than 100 years old, there was no arrangement made by the management to replace old bushes and plant new bushes. These companies often do not care to respect the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act and have appropriated the PF due to workers. However, good companies with good reputations are still running their respective gardens successfully. According to him, efficient management, professionalism and caring for workers are keys to the good health of a company. Unfortunately, these virtues were missing in the inefficient companies. Some companies have also succeeded in injecting corruption into the managerial staff and among a section of trade union leaders. Thus, when these mafia elements are inducted into the OMCs, corruption continues to the serious detriment of the workers. Workers continue to remain captives of these so-called leaders. Other leaders of the trade unions and the members of the OMCs whom we could talk to in the two closed gardens we had visited endorsed the views of the senior leader regarding the exploitative motives of and lack of professionalism in the smaller, inexperienced tea companies.

## **Case Study of Two Closed Gardens**

### ***A. Samsing Tea Garden***

The Samsing tea garden comes under Mal Mahakuma in Matelli block. Located at the northern most part of the Jalpaiguri *Dooars*, this large garden on the bank of the Murti river is surrounded by the Chulsa tea garden and Matelli tea garden. The office of the garden is only about five kilometres from Matelli bazaar and can be approached through a *pucca* motorable road which has bisected the garden. Close to Bhutan, Samsing is known as a picnic spot and the tourism department of the Government of West Bengal has put in some efforts to develop it as a tourist destination.

The garden has been closed since last December and there seems no specific indication as to when the garden will reopen. Even in these dire straits, the workers of this garden have shown tremendous courage and determination, and have adapted to survive. In the recent past three companies have run this garden. In the beginning, the Duncan Company was running the garden followed by the Tea King Company in the 1980s. Then, in the 1990s, the S. P. Agrawal Company took over the garden. The total land of the garden is 1200 hectares, of which 900 are plantation land.

***History of closure:*** The garden was first closed in 2002 December. The owner then claimed that there was surplus labour in the garden and was arguing for a reduction in the workforce. With non-profitability as the pretext, he was not paying the workers regularly. Irregular payments, non-payment of Company's share of PF, non-payment of bonus and an irregular supply of rations were regular features. Other statutory services to the workers also suffered. The owner was urging a cut in the labour force, to which the trade union did not agree. However, before closing the garden, the owner did not discuss the closure with workers. The Trade Union also made no immediate intervention.

However, with the intervention of the district administration, the labour department of the government of West Bengal and the central leadership of the trade union, the garden reopened after about one and a half years. In connection with a research project we had an opportunity to visit this garden in March 2003 when the garden was still closed. The

workers then told us that many of the workers had migrated to metropolitan cities in search of work.

On 25 November 2005, the garden was closed again. A lot of initiatives were taken to reopen the garden but all the efforts came to naught.

**1. Labour profile:** There were 2300 workers **before the closure** and 25 office staff including managerial staff. The workers include Nepalis (60 per cent) and Adivasis (40 per cent), with 60 per cent of the workers being women.

**Before the closure**, there were nine managerial staff, 16 clerical staff and 200 factory staff in the garden. In the peak plucking season, an additional 1,100 *bigha* (temporary) workers were employed. Office staffs, barring a few, are from garden workers' families.

**After the closure**, *bigha* workers and about 200 permanent workers have been laid off. Some workers have left the garden in search of employment in the cities. Thus, the present workforce is 2,100. Since the factory is closed, factory labourers work in the plantation. All nine managerial staffs have left the garden and among the office staff, 2, who had reached their retirement age have left.

The garden has workers belong to Santal, Oraon, Munda, Nayak, Chick Baraik, Lohar and Mahli castes. Nepali workers belong to different caste groups. Among tribal workers, Oraons constitute the majority; most tribal workers are still Hindu, with only about 2 per cent Christians. There are Christians among the Nepali workers as well.

The literacy rate in the garden is relatively high and there are some graduates as well. Some of the graduates now work in the garden as labourers. There is a high school in this garden.

**2. Migration:** According to the members of the OMC, people have always been migrating to different places in search of jobs. Many factory workers have migrated to different places in search of jobs. They work in the army, in the BSF, the CRPF, the West Bengal Police and in the private sector as office staff and workers. Women have been migrating to many places such as Delhi, Chandigarh, Punjab, Bombay, Bangalore and even to Siliguri to work as construction labourers, as maid servants and in other informal sector jobs with low incomes. After the closure, the intensity of migration has grown. However, family members of permanent workers and the youth are more prone to migrate.

The members of the OMCs and the workers ruled out the possibility of women and teenagers being trafficked and being forced into prostitution or into work as bar-dancers. However, local police sources do not rule out this possibility. According to the workers, they know the whereabouts of their family members who migrate. They are in regular touch with them and send remittances to the workers. OMC members and workers admitted that about 100 girls and women below 40 years of age, including some mothers, have moved out, leaving their family members in the garden. Most have migrated to Delhi and Punjab to work as domestic help. Although the inmates of the garden did not admit it, it is quite possible that a section of women migrants are actually involved in the flesh trade. It was not possible for us to investigate this possibility during our short field visits. It is also a



possible that a section of the women are actually involved in prostitution even when they have not moved out.

**Here are some case studies of the women working outside garden**

1. S. Sarma (35 yrs.), wife of A. Sarma (40 yrs.), a worker in the garden, has migrated to Delhi to work as domestic help. This family has 4 children; one boy (15 yrs), three girls (17, 13, and 11 years) – all of whom are studying. She has migrated along with some other women from the garden after the factory was closed down.
2. N. Bhujel (32 yrs.), wife of A. Bhujel (a permanent worker in the garden), has migrated to Delhi to work as domestic help. N's only daughter (16 yrs) is shouldering the responsibility of keeping the house. N went to Delhi along with her friend after the garden closed down in 2002.
3. S. Chettri (40 yrs), wife of K Chettri (45yrs), also has migrated to Delhi to work as domestic help. This family has three daughters (of 12, 10, and 8 years of age) who are studying in high school and primary school. Their father takes care of them.

This is a pattern in this garden as many other women have left as a part of their survival strategy. These women are in constant touch with the family; they remit money and visit the family occasionally. The children miss their mothers and the husband misses his wife, but all agree that they did not have much option. The husbands, in particular, do not think that their wives are doing anything immoral. The men and women from amongst the tribal families have also migrated to different cities. They are engaged in low skill, low paid informal jobs, mainly as construction labourers. However, Nepalis are more mobile than the tribals.

**3. The formation of OMC:** In August 2006, at the initiative of the District Magistrate and the BDO and in the presence of Trade Union leaders, a Committee called the Operating Managing Committee (OMC) was formed. The members of the OMC were taken from all three divisions of the garden: (1) Yongtong, (2) Top Line and 3) Lower Line. The CPI (M) controlled Cha Bagan Majdur Union (CBMU) was the only union present in the garden. There are 24 members on the Committee. The leaders of the trade union are also the local leaders of the party and have been inducted as office-bearers. The Committee, thus, runs on the dictates of the local party. While there are females members of the Committee, there is no woman office-bearer.

The BDO of the Matelli Block has the overall charge of the OMC. After the closure the factory is closed and only plantation and plucking are going on. The OMC is looking after everything. Plucking is done only three or four days a week; on other days workers are engaged in cleaning and maintenance.

**4. Sale of green leaf/ price sharing:** The average production was 14 lakh kgs. of made tea and 1 crore kgs. of green leaf every year before the closure. After the closure the total annual yield in this garden had almost halved. The market value of green leaf is Rs. 5.30 per kg. The sale of the green leaf was arranged through auction and open tender. The BDO supervised the process of auction and grant of contract to the highest bidder. The contract was given to one trader of Banarhat. According to the agreement, he is to be sold the total yield of green leaf for a period of one year. He has been procuring the yield for the last four

months at the rate of Rs 5.30 per kg. The OMC has shouldered responsibility for more than 2,000 workers and is doing well in the garden. Almost all the families are dependent on the tea garden. There is no child labour here. In every house there are one or two workers.

Every worker is getting Rs. 50 as daily wage, according to OMC members. The income of each family is Rs. 100 per day if two members are working. As a bonus, the OMC has distributed Rs. 500 to the workers of Lower Line, Rs. 300 to Top Line and Rs. 300 for Yongtong workers. The week's wage is paid to the workers every Saturday. They can earn extra if they pluck more than 15 kg every day at Rs. 0.50 for every extra kilogram up to 5 kg.

However, workers said that they get Rs. 50 as wage only in the peak harvesting session and the wage rate falls as low as Rs. 25 per day in the lean season, namely the winter months up to end of February, as they cannot meet the quota of 15 kg per day. In the lean season there is simply not enough leaf to pluck.

### **Wage difference**

According to the OMC members, more than 90 per cent of the earnings are spent on the payment of wages and salaries. The Committee can save some money for maintenance of the garden. The members also claimed that there is transparency in the maintenance of accounts as they submit the accounts to the OMC meetings on a regular basis.

No gradation was made of the tealeaf on the basis of differential quality. Therefore, the leaves are sold at an average price. However, next year, the OMC is planning to implement quality classifications and hoping that at least 40 per cent of the total yield will fetch Rs. 8 per kg.

As the garden had already entered the lean season when we visited it in end-November (2006) the members of the OMC and the workers were worried that difficult days are descending on them. During this season the garden's earnings slump and everyone has to prioritise basic survival. They will now have to depend on the rural employment guarantee scheme and the subsidized ration provided to them through the Public Distribution System (PDS). Workers, fortunately, have been granted the status of people below the poverty line and will be entitled to extra wheat and rice and can also get at least 100 days of work at the minimum wage approved of by the government. Workers were also eagerly waiting for the special pension scheme for workers of gardens closed for more than one year, which will net them Rs. 500 per head per month as special sustenance pension.

### **5. Women-headed Families (Case Studies)**

When gardens are closed, women-headed families are the ones hardest hit. These families have gone through the ordeal of losing the male member, major earner, or having an ailing male head that has lost his job because of illness; they have lesser numbers of earners and lesser mobility. It is difficult for at least two people in the family to get work in the garden or to find work outside. Here are a few case studies to illustrate our observations.

**Case 1:** K. Munda is only 30 years of age and has some elementary education. Her husband, S Munda, aged 48 years, had to quit his job a couple of years ago because he was infected with tuberculosis and was unable to work. Until then, K was only working as

a *bigha sramik* on peak harvesting (plucking) seasons. The family was distressed because of this sudden crisis. It has to keep aside money for the treatment of S. Fortunately, K was employed as a permanent labourer in place of her husband. However, with the closure of the garden, survival for the family is threatened. K has two children, one boy 7 yrs and a girl 9 yrs, both studying in primary school (Nepali medium) in the garden. She is the lone worker. The family has to subsist on the Rs. 50 that she earns everyday. Besides the demanding garden job K has to do all the domestic chores, has to visit the village market, has to look after her family and ailing husband, and even has to arrange for firewood. The supply of firewood has abruptly stopped after the closure of the garden.

**Case 2:** F. Lohar (35 years of age) wife of J. Lohar (44 years) had to take the full responsibility of the family as her husband took voluntary retirement because of epilepsy three years ago. She has two children, one girl (13 years) studying in Primary School and son (17 years old) studying in class VII. F's husband has acute epilepsy and might not survive for long. With her meagre income of Rs. 50 a day she finds it extremely difficult to provide two square meals every day. The health service provided by the garden health centre has declined sharply after the closure of the garden. For the treatment of her husband and her children when they fall ill occasionally, they have to go to Matelli, which involves extra expenses. As the lean season in the garden is approaching, which will continue until March, F is getting more and more worried since she will lose her regular income and will have to depend on the rural employment guarantee scheme and the weekly ration distributed through the PDS on subsidized rates for families below the poverty line.

**6. Access to Resources:** Drinking water is provided by one big tank. There is enough water for everybody, with taps in every house. Approximately 8 to 10 families use one tap. In other cases, one tap is provided in every labour line with 50 heads. The power supply is confined to some selected areas of the garden. Pipelines laid along hill slopes carry water to the labour lines.

**Health:** There is a primary health centre in the garden. When the garden was open, a qualified doctor was in charge of the centre. Presently, however, there is no doctor in the health centre. Mobile health check-up camps are organized from time to time, which are attended by qualified and hired doctors. There are 10 staff members in the health centre, including one compounder, whose wages are paid by the Committee. Serious patients are referred to Matelli primary health centre. After the closure, maternity benefits have been withdrawn. The decline in the quality of the health service has caused much suffering to the undernourished and ill paid work force. Medical treatment can be obtained only from far away hospitals and private doctors demand extra money and extra time, which, in turn, lead to wage loss. Chronic poverty, malnourishment and associated ailments are combining to kill workers prematurely. Workers say that although there is no case of suicide in this garden, poverty is pro-active as the silent killer.

**School:** There are three primary schools and a high school in the garden. Workers complain that dropouts from schools have increased manifold after the closure of the garden. All schools have shortage of teachers.

**Ration:** After the closure, the workers in the garden have been brought under the PDS. Workers get 7 kg rice or wheat at the rate of Rs. 3 per kg of rice and Rs. 2 per kg of wheat

every month. Every family gets one litre of kerosene in a month. In the absence of electricity, one litre of kerosene is highly inadequate and the workers have to buy more from the open market.

**Firewood:** When the garden was open, labourers' families were supplied with some free firewood. This has stopped after the closure. The workers have to collect the firewood from the nearby jungle. The onus of the collection of firewood now lies with women workers and for this they have to work harder and longer than before.

**Panchayat's Role:** When the garden was closed the Panchayat initiated a programme called the Sadak Gram Rojgar Yojna (SGRY). Under this scheme, every worker was given work for at least 10 to 15 days a month and was paid Rs. 60 per day. The work involved the construction of roads and earthworks.

**Trade Unions Role:** A local trade union (TU) leader said that the garden and workers are facing the crisis primarily because of the disinterest and mismanagement of the garden management and an excessive orientation towards profits. The electricity connection was cut by the because of non-payment of accumulated bills. However, with the help of the CBMU, the OMC cleared a bill of Rs. 9,16,431 on 10. 8. 2006 and the power supply was restored. The local MP, as the OMC claimed, had sanctioned this money from his Local Area Development Fund.

Conventional roles of the trade union, such as mobilizing workers against the management and fighting for worker rights have lost their relevance after the closure of the garden. However, the trade union has a big influence on the OMC. There are 24 members on the OMC with 10 women members. Women are active members of the OMC, are vocal and can influence decision making.

## **7. Specific Problems caused by Closure**

After the garden is closed the workers of these gardens are facing several specific problems such as:

- i. Irregular supply of drinking water;
- ii. Irregular supply of electricity, particularly in the labour lines;
- iii. Inadequate medical facilities;
- iv. Cessation of ration supply, forcing dependence on PDS ration;
- v. Cessation of free firewood supply, causing increased work for women;
- vi. Cessation of free tea to workers;
- vii. Irregular and partial payments, below the agreed sum of Rs. 52 per day.
- viii. Cessation of house repair programme;
- ix. Yearly bonuses of only 6%, which is much less than normal rate;
- x. Cessation of pension and retirement benefits; and
- xi. Layoff of *bigha* workers, causing a drop in household income.

## **8. Social and Economic Consequence**

Problems facing workers in this closed garden affect the social, economic and political lives of workers. Some fallouts are:

- i. Drop in the average income of worker families, causing family members including women to move out of the garden in search of new income opportunities.
- ii. There is a risk element involved in women below 40 going out to the cities to take up work as domestic help. Moreover, in the absence of the housewife, the family life gets unsettled.
- iii. Health, in particular, suffers as workers remain underfed and undernourished; they become more disease prone and as the health service in the garden has broken down the workers do not get adequate and timely medical attention.
- iv. In the lean plucking season, the income level further drops and the workers have to depend on the government initiated employment guarantee schemes.
- v. With the stoppage of the supply of power, conventional rations and firewood, the quality of life of the workers plummets.
- vi. The drop-out rate from schools has risen as the children are engaged in odd jobs to augment family income.
- vii. The workers seemed to be panic stricken as they are uncertain about their future.

### **9. Government Intervention**

The Government has put forward the following initiatives to support the hapless workers of the closed tea garden:

- i. The OMC has been formed to run the garden in some form;
- ii. The district administration supervises the auction and sale of the green leaf;
- iii. The district administration can monitor and control the functioning of the OMCs;
- iv. All workers have been brought under the BPL and, as a result, are entitled to PDS ration, employment guarantee scheme and a special allowance of Rs. 500 a month meant for workers of gardens closed for more than 1 year.

### **B. Bawandanga-Tondu Tea Garden**

**1. Background of the Garden:** The garden covers an area of 500 hectares, with 400 hectares of plantation, 100 hectares for factory and office quarters and half a hectare of fallow land.

This garden is located in Nagrakata block, which, together with Matelli block, constitutes the northernmost part of the Jalpaiguri *Dooars*. The garden is located on the northern border of the block and the northern side of the garden is covered with forest in which leopards and wild elephants live. To reach the garden one has to drive a 20 kilometre half *pucca*, rough and narrow road, from the national high way. The proximity to dense forest has made the garden prone to wild elephant raids. When we visited the garden the garden inmates insisted that we leave well before sunset to avoid elephant raids on the way. Needless to say, this garden is more isolated compared to Samsing garden and communication, transportation and market networks are nascent.

The garden is very old and has a long history. It was first owned by the Dooars Company and then by the B. C. Ghosh company. The garden was then taken over by the S. P. Agarwal Company in 1982. The garden was closed down for the first time in 2003 and

reopened on 17 June 2004. It was again closed on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2004. In between, a company named Tea Promotional had run the garden briefly on lease. When the garden was closed there was no agitation or any kind of movement from the workers or from the trade union side. The owner closed the garden of his own free will. Before the closure, he was arguing that there is a surplus of workers in the garden, and that the workers were not working well. He was making irregular payments of wages and salaries after two or three months delay. One day the owner left the garden saying that he has to attend a meeting at Siliguri and from there sent the closure notice.

**2. Workers Profile: Before the closure**, there were 1174 permanent workers, 600 *bigha* workers, 18 office staff, 7 managerial staff, 130 factory workers (all men). About 60 per cent of the workers were female.

**After the garden was closed** there has been no reduction in the number of permanent workers. Some have, however, retired and a couple of managerial staff members have left. The staff continues to be almost the same as before the closure. Four office staff members have chosen to go outside for work. Thus, almost all the permanent workforce has been retained. However, since the factory is closed and the production has fallen sharply the intake of *bigha* workers has declined sharply, who are employed when necessary only in the peak plucking season. Otherwise, these workers are involved in Panchayat work for 100 days under the Food for Work scheme.

The workers of this garden are mostly Adivasis but there are some Nepalese as well. Christians make up between 10 and 15 per cent of workers.

**1. Migration:** The members of the OMC and the workers we had interviewed were emphatic in saying that there has been no migration from this garden after closure. Those who went outside in search of job could not adjust and most have come back to the garden. They said that there could be a very few garden inmates who have migrated out of the garden after getting some permanent jobs. They claimed that nobody has permanently migrated. The workers who often leave the garden for work are mostly *bigha* workers. However, as we spoke to the workers we came to know about several cases of migration. Closure of the garden has in fact ejected a section of garden inmates, if not the permanent workers, to far off places.

There are girls who have gone to places such as Sikkim, Delhi and U.P. to work as domestic help but they too visit home twice or thrice a year. For the workers in this garden there is hardly any scope for an alternative livelihood. They are completely dependent on the garden. There is no town nearby or other source of income.

We could notice some difference between this garden and the Samsing garden. In this garden the rate of literacy and the level of education is low compared to that in Samsing garden. This garden is also more isolated and communication facilities are rudimentary. All this speaks of the lesser mobility of the workers of this garden compared to the Samsing garden. However, after getting middle level education, 10-12 boys got jobs outside the garden, one becoming a Sub-Inspector in the police and one a *jawan* in the CRPF.

One common pattern however is the migration of women to cities such as Delhi, Bangalore and Chandigarh and to states such as Sikkim to work as domestic help. There is little information about these women. As we have said earlier, according to police sources, trafficking is very active in the area and some could be involved in the flesh trade. However, we need more investigation to reach a conclusion.

**1. Operating Managing Committee:** The Operating Managing Committee (OMC) was constituted with the initiative of the trade union, the party (CPI-M), the Labour Commissioner and the District administration (the DM and the BDO, in particular) within a month of the last closure of the garden. Interestingly, the President and Secretary were already leaders of the CBMU, the trade union wing of the CPI (M) and were thus inducted into the OMC. There are 23 members in the Committee, including 5 girls, who also work actively for the party. Since there is no presence of any other trade union or any other party, the necessary checks and balances in the functioning of the OMC are absent. Transparency in the functioning of the OMC is conspicuous by its absence.

The Committee is constituted by 23 members from the garden. The committee meets once in a fortnight and keeps an eye on the plucking of green leaves, sales, payments to workers and manages other activities of the garden. If the workers face any type of problem it is the duty of the OMC to solve their problems.

**6. Sale/Auction of Green Leaf:** There is only one union in the garden, CBMU, which is affiliated to the CPI (M). After the garden closed down, the yield of green tea has sharply declined as the workers are not able to manure or maintain the garden. It seems that from 1995 there has been a sharp decline in green leaf productivity. Before the closure, annual production was approximately 9.5 lakh kg made tea. Now, it has come down to around 7 lakh kg. of made tea. The garden is now selling green leaf. The lean season had already started when we visited the garden, and now the yield of green leaf is 5,000-6,000 kg per day. During the peak season (June-Oct), the garden is able to generate 27,000-30,000 kg per day. Unlike the Samsing Garden, there is no regular contractual arrangement for the sale of green leaf. To sell the green leaf every Sunday tenders are issued and the leaf is sold to the highest bidder. So far, the OMC has not faced any kind of problem in selling green leaf. They sell green leaf at the rate of Rs. 8 to 11 per kg. The rate has never gone below Rs. 8 and they sell quality green leaves. During the peak season the workers tip the garden every 8-9 days but when we visited the garden in November 2006 they were tipping once in 10-11 days.

Every worker gets Rs. 48.40 as per day *hajira*. The quota given to a worker is 15 kg per day. If she manages to tip more than 15 kg before 6 pm, she is paid 50 paise for each kilogram as '*dablee*'. After 6pm, that is, during overtime (which happens only during season when green leaves are abundant), the worker is paid Rs. 1 per kg as '*dablee*'. Till now the Committee has never faced any problem regarding the payment of workers. However, as the off-season has already started the Committee might face problems in this regard. Anticipating problems, the Committee is planning to seek help from the local Panchayat as under the rural employment guarantee scheme, those on the BPL list are entitled to 100 days work. Under this scheme the workers are provided a minimum of 100 days of work with minimum wage. In every family there are 1-2 workers on an average, and all the worker families in the closed gardens have been included in the BPL list.

According to the OMC members almost the total amount of the earning of the garden is spent on paying the wages of the workers. No money is left for proper maintenance of the garden or for its expansion. The OMC members find it difficult sometimes to pay the full wages and provide basic services.

**7. Women-headed Families:** There are around 1000 families in the garden with 10-15 female headed families. In this garden as in Samsing, the women suffer the most if gardens are closed. Here are a few case studies.

- 1) **V. Oraon** (aged 45), lost her husband a few years ago due to a serious ailment and is the only earning member now. With her meagre income she finds it extremely difficult to maintain her family, which is constituted of herself and her two young daughters. The daughters have been taken out of school and help by sharing the burdens of domestic chores. Her elder daughter who is 16 years now can hope to get some work during the full season as a *bigha*.
- 2) **F. Kharia** (41 years of age) is the head of the family, which includes her son (20 years of age) as the other member. Her husband expired a few months ago of heart disease. She is a regular worker in the garden. However, her son, who has studied up to class VII is unemployed. Her son is lazy and does not help her any way. F had a frail look and malnutrition was apparent in her face.
- 3) **G. Munda** (aged 45 years) has her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and two children in her family. Her husband died of malaria 3 years ago. Her sister-in-law is also a widow. Her sister-in-law and her mother-in-law take care of the domestic chores and the collection of water and firewood. G. brings home the rations and does the shopping. The sharing of family works helps G a lot. She was worried about the future of the family because it was uncertain when the garden would reopen and life returns to normal.
- 4) **P. Bhuyan** (48), a widow, has two children; a daughter of 15 years and a son of 20 years. The daughter takes care of the domestic chores. The son, who has studied up to class VI, is unemployed. Besides working in the garden, P. has to fetch water and collect firewood. Her son helps in buying rations from the PDS and in marketing.
- 5) **S. Majhi** (40) is the mother of one daughter. S's husband died of cholera last year. He was taken to the local health centre but died within a couple of days after falling ill. He was suffering from tuberculosis as well. Her daughter is 18 years of age. She dropped out of school after studying up to class V. She takes care of the domestic chores and brings water and firewood. S is thinking of arranging the marriage of her daughter and is worried because she has neither the connections nor the money required arrange the marriage.
- 6) **B. Tirkey** (50), lost her husband five years back because of a serious ailment. She is left with 3 sons and 4 daughters, all of whom have dropped out of school. One of her sons works as a helper in the trekker (jeep) that plies



between the garden and Malbazar and thus earns some money. The rest of the children are unemployed and since it is a big family, B finds it extremely difficult to run her family. Gloom is evident all over her face and frail body.

**8. Access to Resources:** A tube well is used for drinking water. There is no central pipeline for water in the garden. The garden has set up a few tube wells and the Panchayat (Gram Panchayat) also has supplies some tube wells. In addition, three deep wells have been set up with financial support from the UNICEF.

The condition of the health centre is very bad. There is no qualified doctor. Earlier, there was one but he has left the garden once it was closed down. The compounder is providing some skeletal services. The necessary medicines are not available. A doctor from Sankapara Tea Estate comes to visit the garden twice weekly. The visiting doctor and hospital staff are paid by the OMC. From the case studies of women headed families, it is apparent that the incidence of premature deaths in the garden in recent years has increased primarily because of the breakdown of the health services and care.

Before closure, subsidised **rations** were provided by the garden authorities at the rate of Rs. 0.40 for 2 kg of rice and wheat once every 15 days to each worker. Two and a half *peels* of firewood was supplied to permanent workers per year. After closure, workers are not getting any subsidised ration or free firewood from the garden. The labourers now depend on jungle for firewood. Rations are given from the Anatar dai Annya Yojna (AAY), the food for work scheme run by the GP, according to which workers get rice at Rs. 3 per kg and wheat at Rs. 2 per kg. The workers get up to 5 units of ration every month, including rice and wheat, with 1 unit equal to 3.5 kgs and 5 units equalling 17 kilograms. However, this is not sufficient and the labourers have to purchase the required amounts from the open market.

#### **9. Role of TUs after the garden is closed**

- 1) The CBMU took the initiative to reopen the garden when it was declared closed. They mediated with the leaders of the party (CPI-M), the officers of the labour department and the district administration and took an active part in setting up the OMC and resumed plucking.
- 2) Trade Unions persuade workers not to migrate, because if the workers leave the garden, things will slip out of their hands.
- 3) The TU motivates the workers to work with commitment and sincerity so that they can stand together in this hour of crisis.
- 4) The TU also mediates while implementing relief programmes for BPL families. It should be mentioned that all tea labourers in closed and abandoned gardens have been incorporated in the BPL list.

#### **10. Problems faced by the workers after closure**

- 1) Payment of wages has become irregular and at times uncertain; the wage rate has been cut down, bonuses have been cut (this year bonus was paid at 8.33 per cent only) and retirement benefits such as PF, gratuity and pension have been withdrawn.

- 2) Services in terms of ration, health, education, and water supply have suffered significantly and, as a result, the quality of life has dropped. From case studies we get an indication that the cases of premature death are on the rise.
- 3) Since the garden is relatively isolated, alternative employment opportunities are almost nonexistent. Since workers are not educated or skilled they are at a disadvantage when competing for work in the organized sector outside the garden. This explains why mobility is low in this garden.
- 4) Repair works of workers' houses have been abandoned. Workers complained that a month ago a wild elephant had destroyed about 8 houses, but there had been no effort to repair them. We had asked the OMC members about it and they pleaded helplessness since there was a financial crisis.

Since the garden was closed there no development has been possible in the garden. The tea bushes are old and are damaged as they are not getting proper manuring. In addition, the bushes are close to 100 years old and, therefore, cannot produce good quantity or good quality leaves. The bushes need uprooting and new bushes need to be planted to maintain productivity levels; new machines are also needed. It is very difficult for the OMC to buy new machines as the money is distributed among workers for wages. The OMC is selling green leaves and is not processing tea as the factory is closed. Therefore, whatever little money they get is spent on workers' payment. The condition is becoming worse every day.

Workers are eager for the garden to reopen soon and they may see those happy days again. Everybody wants a good company to take over the garden. The OMC and the TU are making wholehearted efforts to attract a new company to take over the garden. As a result of their efforts, the manager of Luksan Tea Garden has visited the garden recently.

#### **Case Studies of male workers**

- 1) **S. Lohra (aged 45 years)** has 8 members in his family. They comprise his wife, 3 daughters, a son, a daughter-in-law, and a grandson. He alone is working in the garden and earns about Rs. 48.40 per day as *hajira* (daily wage). It is very difficult for them to survive, and sometimes they have to starve. "*Kabhi khata hai kabhi nahin khata hai*" is what he said. His wife doesn't work as she has problem with her hand. When *bigha* work is required, his younger son (who is 26 years old) goes to work in the garden.  
After the garden is closed they are facing lots of problems. They have problems regarding their house because they are not able to repair it with their money. They also have drinking water problems. Now they are getting no firewood so they have to go to the forest to collect firewood, which, again, is very risky. They are deprived of proper medical facilities. They have no ration increments. When the garden was open they were very happy. They never had to starve and the family was running well. Now, with Rs.48 per day *hajira* it is not possible to maintain the family. Occasional raids by wild elephants that sometimes destroy the houses of these poor labourers are a big problem. They have no money to repair their houses.

The nearest town to this garden is Nathua *bajar*, 8 km away. They have to cross the river to reach there. During the monsoon, it is not possible to cross the river as there is no bridge.

The next closest town is Nagarakata, which is 20 km away. From Matelli, Bawandanga T.E. is 32 km distant.

**2) S. Ekka (55)**

His family includes a wife, one daughter (23years) and a son, (21years) who is working outside. His younger son, who has gone out of the garden, was studying in class X when the garden was running well but has had to stop his studies when the garden was closed and is now searching for a job. Ekka's son could not complete his *Madhyamik*. He is working in Bangalore now. Despite responses by workers and trade unions of low migration from this garden around 100 boys are working outside in Punjab, Delhi, UP, Assam, and Kolkata as labourers.

S's main problem is the reduction in income. Among other problems he mentioned the deterioration in health service, the loss of ration and the non-supply of firewood. He is uncertain and worried as to when the garden will reopen again.

There is no school in this garden, and this is also a problem. For children who go to school at Nagrakata the Committee has provided one school vehicle. Children get a mid-day meal in the school.

## **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

### **A. Crisis due to closure of the Tea Gardens**

1. Starvation deaths and death due to acute and prolonged malnutrition are increasing in these gardens. The health centre sources in the garden think that the average worker does not get even 1500 calories a day, whereas the minimum should be more than 2200 calories per head per day. The average calorie intake is less among females. During our field visit we could easily notice the malnutrition of workers.
2. The health centre sources say that diseases related to prolonged and acute malnutrition have increased and the death rate of children has risen significantly. The two gardens we have visited did not have any cases of suicide. The workers, however, informed us that the number of premature deaths and physical impairments have increased in recent times. Some case studies of the female-headed families suggest that the men are laid off because they are ailing seriously and are not in condition to continue with work. In their place their wives have been taken as permanent labour. The breakdown of health services after the closure of both gardens have made the workers more vulnerable.
3. The incidence of water-borne diseases has increased as the regular supply of water has suffered greatly. With the increase of pressure on existing water sources for washing, bathing and drinking, the quality of water has suffered. Existing wells are not maintained properly.
4. With the breakdown of health services in the gardens the incidences of malaria and malaria related deaths have increased in recent months.

5. With the deterioration of the economic condition of the workers' families the drop-out rate at the primary and secondary level has increased significantly. By withdrawing children from schools parents save family expenses and engage children in odd jobs for some income; they are sent to the local markets to work in shops, hotels and in buses and small cars as helpers while the girls are being sent to work as domestic help in the middle class families. The workers we have interviewed have informed us that the incidence of child labour has substantially gone up despite the recent ban by the government.
6. Because of the closure, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS aims at preparing children below 3 years of age for school) programme and the Government drive for primary education and child health have been adversely affected. DOT, Pulse-Polio, and other health programmes of the government could not advance in these gardens because of the lack of any health infrastructure.
7. According to a senior trade unionist, the trade union leader, the management of other running gardens is taking advantages of the huge number of unemployed workers and is engaging them at very poor wages and with an inhuman workload. In this fashion, planters of the state are trying their best to dismantle established wage-structure as well as work schedules.
8. Taking advantage of the state of complete disorder and absolute lawlessness, traders of green leaf and owners of Bought Leaf Factories (BLFs) and established manufacturers are keeping the price of green leaf low. This, in turn, is seriously affecting the interests of small holders and the workforces in those gardens.
9. Women workers are not getting maternity allowance and maternity leave in closed gardens. This is making workers scared of pregnancies. In the event of pregnancy, women go without earning although they need extra money to take care of themselves, particularly for medicines and nutrition. Women workers are not even getting 1,500 calories against the standard of 2,250 calories a day.

#### **B. The Government Intervention**

The Government of West Bengal has initiated a scheme under which the permanent workers of the locked-out gardens will get a stipend of Rs. 500 per month, provided the garden is locked out or abandoned for at least one year. Out of 13 closed gardens, workers of 5 gardens are now entitled to this special stipend. Three of these five gardens, namely, Kathalguri T. E., Ramjhora T. E. and Kalchini & Roymatang T. E. are getting this benefit, whereas Bharnabari T.E., Shikarpur-Bhandapur T.E. and Raipur T.E. have not implemented this scheme so far. Only permanent workers registered in the payroll are entitled to this benefit.

In every closed tea garden the state has made some interventions. A series of conciliation meetings have been called at the initiative of the District Magistrate, Division Commissioner and the Labour Welfare Commission but in most cases no fruitful results have come out. In all the 13 closed gardens the OMC (Operating Managing Committee) is looking after the plucking, selling of green leaves and the welfare of the workers. The plucking of green leaf is going on but the factories are closed. Factory workers, too, are engaged in plucking. *Bigha* workers have been laid off. In no garden are the workers getting stipulated wages. The Block Development Officers (BDOs) of the respective areas are the overall in-charges of these gardens. The BDO oversees the auction of the green leaf and works as the liaison officer between the OMC and the Government. The DM and the Labour Commissioner also intervene occasionally.

After plucking the green leaves the OMC sells it to the buyers and pays wages with the money. However, a senior leader commented that it is not impossible that some corrupt members of the OMC misappropriate a significant share of the money earned through the sale of the leaf. The workers are not paid the full wage they are entitled to; and are getting anything between Rs. 25 to 50, depending on season, yield and the transparency of the OMCs. During the lean season, in particular, wages get drastically reduced because the yield goes down and all workers are needed in the maintenance of the gardens. The innocence of the workers is exploited by a strong coterie of OMC and TU leaders who manipulate the accounts and get them passed while depriving workers of their due. Sometimes, there is a secret arrangement between the buyer and the OMC members. The OMC lacks transparency, which in turn leads to misappropriation of the workers' money. Workers are entitled to a minimum of Rs.50 a day but sometimes they get between Rs. 18 and Rs. 35 per day. The situation in the coming days is expected to deteriorate as the OMC is not maintaining the gardens, which need periodic manuring, pulling (*kalam katana, jhurni*), cleaning and draining. Thus, the coming years might see a sharp decline in the total yield of green leaf and further decrease wages. This will put a big question mark on the survival of workers.

One of the senior leaders said that OMC is lacking in transparency in the maintenance of accounts, the submission of accounts and the passing of the accounts. Trade unions cannot intervene much because a section of the garden leaders are involved in it. He cited an incident of misappropriation of funds in Kathalguri T.E. where the buyer connived with one OMC member and misappropriated Rs. 19 lakh. An arrest warrant was issued against the buyer but the corrupt member of the OMC was not touched by the DM, A. Subayya. The member was only removed from the membership of the OMC. Trade union leaders had said to the DM that whoever is involved in this corruption should be punished, but the administration did not perform its role. In the guideline prepared by the administration there is a provision for the rotation of the members of the OMC, but, in actuality, the same set of members succeeds in maintaining their hegemony over the OMCs. Sometimes, as we have seen in Samsing TE, a local leader, who is also the leader of the party and the only trade union it has works as a don. Despite the fact that he is not a member of the OMC, he controls the functioning of the garden and the OMC. Though the OMC sends its accounts to the trade union office there are always doubts about their authenticity.

Talking about the extent of corruption of the garden owners it was revealed that in North Bengal about Rs.70 crore of Provident Fund money of workers has not been deposited with

the PF office. Against such a crime only two persons were arrested, who were subsequently granted bail.

The planters' lobby is pleading with the government for a switch to the PDS system in place of the present subsidized ration the planters are required to give to the workers according to the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act. The closed gardens have already been brought under the scheme. When this is done for all gardens, workers will have to buy rice and wheat at a much higher price (not below Rs. 8 a kg.), which will further add to their miseries.

### **C. Concluding General Observations**

- i. The quality of life has drastically fallen and the workers are apprehensive of the future.
- ii. Since one particular trade union backed by the ruling party in the state is controlling the OMC and the garden, some kind of iron law of oligarchy has developed in its management. One particular influential leader along with his close coterie can use terror tactics to virtually manipulate the functioning of the OMC, in connivance with the district administration and deprive workers of their dues.
- iii. The arrangements made so far are ad hoc and these do not indicate a long-term solution to the problems of the workers of the closed garden.

### **D. Alternative livelihood arrangements**

1. Since most workers are unskilled, the rural employment guarantee scheme or a scheme such as the *gramin sadak yojna* should be taken up in a massive scale to provide alternative income opportunities to the workers, especially in the lean season. Other central government funded projects should be tuned in such a way that the tea labourers get maximum benefits.
2. Educated youth should be identified and given permanent and contractual employment in places such as government offices, panchayats, schools and hospitals. There is no reason why teachers for local primary schools should not be recruited from the graduates and high schooled people available in the garden. Many vacancies for teachers are present and the youth could be recruited on contractual basis (such as *para* teachers, a scheme already put into practice by the Government of West Bengal) when it is difficult to recruit them on permanent basis.
3. Boys should be trained under the schemes like Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM, is a Central Govt. Scheme which provides training to the unemployed youth in various crafts and prepare them for self-employment) and loans should be extended so that they can launch self-employment schemes. The growing transportation and communications industry could be an alternative source of employment for the boys. Girls could be trained as nurses and will find employment in the growing number of private hospitals in nearby urban centres.

4. The Self Help Groups (SHGs) movement in West Bengal is spreading fast and successfully in the villages, but are conspicuous by their absence in tea gardens. Women trained for self employment should be organized into SHGs.
5. After the closure of the gardens, health services have virtually broken down. Immediate coordinated measures are necessary to save workers from physical extinction. The services of the local youth could be used for the purposes of this health campaign.
6. Workers should be motivated to utilize the fallow land of the garden for growing fruits and vegetables. This would not only help them meet their nutritional deficiencies but could help them earn some money as well.
7. Animal husbandry and poultry farms in miniature scale have a great potentiality for being the source of income generation and supply of protein. Unemployed members of workers' families should be motivated and given technical and financial support to exploit the possibilities in this area.
8. With the passing of the Forest Rights Act, tribal workers living close to the forests, as both the gardens studied fall in this category, can make the best use of the forest resources for alternative income opportunities. The district administration can spread awareness among the workers on this issue.
9. The Government of West Bengal is trying to promote tea-tourism in the Jalpaiguri Dooars. This has immense employment potential for the unemployed youth in the region. However, it has to be ensured that the younger generation of the tea workers gets the benefit of the income opportunities thus created.

# Closed Tea Gardens in Darjeeling Hills: A Case Study

Milindo Chakrabarti and Animesh Sarkar

Darjeeling is commonly known as the 'Queen of the Hills'. This beautiful place, with a majestic view of the Khangchenjungha peak and green forests is famous worldwide for the finest quality of tea produced here.

## Location of Darjeeling

Darjeeling is the northernmost district of West Bengal. Its location on the mighty Himalayas makes it important both nationally and internationally, from both geopolitical and environmental perspectives. On its northern side Darjeeling is bordered by Sikkim and Nepal. The eastern border of Darjeeling shares boundaries with Jalpaiguri district, Sikkim and Bhutan. The southern border touches the district borders of Jalpaiguri and Uttar Dinajpur and the international border of Bangladesh. The western border shares the common boundary with Nepal. The district lies between 26°29' and 27°13' North latitude and between 87°59' and 88°53' East longitude (Chhetri, 1999; P. 29).

Altitudinal variation of the district is quite significant and varies between 91 meters and 3658 meters (Chhetri, 1999; P. 32). A portion of the district lies in the *terai*, with most of the landed area of 3149 square kilometres being located on hilly and rough terrain.

## Occupational profile

The primary occupations of the people in Darjeeling include sustainable agriculture, working in tea gardens, casual wage employment, tourism related business and driving. The tea sector still provides maximum employment, followed by the tourism sector. Casual wage employment is the next important source. As of 2005, 52,000 people were engaged in the tea gardens in Darjeeling hills (<http://www.darjeelingtea.com>).

## Tea in Darjeeling

Captain James introduced tea in Darjeeling in 1832. By 1851, Dr. Campbell and Major Commelin were successful in setting up nurseries at Darjeeling and Lebong respectively. Commercial plantation started in 1853 and plantations on an extensive scale were evident from 1856-57 (Chhetri, 1999, P 37).

Most of the 86 gardens registered (see Map 1 for the "Darjeeling" trademark in the hills) still produce tea that is sold at premium prices in foreign markets (<http://www.india->



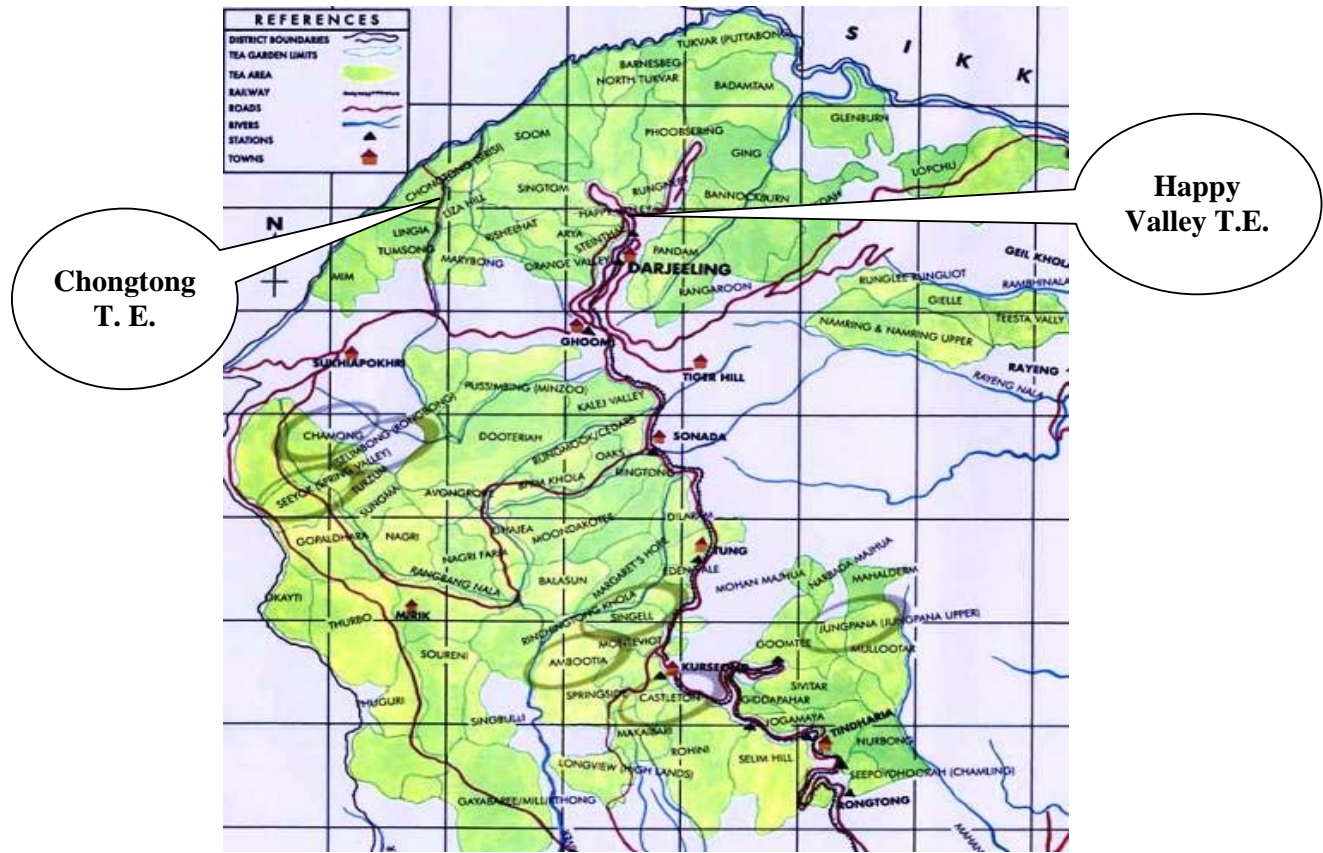
[today.com/today](http://today.com/today)). Incidentally, even though only around 10 million kg of Darjeeling tea is produced annually, and around 2-3 million kg is consumed domestically, around 20 million kg is exported as Darjeeling tea! The cost of production is very high as leaf productivity per unit of land is low, partly due to geographical and environmental reasons and partly due to the management practices followed. The weather and hilly terrain considerably reduce the leaf bearing capacity of the bushes and the plucking capacity of the workers respectively. To top it all, laxity in uprooting existing bushes once they age beyond their peak leaf-bearing capacity and in replacing them with newer ones has also contributed to the lower productivity of Darjeeling tea gardens. The average yield in Darjeeling is only 500 kg per hectare, compared to an all-India average of 1700 kg. However, the fact that Darjeeling tea fetches a premium of 70–80 per cent over the average price of Indian tea should make tea operations quite profitable in this region if the management of the gardens is planned properly.

### **Employment Scenario in Tea industry in Darjeeling**

Since 1961, the employment generation in the tea industry all over India has been growing slowly. Darjeeling's tea industry which has recorded only 13.39 per cent of growth in employment during the last 40 years has lagged behind considerably the 31.23 per cent average growth rate of the tea gardens of West Bengal and the 20.89 per cent recorded by the tea sector of the country as a whole (Chhetri, 1999, P 41).

During the last decade Darjeeling has witnessed the suspension of work in several gardens. The West Bengal Tea Development Corporation (WBTDC) has taken over the management of some of them such as Pandam Tea Estate, Rungmook Cedar Tea Estate and Rangaroon Tea Estate. Private entrepreneurs have also taken over some other tea estates. Tea-related organised operations are being conducted in only two tea estates in Darjeeling hills, namely Chongtong and Happy Valley tea estates.

Map 1: Tea Map of Darjeeling



## **CASE STUDY ON CHONGTONG TEA ESTATE**

### **Intorduction**

Chongtong is a unit of East Indian Produce Limited. (Its registered office is located at 1, Mangoe Lane, Calcutta - 700001. The Board of Directors is constituted by Mr. A.K. Agarwal, Smt. S.K. Agarwal and R.K. Kanodia. Its registration number is 2313. Its gross area is 393.11 hectares with a cropped area of 376.15 hectares. Its local address is Chongtong Tea Estate, Post Office, Marybong District, Darjeeling, 734102. Its telephone numbers are 0354–2261204/2261207/2261208.) The garden produces orthodox tea and the average annual production till last year was 3,00,000 kg of made tea which requires 15,00,000 kg of green leaves.

### **History**

Chongtong Tea Estate was transferred to Daga Company from its British owner in 1955. According to local sources, Mr. Sitaram Daga was running the garden very well. However, after his death in 1980 his sons leased out the garden to Mr. Ajit Agarwal in 1983. A few more individuals like Mr Churimore and Mr Jhunjhunwala also tried their hands in managing the garden and failed. Mr. Agarwal has been running the show since 1983 right until the declaration of suspension.

### **Location of Chongtong Tea Estate**

The district town of Darjeeling is located at a distance of 36 km from the garden. The block headquarters and the market is just 3 km away from the garden. The garden is located on the eastern aspect of the mountains overlooking Darjeeling town. However, the garden is northeast facing. The eastern border of the garden shares the common boundary with Liza hills Tea Estate and Marrybong Tea Estate. The western side is bordered by Tamsang Tea Estate and the northern end by Little Rangit river. The northern boundary touches the forestland under Darjeeling Division and on the southern end it shares a boundary with Marrybong and Lingia Tea Estates. The nearest railway station is Ghoom (27 km away) and air terminal at Bagdogra is 120 km away. Bus and jeep services to the garden are available from the Darjeeling bus stand.

### **Labour Profile**

#### ***Workforce pattern***

The total number of workers in the garden is 1252; 45 of them work in the factory and 1082 are engaged in field activities as daily workers. 107 permanent field employees take care of the garden and 18 employees work in the office. The proportion of female workers in the garden is 62.78 per cent (see Table 1 for details). The entire garden is divided into three divisions — upper division, middle division and lower division (see Map 2).

<b>Details of Chongtong Tea Estate</b>		<i>Table 1</i>
<b>Chongtong Tea Estate</b>		
Gross area	393.11 hectare	
Area under tea plantation	376.15 hectare	
Daily rated workers	1127 (Male: 307; Female: 786 & Adolescent children below 16 years: 6)	
Monthly rated employees	107 (Male)	
Staff	18 (Male)	
Total workers	1252	
Land-Labour ratio	3.32/ hectare of cropped area	
(Source: Department of Labour)		

Around 62.78 per cent of the work force is women. Employment opportunities are often transferred from generation to generation. Garden workers are paid half in cash and half in kind. Until the declaration of suspension of work, the management provided free accommodation, subsidised cereal rations and free medical benefits. The garden ran a primary school that has since been taken over by the government. The building was maintained by the garden management till work was suspended. The primary health facility was available in the garden and the workers were reimbursed half the cost if they sought treatment elsewhere.

#### ***Number of workers before and after closures***

The size of workforce before and after the suspension of work has not varied. The workers are still waiting for the garden to reopen. However, a large number of their family members have migrated to outside cities in search of alternative sources of livelihood.

#### ***Problems specific to women workers***

Women workers faced problems primarily during pregnancy. While the garden had a small dispensary and a pharmacist, the supply of medicine was limited. This forced pregnant workers to take leaves of absence to be admitted in the government hospital in Darjeeling town for medical care. Sexual harassment has not been reported.

#### **Migration**

Both the production and law and order situation in the garden were good until the 1990s. However, the situation has deteriorated with the decline in the price of tea in global market. Till 2005, casual labourers had employment for as many as 9 months in the year. But, 2006 was terrible for labourers. Suspension of work was announced in January 2006 and labourers became unemployed. During the first quarter in 2006, young workers agitated and destroyed some property in the garden. According to hearsay there are 8000 individuals in the garden and around 50 per cent left, even though the majority had not been actually employed by the garden authorities.

### ***Where do they migrate?***

After the notification of suspension of work a section of the population dependent on the tea garden workers migrated outside the garden. Competition in the labour market in Darjeeling forced them to migrate far from their residence and around 4000 of these individuals are now working in Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai, Goa and Delhi (source: field work).

### ***Who migrates?***

Most of the migrants (80 per cent) are male. Mainly, the dependents of the workers including individuals from the families of permanent workers migrated. During peak plucking season in the garden many of these people used to pluck green leaves in the garden as *bigha* (temporary) labour (source: field work).

### ***Nature of migration***

80 per cent of the total migrants are male. They now work primarily as wage labourers in the construction sector and as security guards. However, some of the female workers are engaged in hotels and beauty parlours (source: field work).

## **Alternative Livelihood Arrangements**

### ***Garden Committee***

A Joint Action Committee (with five members from four workers' unions and two outsiders as advisers) was formed in the first quarter of 2006 to tackle the problem of suspension of work. They were involved in discussions with a host of people. Later the District Magistrate of Darjeeling appointed the local Block Land Revenue Officer (BLRO) as the receiver of the garden. After a discussion with the labourers, an arrangement was formalised that the plucked green leaves would be sold outside and the workers would get their payment after deducting a portion to be used for the maintenance of the garden and for staff payments. However, Mr. Agarwal filed a case in Kolkata High court and got a stay order against this decision. The workers protested and sat in a *dharna* in front of Mr. Agarwal's house at Siliguri during April this year and also submitted a letter to the State Urban Minister. They sent the copy of that letter to the Chief Minister of West Bengal but nothing happened. The Joint Action Committee has since been dismantled. (source: field work)

### ***Union involvement in garden committees***

There are four labour unions (Darjeeling Terai Dooars Chia Kaman Mazdur Union (DTDCKMU), Himalayan Plantation Workers Union (HPWU), Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Mazdur Union (DDCKMU) and National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW)). A Joint Action Committee was formed after notification of the closure with 5 members from each union and two advisors from outside. The total number in the executive council was 22. All the labourers were the members of that committee. (Source: field work)

### ***Green leaf market and price***

A market for green leaf exists outside the garden. This year, labourers plucked green leaves and sold them at between Rs. 22 and Rs. 25 per kg to two local middlemen. The workers have no definite knowledge where the leaves were sold. Green leaves provide them employment for 6 to 7 months. About 6.5 lakh kg of green leaves (equivalent to around 1.3 lakh kg of made

tea) were harvested and sold this year. The harvest has been much lower than earlier years when Mr. Agarwal was managing the garden. (Source: field work)

### ***Price sharing in the garden committee***

As there is no garden committee the question of sharing income does not arise. (Source: field work)

## **Income**

### ***Household income pattern***

After the suspension of work the only livelihood option was to pluck green leaves during the season. Some families receive remittances from family members working outside. The average annual income of each family from the proceeds of green leaves is Rs.39, 000. Tea leaves are plucked for about 6 to 7 months a year. They workers grow maize and vegetables to reduce monetary expenses. They also earn around Rs. 2,000 per year from rearing livestock in their houses. However, they are worried that if the situation continues, the health of tea bushes will deteriorate and their income will decrease as well. (Source: field work)

### ***Contributions of other members***

Most pluckers are female and some families send their children to pluck as well (For example, Mr. Kishore Singh is around 74 years old. His wife was a permanent worker in upper division of this garden. At present, she takes her daughter, aged less than 14 years, to pluck green leaves. Most of the families depend on the money sent by the members working outside the gardens. (Source: field work)

### ***Women headed Households and related issues***

There are around 250 women-headed households. Their main income is from plucking and selling green tea leaves to the middlemen. Some of them run small grocery shops and sell homemade local brew. Presently, the power grid is installing 16 towers for its new supply line and employs around 100 of the people. Women labourers also work there. The social system is liberal and therefore, women-headed families are not treated differently. (Source: field work)

## **Access to Resources**

### ***Drinking water***

The drinking water facility where water comes directly to the labour lines from perennial water sources, developed earlier by the garden management is still functional. However, drinking water is a problem for residents located at higher altitudes where natural sources are not available. Earlier, the tea garden management provided them water in tankers. (Source: field work)

### ***Electricity***

The gardens have had electricity connections for a long time. Till 2005, the tea garden management deducted electricity charges from workers' payments. However, since early 2006, each household has been paying their charges directly to the State Electricity board. (Source: field work)

### ***Medical facilities***

Since the declaration of suspension of work in the garden the small dispensary has been running short of medicine. The pharmacist is helpless without a supply of medicine. People now go to the government hospitals, either in Bijanbari or in Darjeeling for treatment. (Source: field work)

### ***Contributory ration***

Contributory rations were given till last year. However, this has stopped with the suspension of work. (Source: field work)

### **State Intervention**

#### ***Ration***

The local administration has distributed BPL cards to the labourers. However, they have not received any opportunity to use these cards to their benefit. No benefits officially available to one who holds a BPL card have been made available to them yet. (Source: field work)

#### ***Unemployment benefit***

The state government's scheme Financial Assistance to the Workers of Locked out Industrial Workers (FAWLOI) provides monthly financial assistance of Rs.500 per worker provided that they are below 58 years old. However, as the management of Chongtong has only served a notice for suspension of work, and did not close the garden, the labourers are not getting any benefit under this scheme. Around 50 individuals are receiving old age pensions from the local *Gram Panchayat*. (Source: field work)

### **Other Interventions**

The local Block Development Office has distributed relief twice among the workers during the first half of this year. Each individual received 1 kg wheat and 1 kg rice in each term. (Source: field work)

### **Status and Role of Trade Unions**

Trade unions have been operating separately after the failure of the attempt to run the garden under Joint Action Committee. However, they have been arranging regular meetings among themselves to discuss their problems and chart out future courses of action. (Source: field work)

Recently, representatives from the trade unions met the Management of the Rishi Haat tea garden located nearby who are interested in taking over the garden. The management has visited the garden twice. However, the magnitude of the garden's current debt with different financial organisations, which has accumulated to about Rs 14 crores, remains a problem. (Source: field work)

### **Conclusion**

1. Plucking tea is the primary economic activity of locals in Chongtong Tea Estate;

2. The annual production of this garden was 3,00,000 kg before the order for suspension of work was issued.
3. Medical facilities in the garden were insufficient even while the garden was in operation, though there was a dispensary and a pharmacist appointed by the garden management. Pregnant women, in particular, face problems.
4. Contributory rations stopped with the suspension of work;
5. Workers have been issued BPL cards. However, they have not received any benefits from these cards.
6. In spite of running smoothly for 18 years with production levels remaining more or less unchanged during this period, the closure was declared all of a sudden, which the labourers could not have apprehended even on the previous day.
7. The suspension of work in Chongtong Tea Estate led to the destabilisation of the living conditions of the families of labourers working there.
8. Around 50 per cent of the total population of 8000 has migrated to cities looking for work.
9. Migrant workers do not plan to return even if the garden is reopened.
10. Workers had formed a joint action committee to tackle the employment problem. However, a stay order from the Kolkata high court stopped that initiative.
11. The committee has approached the Urban Minister of the State who is a regional leader of the CPI(M) and has sent a copy of their letter to the Chief Minister of West Bengal, but nothing tangible has happened so far. The committee has since been dismantled.
12. The existing trade unions are negotiating with the authorities in order to reopen the garden.
13. Female workers pluck tea during the plucking season and sell leaves the local middlemen to earn around Rs.39000 per year per household. However, they do not share their money with any committee;
14. The recent installation of towers by power grid is providing casual employment to a number of local residents;
15. Local BDO distributed relief twice to the workers. Every individual received one kg of wheat and one kg of rice each time;
16. Workers are not getting benefits from the government PDS.

The future for labourers seems bleak, if this condition prevails. Not many resources are available to maintain the tea bushes in a productive condition. The Rishi Haat Tea Garden Management, a unit of the Birla Group of Industries is interested in taking over the garden. If the negotiation is fruitful the workers might emerge from their present state. Otherwise, institutional arrangements are imperative to help the existing workers maintain the tea bushes in a productive and sustainable condition. In addition, the government may allow the labourers to start ecotourism enterprises using the existing real estate of the tea garden.



## **Case Study on Happy Valley Tea Estate**

### **Introduction**

Happy Valley is a unit of Happy Valley Tea Company Limited. It is locally known as Olsin Kaman. (Its registered office is located at 14, Weston Street, Calcutta–700013. The Board of Directors are constituted by A.N. Banerjee, P. Banerjee and T. Banerjee. Its registration number is 100. The gross area under tea garden is 162.34 hectares and its cropped area is 114.05 hectare. Its local address is Happy Valley Tea Estate, P.O.Darjeeling –734101. Its telephone number is 0354-2252405. The garden produces orthodox tea. Till 2000, production was about 60,000 kg per year.

### **History**

Happy Valley Tea Estate, one of the oldest tea garden in Darjeeling hills, has become a symbol of the turmoil that plagues the region's growers and of their hopes for survival. Just two km away from Darjeeling town, Happy Valley was first established in 1854 as Wilson Tea Estate. In 1903, Tara Pada Banerjee, a wealthy Bengali, bought the estate from its British owners. In 1929, Mr Banerjee bought the Windsor tea estate nearby, and merged the two estates under the name of Happy Valley tea estate ([www.hinduonnet.com](http://www.hinduonnet.com)). The bushes in the garden are very old — the minimum age is 80 years, and some are 150 years old. Very little re-plantation has been done in the recent past. This tea estate being the closest one to town, is visited often by tourists who come to Darjeeling. ([www.ioshtea.com](http://www.ioshtea.com)). Happy Valley tea garden never sold its produce in Kolkata tea auction markets, unlike most large estates in the region. Instead it sold tea in local markets with some portion exported directly to Japan and Germany.

### **Location of Happy Valley Tea Estate**

The nearest town is Darjeeling around 2 km away from the garden. The garden is located on the western slope of Darjeeling town. The garden is west and northwest facing. The average altitude of the garden is 6,000 feet. The northern boundary of the garden goes up to Singtam Valley River. The Singtam Tea Estate is located on the other side of the river. The southern area of the garden is demarcated by the boundary area of Stainthal Tea Estate. The western side of the garden merges with the eastern bank of Arya Khola. Arya Tea Estate is located on the other side of the river. The eastern side of the garden extends up to the municipality road. The railway station is 3 km away and the air terminal at Bagdogra is 92 km away. (See Map 3.)

### **Labour Profile**

The total number of workers in the garden is 332. 30 labourers work in the factory and 249 in the field. 53 permanent field and office employees took care of the garden and office works. 54.81 per cent of the total work force is women (see Table 2 for details).

<b>Details of Happy Valley Tea Estate</b>		<i>Table 2</i>
Gross area	162.34 hectare	
Area under tea plantation	114.05 hectare	
Daily rated workers	279 (Male: 86; Female: 182 & Adolescent Ch.: 11)	
Monthly rated employees & Staffs	53 (Male)	
Total workers	332	
Land–Labour ratio	2.91/ hectare of cropped area	
Source: Department of Labour, Darjeeling		
Source: The site overview map of Chongtong: has been prepared by Mr. Chusen Lepcha. The site overview map of Happy Valley has been prepared by Mr. Kishor Tamang.		
Insert Map		

Around 54.81 per cent of the work force is women and the employment opportunities are inherited by members of the next generation. The income of garden workers is half in the form of cash and the other half in kind (subsidised ration, firewood, clothes, shoes, rain coats, *daukso*(plucking basket), labour quarters, water, some medicine, *haat* bus (truck to the market) and school bus (also a truck). The workers were, before the abandonment by the owners, were provided with free accommodation and free medical benefits. The gardens used to run primary schools that have since been taken over by the government. The building continued to be maintained by the garden management till they abandoned it. Now the Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council (DGAHC) provides funds for its maintenance. The primary health facility was available in the garden and workers were reimbursed half of the cost if they sought treatment elsewhere. (Source: field work)

#### **Number of workers before and after closure**

The total number of workers in the garden is 332. The number of workforce before and after the declaration of suspension of work does not differ to a great extent. They are waiting for the garden to re-open. (Source: field work)

#### **Problems specific to women workers**

Budhne Gurung, a sub-staff member in this garden in 1999 during his wife’s pregnancy spent around Rs. 3,000 on medicines for his wife. The garden has its own dispensary and a compounder. However, the medicines were inadequate. Dispensary was helpful for minor problems though. The workers are forced to rush to the government hospital in Darjeeling town for emergencies. Sexual harassment has not been reported.

#### **MIGRATION**

Due to the turmoil in tea prices in the world market and the six months of bad business during 2000, the workers were not paid. The Banerjees abandoned the garden in August 2000 ([www.dayafterindia.com](http://www.dayafterindia.com)). The 332-odd abandoned workers and their families decided to

manage the plantation themselves. They pluck green tea for selling for about 8 months a year and seek employment as daily wage labourers with construction contractors in Darjeeling town. Consequently, no migration has been noticed so far. (Source: field work)

## **Alternative Livelihood Arrangements**

### ***Garden Committee***

The Happy Valley Workers Committee was formed in 2000 to tackle the problem of suspension of work. Six executive committee members chair the committee. Other workers are general members. They were involved in discussions with a host of people and later came to an arrangement with the Makaibari tea Estate which agreed to buy plucked green leaf at the rate of Rs.20 per kg. The committee is still trying to persuade the owner of Makaibari, Mr. Raja Banerjee to take control over the garden. Makaibari management is also positively inclined to this proposal. (Source: field work)

### ***Union involvement in the garden committees***

There is only one union — Himalayan Plantation Workers Union (HPWU) — backed by the local Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). All the workers are members of this union. (Source: field work)

### ***Green leaf market***

Plucked green leaf is directly sold to the representative from Makaibari Tea Estate. The pluckers receive Rs.20 per kg for the harvested green leaves. Green leaves provide them with employment for about 7 months. During the lean season, they pluck green leaves to produce home made tea for their own consumption. However, some of them sell this tea in the local markets at the rate of Rs.50/- per kg. (Source: field work)

### ***Price sharing***

There is a formal garden committee. However, no price-sharing mechanism has been identified. Those engaged in plucking donated some money to take care of the day-to-day expenses of running the committee. The amount to be donated is uniformly fixed across the labourers. (Source: field work)

## **INCOME**

### **Household income pattern**

While the garden was running, the average salary for a tea plucker was Rs. 52 a day for collecting 6 to 8 kg of green leaves. The Happy Valley workers' cottages are surrounded by small plots of cultivable land which they use to grow vegetables for their own consumption, and a few have their own livestock. The workers rely on these assets as they have not been paid for months and have not received a subsidised supply of rice, kerosene, firewood or medical treatment. At present, most workers go to Darjeeling town to work at construction sites during lean seasons. The sale of green leaves provides them, on an average, Rs. 30,000 per year. The present population of the garden, according to the residents interviewed in course of the present study, is around 1700. There are two primary schools. The children go to the high schools in Darjeeling town (source: field work).

### **Contributions of other members**

Most pluckers are female and some families send their children to pluck leaves as well. They also work in the nearby town as casual wage labourers (Rs.60 per day) under contractors engaged in construction activities. (source: field work)

### **Women headed household & concerned issues**

There are around 55 women-headed households and their main option is to pluck green leaves. Some of them run small grocery shops and sell homemade local brew. Presently, most of them are going to the nearby town to work under contractors in various construction works. (Source: field work)

### **Access to Resources**

#### ***Drinking water***

Where water comes directly from perennial water sources the drinking water facility is still working. Garden management had constructed pipelines for drinking water supply to labour colonies. These lines are in working conditions (source: field work).

#### ***Electricity***

Electricity connection has been in existence in the estate for a long time. Until 2000, the tea management deducted electricity charges from their payment. However, after suspension of work each household pays their charges directly to the State Electricity Board (source: field work).

#### ***Medical facilities***

Medical facilities have been stopped with the notification of suspension of work. The pharmacist is helpless without a supply of medicine. People go to government hospitals in Darjeeling for treatment. Most of the workers want a fulltime doctor and medicine in the dispensary to reduce the financial and mental pressures on them. They also want medicines for Tuberculosis patients should be available in the dispensary.

#### ***Contributory ration***

Contributory ration has not been available for the last 15 years. They have not even received any BPL card. The government run Public Distribution System is not available to them. They have not even received any relief from the local administration (source: field work).

### **State Intervention**

#### ***Ration***

So far, the workers have no ration card so there is no question of getting rations from the State run public distribution system (source: field work).

#### ***Unemployment benefit***

The State government has a scheme called Financial Assistant to the Workers of Locked out Industries (FAWLOI) to provide monthly financial assistance of Rs.500/- per worker provided that they are below 58 years old. However, the garden management served a notice of suspension of work, they did not close the garden. Due to this, labourers are not getting any

benefit under this scheme. Around 10 individuals are receiving old age pension from the local *Gram Panchayat* (source: field work).

### **Any Other Intervention**

Labourers did not receive any relief from the district administration (source: field work).

### **Status and Role of Trade Unions**

There is a single trade union (HPWU) backed by the local GNLF. However, the trade union backed garden committee is negotiating with the owner of Makaibari Tea Estate to take over the garden. Presently, Makaibari is buying green leaves from pluckers (source: field work).

### **Conclusion:**

1. Tea production is the primary economic activity of the locals in the Happy Valley Tea Estate;
2. The management abandoned the garden in 2000;
3. Annual production of this garden was 60,000 kg before this garden was abandoned;
4. Contributory ration was stopped from 1991;
5. The workers do not have any ration card;
6. The suspension of work in Happy Valley Tea Estate has led to a destabilization of the living conditions of the labourers working here;
7. No migration has been observed. However, they have been looking for casual wage employment in nearby Darjeeling town;
8. Workers formed a joint action committee to tackle the employment problem and arranged a buying agreement with the owners of Makaibari T. E. to sell harvested green leaf;
9. The committee is persuading the owner of Makaibari T. E. to take over the garden;
10. Workers — mostly female — pluck tea during the peak season, sell the plucked leaves to middlemen and earn around Rs. 30,000/- per year. However, they do not contribute any money to any committee for running a fund to maintain the tea bushes.
11. The labourers work with local contractors in Darjeeling town during the lean season;
12. No help has reached them from the local administration;

If this condition prevails, the situation will worsen, as the workers have not been able to develop any mechanism to maintain the tea bushes to sustain their productivity. The administration may allow the garden committee to use the manager's bungalow to run ecotourism enterprises. In view of the considerable scarcity of parking space in Darjeeling town, the approach roads to the garden may be used as parking lots for vehicles and the revenue thus collected may be shared between labourers and the municipality. However, the skilled tea workers would be better off if the factory is reopened.

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## Overall Profile of Closed Tea Gardens Idukki District, Kerala

Jacob Bose

The present crisis in the Indian tea industry which started around 10 years back, made at least 1,00,000 workers lose their jobs and a large number of reports of destitution, starvation and suicide are being received every day. (*Times of India*, 13 March 2003)

The high-range district of Idukki in Kerala is spread across a total land area of 4,476 square kilometres, which is 12.9% of the total area of the state. With almost 11.25 lakh population the major earner for people is agriculture. The major crops grown in the region are tea, coffee and spices. Tea is the major activity that provides close to 50 per cent of the direct and indirect employment in the region. The crisis in the tea sector, which started in the '90s, has significantly altered the lives of nearly 40,000 people directly and 2 lakh people indirectly.

### Overall Profile of Tea-Kerala

The plantation sector is important to the economy of Kerala, contributing about Rs. 2,911 crores to its GDP. Kerala produces 34 per cent of the tea produced in South India and 10 per cent of national production. There are nearly 40,000 workers, mainly women, dependent on the plantations in Peermade. They were permanent workers, plucking leaves and earning between Rs. 81 and Rs. 120 per day in addition to Rs. 150 paid per week as store cash. The men who did attendant jobs such as pruning tea bushes and spraying pesticides earned Rs 77.26 per day (*The Hindu*, September 28, 2003). The management provided the workers water, electricity, healthcare and education, besides accommodation.

Employment in tea estates was considered to be the most attractive and secure job one could get in Idukki district. Now, no major cultivation activity is being carried out in the organised sector. However, a number of small tea plantations by small scale farmers are coming up. 68 percent (out of 35,210 hectares) of the total tea grown in Kerala is grown in Idukki district.

The large scale tea gardens in Idukki are owned by the following companies: Peermedu Tea Company, RBT group, Pullickanam estate, MMJ group, AVG group, AVT group, Harrison Malayalam Ltd., Hope plantations, Haileyburia plantations Ltd. and Karimtharuvi Tea Estate Ltd.

<b>Plantation Crops-Area, Production and Productivity</b> (1998 - 99 to 2000- 01 )						
	1998-99		1999-2000		2000-2001	
	Kerala	India	Kerala	India	Kerala	India
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>AREA (hectares)</b>						
Tea	36,877	43,857	36,826	4,37,857	36,826	4,37,857
Coffee	84,139	3,40,306	84,735	34,716	84,735	3,46,716
Rubber	4,72,900	5,58,584	4,74,364	5,62,670	4,74,364	5,62,670
Cardamom	40,867	72,444	40,867	72,444	40,867	72,444
<b>Production (tonnes)</b>						
Tea	71,813	81,855	66,093	8,48,359	66,093	8,18,359
Coffee	60,470	2,92,000	70,550	3,01,200	70,550	3,01,200
Rubber	5,72,800	6,22,265	5,79,866	6,30,405	5,79,886	5,30,405
Cardamom	6,550	9,290	7,555	10,450	7,555	10,450
<b>Productivity(kg/ha)</b>						
Tea	1,947	1,869	1,795	1,938	1,795	1,938
Coffee	719	858	833	869	833	869
Rubber	1,211	1,114	1,222	1,120	1,222	1,120
Cardamom	160	128	185	144	185	144

Source: <http://www.keralaplanningboard.org/html/plantationcrops.html>

#### Appendix 4. 22

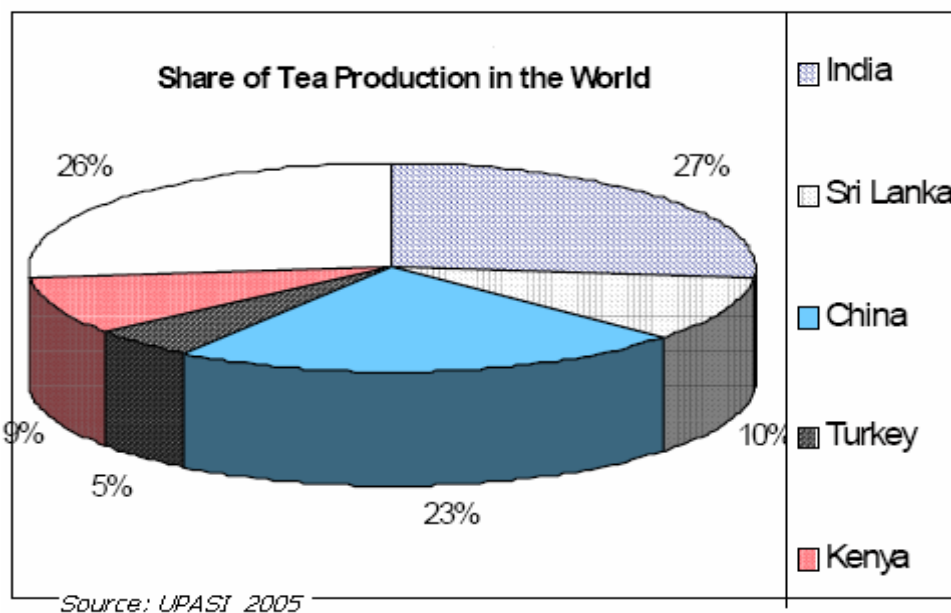
#### Production, Consumption, Export and Auction Price of Tea

Year	Production			Consumption ( '000 MT)	Exports		Cochin Auction Price (Rs/kg)
	India ( '000 MT)	( '000 MT)	% of Kerala		( '000 MT)	Percentage of Production	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1980	569.00	54.00	9.49	346.00	224.00	39.37	13.14
1981-85	600.00	50.00	8.33	387.00	214.00	35.67	20.50
1986-90	679.00	57.00	8.39	464.00	204.00	30.04	27.54
1991-95	740.00	65.00	8.78	567.00	174.00	23.51	38.14
1996	780.10	61.60	7.90	618.00	162.00	20.77	44.42
1997	810.00	69.80	8.62	633.00	203.00	25.06	61.57
1998	874.10	65.90	7.54	664.00	210.00	24.02	73.39
1999	824.40	67.80	8.22	650.00	192.00	23.29	62.04
2000	846.50	69.30	8.20	653.00	207.00	24.45	51.34
2001	853.70	66.10	7.70	673.00	183.00	21.44	52.21
2002	826.20	59.70	7.20	693.00	198.00	23.98	47.21

Source : Association of Planters of Kerala

Source: [http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept\\_planning/ecoreview1.htm](http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept_planning/ecoreview1.htm)





**Table 4.4:**  
**Area, Production and Productivity of Principal Crops**

Sl. No	Crops	Area ( Ha )		Production ( MT )		Productivity ( Kg/ha )	
		2001-02	2002-03	2001-02	2002-03	2001-02	2002-03
1	Rice	322368	310521	703504	688859	2182	2218
2	Pulses	8191	7357	6281	5548	767	754
3	Pepper	203956	201037	58240	59744	286	297
4	Ginger	10706	10365	40181	39886	3753	3848
5	Turmeric	3558	3388	7895	7598	2219	2243
6	Cardamom	41336	44237	8380	6480	203	146
7	Arecanut	93193	92589	84681	92039	909	994
8	Banana	50871	51805	375903	379884	7389	7333
9	Other Plantains	55183	55412	393182	408649	7125	7375
10	Cashewnut	89718	86623	65867	63287	734	731
11	Tapioca	111189	110297	2455880	2504391	22087	22706
12	Coconut *	905718	905482	5479	5338	6049	5895
13	Coffee	84795	84139	66690	64425	786	766
14	Tea	36899	36821	66090	65800	1791	1787
15	Rubber	475039	476047	580350	594917	1222	1250

\*Production in million nuts & Productivity in nuts/ha

Source : Directorate of Economics and Statistics & UPASI

Source: [http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept\\_planning/er/chapter4.pdf](http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept_planning/er/chapter4.pdf)

### **Historical perspective**

One of the major threats faced by the tea industry is the increased import of inferior quality tea into India, particularly from Indonesia and Sri Lanka, resulting in further depression in prices<sup>2</sup>. Imports increased from 1.34 crore kg. in 2000 to 1.66 crore kg in 2001 and further increased to 2.19 crore kg in 2002 (UPASI). The disturbing fact is that most of these countries are exporting tea to India at low prices. The unit value of imported tea during 2001 was Rs. 55.72 per kg in 2001. It declined to Rs. 45. in 2002. Around 55 per cent is imported from Vietnam followed by Indonesia (20%) (UPASI). In 2002, based on the recommendation of the Madhukar Report, the Reserve Bank of India announced a **Tea Relief Package** to the industry. Considering the wide gap between the auction price and the retail price of tea, the Commerce Ministry appointed A. F. Ferguson & Co to study the market structure of tea and suggest appropriate reforms that will lead to reduction in the transaction cost and introduce greater transparency. Based on the recommendations of the report, the Government of India has issued the Tea (Marketing) Control Order 2003, with effect from 1st January 2003, superseding the Tea (Marketing) Control Order 1984. The Government of India had appointed three separate Expert Committees for a complete investigation into the affairs of closed tea units in West Bengal, Kerala, Assam and Tripura. The Committees have submitted their reports to the Ministry of Commerce, and these are under the scrutiny of the Government. The Government of Kerala also announced a relief package to the ailing plantation sector. A Committee was constituted under the Chairmanship of the Chief Minister to address the issues in the Plantation sector and tax exemptions were allowed for one year in the sector. (Economic Review 2004 Kerala)

### **Closed tea gardens in Idukki District: A General Picture**

The total area under tea cultivation in Idukki district per the agricultural statistics of Government of Kerala is 23,255 hectares (Dept. of Planning, Govt. of Kerala). In spite of odds, the total area under cultivation remains the same as in the '90s, a factor that contradicts the study, which shows rapid reduction in the total area under cultivation.

### **Conditions of Plantations after Closure**

Most plantations in the area have stopped production from 1990. Subsequently, workers have not been given their provident fund or gratuity amount; electricity to line houses, where workers stay, has been disconnected because the company has not paid its bills; estate hospitals do not function; the supply of drinking water has been stopped and people walk kilometres to fetch water; many children have stopped going to school. There are reports of chronic diseases, malnutrition, and high levels of alcoholism from the closed and abandoned tea gardens of Idukki district.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details see, Chapter 4, "Agriculture", *Kerala Planning Commission*, available at <http://www.keralaplanningboard.org/html/Economic%20Review%202003/chapter4.pdf>

There is another side to this crisis. Interestingly, the tough times during the crisis have taught workers to carry on their lives through the crisis. Most have either migrated or have alternate jobs in hand now.

Out of the 36 estates owned by 16 groups in Peermade taluk, 22, belonging to the Peermade Tea Company, MMJ Plantations, Pullikanam Estate, Haileyburia estate and the Rai Bahadur Thakur (RBT) Group II have closed down. In some remaining estates, while plucking is carried out, only the bare minimum is paid out to the workers. In some other inactive plantations, workers, in connivance with trade unions pluck leaves and sell them outside. There are also estates which are almost becoming employee-run institutions with the help of old administrative and factory staff members, as a result of the managers deserting the area.

### **1.2 Number of closed tea gardens.**

The study reveals an interesting scenario. Contrary to popular belief, there are no closed tea gardens in the area. To close a tea garden, a company has to apply for closure. However, out of 14 inoperative estates, this has not been the case. All gardens were deserted by owners without giving any notice or information to anybody. Hence, for the purpose of this study, the researcher concludes that there are no closed tea gardens in the region.

### **1.3 Number of abandoned Tea gardens**

Thirty six tea gardens in Idukki district belong to this category. All of them were deserted by their owners when they found that the chances of rescuing the garden and continuing the cultivation in the long term are dim. In most cases, they left the place or stopped managing without prior notice. No estate was closed formally.

A total of 14 tea estates and 11 factories are abandoned in the area when this report was being prepared. This means that unlike the popular notion, there are no closed tea gardens and what we have is abandoned tea gardens.

If we look at the table given below, we find that the abandoned estates belong to three groups, namely, the Peermedu Tea Company, the MMJ Group and the RBT Group. All gardens were abandoned without any lock outs or declaring any layoffs. The researcher has also information about three more estates as closed but data could not be collected due to paucity of time and their current status is unknown.

1. Karimtharunie Estate, Malankala Rubber & Tea Company Ltd.
2. Penshurut Estate, Malankala Rubber & Tea Company Ltd. (1050 permanent workers in two estates)
3. Lakshmikoil Estate (83 permanent workers)

The following are the abandoned tea gardens:

SI No	Company	Name of Garden	Total Area (in hectares)	Date of abandonment
1	Peermedu Tea Company	Lone Tree Estate, Elappara	500.00	13/12/2000
2	Peermedu Tea Company	Pirmedu Tea Estate, Elappara	529.55	13/12/2000
3	MMJ Group	Vagamon Tea Garden, Vagamon	470.23	06/09/2002
4	MMJ Group	Bon Ami Tea Gardens, Fair Field	521.12	24/08/2002
5	MMJ Group	Kotamalai Tea Garden, Kotamalai	322.40	04/11/2002
6	RBT -1	Thengakallu Estate, Vandiperiyar	315.46	2001 ( Gradual abandonment)
7	RBT -1	Pamabanar Estate , Peermedu	242.50	2001 ( Gradual abandonment)
8	RBT -1	Munjamillay Estate, Vandiperiyar	549.90	2001 ( Gradual abandonment)
9	RBT -1	Nellickal Estate, Vandiperiyar	201.16	2001 ( Gradual abandonment)
10	RBT -2	Kolickanam Estate, Elappara	371.85	2001 ( Gradual abandonment)
11	RBT-2	Granby Estate, Vandiperiyar	259.28	2001 ( Gradual abandonment)
12	RBT-2	Mount Estate, Vandiperiyar	263.40	2001 ( Gradual abandonment)
13	RBT—2	Pasumillai Estate, Vandiperiyar	252.67	2001 (Gradual abandonment)
14.	RBT-2	Thungamillay Estate, Vandiperiyar	342.05	2001 (Gradual abandonment)
Source : Labour office records, Peermedu , November,2006				

### Reopened Tea Gardens

Some abandoned gardens are now functional. One is Pullickanam Estate, which was sold in the month of July and was reopened in November 2006. It has a total of 351.29 hectares of land, 708 permanent workers, 12 office staff and almost 264 housing facilities. This estate was reopened when the State electricity board restored electricity. Since this was a temporary connection, the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) disconnected the electricity on 1.12.06. However, due to political pressure, the electricity supply has been restarted. The ruling party's intervention and the agreement between new buyers and the trade unions was instrumental to the re opening of the garden. The new management has promised that they will pay all the dues to the PF department and the workers. One thing to note regarding this tea garden is that the estate was abandoned due to friction between the owners and that it was running profitably.

Another estate is Haileyburia Estate, which was closed for one year in 2001 and was reopened because of the intervention of the State Government, the Kerala State Electricity Broad and the High Court of Kerala. Almost 25 lakhs, demanded by the KSEB as minimum charges for the

period during which the estate was abandoned in 2003, was exempted. Another instance is that of Methanam Estate, Vagamon, near Moolamattam. Due to the proactive approach of the management, another person is running the factory, workers organised by the garden committee pluck green tea and the garden can be called functional. This means the total number of abandoned tea gardens in the area is 17. An estate group, Hope Plantation, was also closed for some time due to top-level management conflict.

Available data shows that 16,000 permanent workers and an equal number or more casual and contract workers have lost work, taking the total unemployed in Peermade to approximately 30,000.

The following estate Hospitals in Peermade are closed:

1. Granby Hospital	Group Hospital
2. Manjumallai	Dispensary
3. Pasumalai	Dispensary
4. Thangamalai	Dispensary
5. Nellikai	Dispensary
6. Pampanar	Dispensary
7. Kozhikkanam	Dispensary
8. Cheenthalar	Group Hospital(Peermade Tea Company)
9. Ladrum Estate	Dispensary
10. Glenn Mary	Dispensary
11. Lakshmi Covil	Dispensary
12. Vagamon Tea Garden	Dispensary
13. Kottamullai Tea Garden	Dispensary & group hospital
14. Bon Ami Tea Estate	Dispensary
15. Pullikkanam Estate	Dispensary
16. Churakulam Tea Estate	Dispensary

### **Condition of Workers in Closed Tea Gardens**

The primary data for the study has been collected from plantation owners, management, government officials, trade unions and workers of the abandoned tea gardens through interviews.

#### **2.1.10 Owners**

The owners of all abandoned tea gardens have the following in common:

- Lack of professional managerial skill
- Lack of vision and a long term strategy
- Near-zero reinvestment in plantations.
- No constructive measures to increase productivity

### **2.1.2 Management**

The management and the administration of tea estates have been under heavy pressure from owners to misappropriate funds. Often, management and administration was complicit in manipulation due to the threat to their jobs. The main features of the garden management are:

- A lack of professional managerial skill and efficiency.
- Gross wastage of resources and low involvement in measures to improve productivity.
- The hiring of approximately 6 workers just to look after a manager, grossly increasing the cost of hiring the manager.
- Garden office staff are among the worst-hit group of people who are ignored by the government, trade unions and others.

### **2.1.3 Unions**

The major trade unions in the affected area are

- INTUC: HRP (High Range Plantation Workers Union), which claimed almost 10,500 members before closure.
- AITUC: HEEA (Highrange Estate Employee Union), which claimed almost 11,000 members before closure.
- CITU : HEL (Hillrange Estate Labour Association)
- PTTU (Peermedu Thottam Thozhilali Union), with an indeterminate number of members before closure.
- BMS ( Bharatiya Mazdur Sangh), which claimed almost 2000 members before closure.

Interestingly, no trade union seems to know the amount of current membership, which may be due to heavy migration and the inaccessibility of their members.

### **2.1.4 Workers**

The total number of workers of abandoned tea gardens is approximately 40,000, of which 65 per cent are Tamil. There are also some Sri Lankan refugees employed in tea gardens. Around 30 per cent of the workers are from Kerala.

Most workers in the productive age group have migrated and for the remainder, life is a misery. Occupational diseases such as tuberculosis and bronchitis are especially prevalent amongst aged workers that are reported from the affected areas. Interviews with public health doctors confirm almost 100 HIV/AIDS cases in the affected area. The cause of this is mainly attributed to desertion and separation of families due to migration. There are also reports of deaths due to AIDS. More details are available under the section relating to migration. Workers at abandoned tea gardens have poor family life, are poor, suffer from alcoholism and are highly prone to migrate.

#### **Conditions of workers**

- Most workers who still stay in the labour lines are above 50 years

- There is a high level of Vitamin A deficiency among the children.
- There is a high level of migration of workers and their families
- There are almost 200 reported cases of severe malnutrition among children
- There are many senior workers who have contacted diseases that may be classified as occupational diseases, such as asthma, tuberculosis and bronchitis.
- Most workers have found alternate jobs.
- Many groups such as unprincipled trade union leaders and overseas job brokers have exploited the workers.
- Most workers do not take the free ration offered by the government through PDS, as confirmed in interviews with 4 PDS shop owners and workers. As most workers have alternate jobs they do not have any problem sustaining their lives. Their earnings, on average are good so they want only high quality rice. The rice supplied in PDS is not good enough and there is no problem of accessibility. More available details of this phenomenon even question the impact of the crisis. The productive population is not badly affected because of the crisis as there are plenty of jobs available. Men on an average get Rs. 120 per day and women get Rs. 80 per day for casual jobs.
- Electricity and drinking water is not available in most estate lines.
- There is an increase in desertion by spouses, evident from the increasing number of complaints of destitution in places of worship, *panchayats* and police stations.
- Public health authorities report that almost 5 per cent of children in the worst affected estates have night blindness.
- The number of mental patients is on the increase, due to desertion, loneliness and a lack of social security.
- Water born diseases such as jaundice are common as there is no safe drinking water available.

## **2.2 State Government**

The State Government has taken some measures to face the crisis and to save the workers in the area. However, many initiatives appear to have been taken for political mileage. The major interventions are listed below.

### **2.2.1 State Intervention**

1. Mobile clinic from the Government Taluk Hospitals and public health centres often visit even the interior parts of the estates and supply medicines.
2. An out-reach specialty camp is normally held monthly, in which free medicines are supplied and expert doctors from Kottayam Medical College consult.
3. School students are provided with note books, bags and uniforms.
4. Mediators were used to find a solution to the crisis
5. A standing committee for plantation that meets at least once a month has been appointed, in which management, trade unions, workers and government are represented.
6. Five kilograms of rice per week are provided to 3,914 affected households. (Source: Civil Supply office records). Until 2005, this was given to all the labour office card

holders classified as employees of abandoned estates. Now, it has been limited to one ration per household. Interviews with PDS dealers and affected workers revealed that close to 80% of the workers do not consume the PDS free ration rice. They buy this rice from 'ration shops' for Rs. 7.50 per kg and sell it to grocery shops and buy branded rice which costs Rs. 17 per kg. Dealers resell the PDS rice for Rs. 12 per kg in the market. This raises doubts of the real incidence of poverty in the area. The researcher personally witnessed seven such incidents in ration shops while interviewing PDS dealers.

7. Financial aid of Rs. 2,000/- per household was given to workers who were issued identity cards by the labour office to repair Estate Lines in 2006. This was due to political pressure by the assembly member on the newly elected left wing government.
8. Expenses towards the education of the children of the affected in professional courses in government aided colleges have been reimbursed.
9. Every year, the Government gives a festival allowance of Rs. 500 per employee as 'Onam Festival Ex Gratia'.

### **2.2.2 Interventions by other groups**

During the initial phases of tea crisis many non governmental organizations and associations such as the Rotary Club, the Lions Club and religious groups came with medical and basic supplies to the affected people. However, all of them have stopped any direct or indirect intervention to deal with the crisis. An interview with labour office officials and workers reveals that there is continued assistance by 3 organizations, the Churches Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), a Chennai based organisation, the Kerala Council of Churches (KCC) and World Vision, Kattapana, a voluntary organization. They supplement governmental activities, supply food and other essential materials, conduct medical camps and also assist the government mechanism in project implementation. No other involvements by organisations can be seen during the study. The involvement of trade unions has already been discussed above.

### **2.3 Migration**

This study reveals that there is a high level of migration in abandoned tea gardens. Men, in general, have taken up work such as road tarring, excavation for cabling, construction and daily wage agricultural work. Many men also work in nearby towns such as Kottayam and Ernakulam. Some Tamil men have returned to Tamil Nadu in search of jobs.

Women, in general, are working as house maids, servants in the fishing sector in Gujarat, and in the Tirupur cotton industry. Some work in the Gulf and Malaysia as housemaids. There are incidents of women being exploited by groups who arrange overseas jobs.

Almost 15 per cent of workers have permanently migrated. Another 40 per cent have migrated temporarily in search of jobs, taking actual migration in the area to 55 percent. (Source: Trade Unions, estate managers).

The following are the details of migrated workmen in tea gardens.

Sl no	Company	Name of Garden	Workers before	Workers after	Workers after



			closure *	closure**	closure***
1.	Peermedu Tea Company	Lone Tree Estate, Elappara	1450	1112	612
2.	Peermedu Tea Company	Pirmedu Tea Estate ,Elappara	1121	872	480
3.	MMJ Group	Vagamon Tea Garden, Vagamon	1230	890	490
4.	MMJ Group	Bon Ami Tea Gardens, Fair Field	950	521	287
5.	MMJ Group	Kotamalai Tea Garden, Kotamalai	1024	781	430
6.	RBT -1	Thengakallu Estate, Vandiperiyar	668	439	241
7.	RBT -1	Pamabanar Estate , Peermedu	710	448	246
8.	RBT -1	Munjamillay Estate, Vandiperiyar	760	586	322
9.	RBT -1	Nellickal Estate, Vandiperiyar	650	307	169
10.	RBT -2	Kolickanam Estate, Elappara	1345	944	519
11.	RBT-2	Granby Estate, Vandiperiyar	1100	758	417
12.	RBT-2	Mount Estate, Vandiperiyar	1045	858	472
13.	RBT—2	Pasumillai Estate, Vandiperiyar	960	764	420
14.	RBT-2	Thungamillay Estate, Vandiperiyar	1215	1098	604
	Total		14228		5708
Source: * Before closure, comparative data from the PF department and estate rolls ** Labour department data on which free ration is given as affected people *** Labour office data less correction for 35 per cent (approximate) who are temporary migrants.					

Data on the number of workers of abandoned tea gardens can be gleaned only from the register of free rations given to former workers. This data will not give the real figure. On interviewing the trade union leaders and workers, it was understood that only about 65 per cent of workers are still staying in estate lines. The remaining workers are classified as temporary migrants who come home on weekends or every month.

## 2.4 Women headed households

Migration, desertion of partners and the high average age of the worker at 50 (women, in general, have longer life expectancy (ref Economic Review 2005)), have caused an increase in the number of households headed by women. These women feel insecure, lack support in crises, are rejected by their own family and are exploited. The researcher came across 5 cases where there only women remain in families. Mrs. Thai, 70, in Peermedu estate has had her daughter and grand daughter admitted as mental patients and has had her granddaughter, 20, taken to an orphanage since she cannot look after her.

## 2.5 Green leaf prices

The average price of green leaf in the year 2005 was between 8 and 10 rupees per kg. The price of green tea leaves is fixed based on three aspects, water content, leaf fineness, and quality. During the high yield season just before the monsoon and immediately afterwards, prices are around Rs. 5 per kg. During the off-season, prices of green leaves went up to Rs. 12.50 per kg this year. On average, depending on the quality of the leaves, a worker gets about 60 per cent of the above price in hand with the rest going towards agents, transportation and local leaders.

## 2.6 Case Study

### **2.6.1 RBT Plantations**

RBT estates was formerly known as Travancore Tea Estates Ltd., with their registered office at Nicholas Lane, London. They started cultivation in the year 1847. The total area of land with them, as per records, with them was 92,675.336 acres (3,860 hectares). In September 1976, ownership was transferred to the RBT group (Ram Bahadur Thakur Company Ltd) (Sale Deed 1175/1976 Peermedu) and is owned by Mr. M. M. Sharma from Bihar. RBT owns 9 tea estates in Peermadu. After the death of Mr Sharma, his son Mr. B. M. Sharma took over the company. Since he is based in London, he deputed his cousin, Mr. Shailesh Mohan Sharma, who is based in Cochin to look after the estate.

In 1975, TTE tried to sell the estate for 1 crore but could not do so due to FERA rules prevailing at that time. Later, RBT acquired estates from TTE Ltd. for Rs. 75 lakh and took a loan on the property of Rs. 1.5 crore.

The estate ownership is divided among Mr. Shailesh Sharma and Mr. Manish Sharma as RBT-1 and RBT-2.

There are an equal number of permanent and contract or casual workers. There are 1,435 houses in the worker lines and 185 staff quarters.

In 1976, Mr. Shailesh Sharma, for some reason, vacated the Cochin office and started diverting funds from the tea plantations to private business concerns of his own such as RBT Kerala, RBT Manganese (Madhya Pradesh), RBT Pharma (producer of the cough syrup ARBETA) and the Pilmens–CNF Shipping Company. In 1998, Mr. B.M. Sharma's son Manish Sharma came from London to investigate complaints received from some staff. He found out about the siphoning off of the funds and filed a case against the cousin for the recovery of property in the Allahabad High Court. The Industrial Law Board has appointed the following to take care of the business till the final verdict is reached:

Justice B.N. Verma, Allahabad High Court, Chairman of the Company  
Mr. B.M. Sharma  
Mr. S.M. SharmaMr. Manish M. Sharma  
Mr. C.B. Sharma

In 1995, the original owners applied for a PF loan (with Rs. 3 crore due to the PF authorities) and got an extension and permission to remit the amount in 24 instalments but were able to remit only one instalment. The Trade Unions started an agitation against this. In 1996, Br. C. A. Kurien was elected MLA and took up the matter of financial misappropriation. Employers claimed a lack of funds. The company has outstanding dues of Rs. 66 crores, including PF dues of Rs. 18 crores, wage dues of Rs. 12 crores and land tax of Rs. 36 crores.

In early 2000, the caretaker employer simply emptied the godowns overnight and stopped running the plantation. Since March 2000, the workers and the estate staff have been running the plantation and dividing the earnings amongst themselves. The factory functioned for some time and then had to be closed.

PF dues have become a huge amount and the PF department has decided to sell the abandoned estates of RBT. The details of the sale notice are given below.

PROCLAMATION OF SALE of attached property of RBT Dated: 19.10.2006. Recovery of the sum of Rs. 15,34,29,248.55 from M/s. Ram Bahadur Thakur Ltd, Vandiperiyar, Idukki (defaulter) and the costs, charges and expenses of the proceedings of the recovery thereof:

And whereas on the 29th day of November 2006, there will be due there under a sum of Rs 22,11,66,027.55 including costs and interest.

However, a sale did not happen in November as there was no buyer due to two provisions under the above notice, namely:

- The purchaser will have to take possession of the Estate as it is and where it is condition.
- The Recovery Officer shall not be answerable for any difference in the above order or measurement.

Workers manage to earn between Rs. 2 and Rs. 7 per kg (depending on the season) by selling plucked leaves. Every day a worker plucks about 2 kgs. and some workers also work outside the plantation to earn a living. Some survive by doing casual work on the neighbouring AVT Tea Plantation. Almost 3,500 workers from this plantation have migrated to Coimbatore, Tirupur, Salem, Gujarat and Maharashtra for jobs. From Peermade area nearly 2,000 women have migrated to Gujarat and Maharashtra to work in fish processing factories.

AITUC, a central trade union, filed a case in the High Court on January 5, 2004 and a final verdict will be given within 6 months but the interim order has been passed whereby the Company has to revive in 6 months or the government will take over the property.

Below Poverty Line schemes have not been implemented in the plantation. Even though an ICDS (Integrated Child Development Schemes) centre is running, there is no electricity in the plantation or water in the housing lines. Water has to be fetched from 2 kilometres away. Children attend the Panchayat-run school 7 kilometres away. Since the dispensary is closed, workers have to go the Public Health Centre at Vendiperiyar, 7 kms. away. In severe health crises, unions have been successful in getting some aid through the Kerala Labour Welfare Fund Board, where employers too contribute Rs. 8/- per worker every six months. (Source: Secondary data (please specify))

The case of RBT can be understood by analyzing the stakeholders.

### **1. Management**

As many as 450 cases were filed by the PF department for PF dues, leading to additional expenses on litigation and the arrangements necessary for the presence of senior management before the court. They are believed to have paid almost 60 lakhs of rupees for the same. PF dues, penal interest and 100 per cent additional payment for arrears together add up to a huge sum. For obvious reasons, the PF department waited until the PF arrears became a huge amount. Even when the assets were under the control of the PF department, trade unions, workers, managerial staff and other legal system allowed the top management to sell immovable property and timber worth crores to third parties. All the above parties were silent spectators to this theft.

The opinions of some of the senior top managerial staff (that were received on conditions of anonymity) was that the RBT management made a huge amount of money from the plantations when it was abandoned by using the abovementioned methods. Visits made to the estates reveal a number of resorts, buildings, homes, and a lot of deforestation, proving the above point.

The approach road to the plantation is full of holes the size of bicycle wheels every few feet. A patient that has to be driven to the Medical Centre or a hospital from the interior of the plantation will suffer greatly. Eighty cases of severe Malnutrition among children have been detected and are being looked into by Christian missionaries (CSI Church). The daily food of workers consists of rice, onions, tomatoes and chillies.

### **2. Workers**

Almost 65 per cent of tea plantation workers are Tamil. 30 per cent are from Kerala and some Sri Lankan refugees are also employed in the tea gardens. The workers went on strike during the peak yield season for demands such as a 20% bonus, disregarding losses.

### **3. Trade unions**

Through union involvement, tea bushes are divided among workers and a sort of garden committee exists in all abandoned tea gardens where each employee is asked to contribute Rs.0.50 per kg of green leaves to the union.

#### **2.6.1.2 Major Reasons for Abandonment**

- Tea prices dropped drastically.
- The plantation sector saw zero reinvestment in facilities, inputs, modernisation and maintenance. This virtually eliminated the chances for long term survival, dropping the total yield to record lows every month.
- Workers (It is victim blaming)
- Ownership issues including litigation between the owners
- A lack of economic discipline.
- Zero investment after purchases.

### **2.6.2 Pirmedu Tea Company**

During the initial stages of tea crisis, and especially when tea prices were dropping daily, workers went on a strike asking for higher remuneration. Angered by the strike, the owner, Mr. Ramakrishna Sharma closed the tea garden without any notice, in order to teach the strikers a lesson. Workers were agitated and broke into estate bungalows and other areas and took whatever they could as token protest for the non-payment of wages and illegitimate abandonment. This was done irrespective of the injunction order by the court. There is also a large amount of encroachment on the property. Though the management blamed labour unrest for the abandonment, actual reasons were mismanagement and a lack of interest in the tea business. The management also has interests in other plantation crops such as rubber, cardamom and pepper.

The Lone Tree Tea Estate is a division of Peermade Tea Company, which owns 4 estates of which all are closed. There were around 3,000 workers (1,300 permanent and 1,700 temporary) employed in the estate. The estate covers 1,665 hectares of land.

The plantation was closed in October 2002 and two factories were closed down after one year. Since then there has been no supply of electricity or water. The plantation was almost closed down 4 years ago when the workers demanded bonus arrears which the Management declared in 2000. The company owns 13 rubber estates and is very rich. The company will now have to invest Rs. 1 crore to repair the factory.

The workers have formed a Committee to manage the plantation. Each worker looks after 1,200 plants. The management has got a restraining order from the court forbidding the workers from plucking the leaves. Therefore, the plucking of leaves is done unofficially. Electricity bills and gratuity have not been paid. Wages have not been paid since March 2002 and provident fund dues and bonuses are in arrears for the last four years.

Almost 600 women from Peermadu have gone to Gujarat for work. Their parents do not know where they are working. Local contractors recruit them and give an advance payment. Once they leave the estate, there is no contact with these women and no money comes in. Recently, there has been a crisis in the fish industry and many women have returned from Gujarat and Maharashtra.

The source of drinking water is a hole dug by the workers, which is at a great distance. There has been a remarkable increase in water borne diseases and cases of jaundice. The dispensary was also closed due to lack of medical supplies and all the staff left the plantation about 4 years ago. The workers now have to walk to the Government Public Health Centre or a missionary hospital 25 kms away which is run by the CSI Church Aid. The KCCI (Kerala Council of Churches in India) is running 13 health centres with 34 children being treated for malnourishment.

The approach road to the plantation is full of holes and is even worse than the road to the Pusammullay tea estate.

### **2.6.3 MMJ plantations.**

'MMJ plantations' is a family business run by the Manarkattu family from Palai near Kottayam. There has been an ownership conflict for some years. The ownership is now divided between Vagamon plantations and MMJ plantations Ltd. There has been a lack of professional managerial ability .MMJ plantations have two unique problems. The first is that the average life of tea bushes in their estate is 120 years. The second problem is that there is heavy rainfall in their estate (Bon Ami, Kottamullay and Vagamon estates) which reduces the yield and increases the number of pests and diseases. As a result, the cost of operation of the MMJ plantation is much higher than that of other tea gardens. The Vagamon estate and the Kottamullay estate are owned by Vagamon plantations Ltd. while the Bon Ami estate is owned by MMJ plantations, a firm. The total land area with the Vagamon Estate is 2,049 acres, with Bon Ami Estate having 992 acres, and Kottamullay estate 2,219 acres.

### **3.1 Problems that led to the current crisis**

This research attributes the following reasons for the current crisis in the tea plantations.

1. The demise of the USSR, reducing the international price of tea, as they were the major consumers of Indian tea.
2. The high age of the tea bushes in Indian tea estates, ranging from 70 years to 150 years. These bushes have passed their productive life and provide low yields and require a large amount of input.
3. The number of pest-related diseases are high in this region, increasing the cost of pesticides and reducing yield.
4. Lack of professional managerial talent as most abandoned tea gardens were family run business run by people without any professional education or experience.
5. Low worker productivity. The average output per worker here is only 15 kgs per day, which is probably the lowest in the world.
6. A lack of training of workers and the non use of modern methods of plucking green leaves.
7. Excess spending on luxuries for managers. For more details, see the lessons learnt section.
8. High local labour cost.
9. A multiplicity of trade unions and their use of collective bargaining methods, which stop all work.
10. High average age of workers. The average age of workers is 50 years. (Source: Data from RBT and PTC estates). 75 per cent of the people in estates between 17 and 45 years do not work in tea plantations. This is evident from the worker rolls of various estates prior to closure. People under this age group either migrate or find permanent or casual employment. This means that most workers in tea estates are past their most productive years. Workers above 50 years incur high medical costs exhibit high absenteeism.

### **3.2 Specific reasons for the closure**

1. The negative attitude of owners, including the stoppage of expenditure on inputs, and the diversion of funds to other businesses of the owners.
2. The role played by PF department and accelerated abandonment also ensured that the plantation will not be reopened (See PF department section for details).
3. Workers and their unions. Trade unions resorted to strikes whenever crops were high and workers started demanding items such as free rations, which was available only to abandoned tea gardens. In general, due to the current garden committee arrangements in abandoned tea estates, workers have a feeling that the owners are not the owners and that the workers are the people who have the ultimate power over or control of the estates. Managers of functioning estates often said that during bargaining sessions, workers ask the managers to close down the estate so that they can 'run' it.
4. The role played by government and institutions like PF department and electricity board.
5. The enormous theft of property and assets by the owners during the stage of closure. (Details in the Employers section, including the sale of property such as machinery and bungalows)
6. The problem of 'double jobs', where an employee gets himself registered as an employee in two estates and obtains employee benefits for both jobs. (As the Plantation Labour Act specifies that workers have to work for a minimum of 80 working days to be eligible for benefits, such employees ensure that they cross this requirement in both estates). This increases the cost of employment to the company. An interview revealed 3 cases of an employee claiming maternity leave simultaneously from two estates. 'Double jobs' also mean that employees take benefits such as housing, medical services and other privileges, works only for 80 days and works elsewhere for the rest of the period. This increases the cost of management for an employee who is not working. A senior official at RBT said on conditions of anonymity that the cost of welfare and fringe benefits are three times the amount paid as wages in estates.
7. Medical assistance, statutorily, is to be paid to all family members of workers. However, in most cases other family members work elsewhere and even occupational diseases from their other places of work become the responsibility of the tea estates.
8. In none of the approximately 600 cases filed by the PF department for default of payment was anyone convicted or made to pay dues.

### **3.3 Current Situation**

The research findings lead to the following conclusions about the current state of the abandoned plantations.

1. No estate can be reopened if the Government does not take corrective rather than punitive actions. The PF dues and the huge penalties for default come to an amount greater than the total value of the assets. The electricity board has asked all non-functioning estates to pay huge amounts as part of a minimum guarantee scheme charges even for the time the estates were not operational. Even if these amounts are

- not recovered, the electricity boards will not lose any amount since the charges are for unused electricity. Therefore, departments such as the PF Board and the Electricity Board should waive demands such as penalties, additional charges and penal interest and should ask for the actual default amount. Further, they should probably allow for the repayment of dues through instalments.
2. In all cases the major reason for abandonment is mismanagement as is evident from the study. As per Section 16 E under the Tea Act, the Government is empowered to acquire any tea estate if the estate is closed down or abandoned due to mismanagement. The Government may look at this option. The researcher suggests that one option could be the emulation of Tata Tea in Munnar, where cooperatives were formed by making the workers members and owners.
  3. It is noticed that as part of the garden committee arrangements initiated by trade unions, workers are asked to make a fixed contribution to political leaders per kg of green leaves they pluck. Therefore, it is doubtful if the unions and union leaders who benefit from the current arrangements can honestly support the idea of opening these estates.
  4. In at least 7 estates, workers do not want to get the estate reopened since they can freely pluck leaves and get facilities such as free rations. They can stay in the lines and work elsewhere. The workers of functioning tea gardens are also threatening managements, asking them to close the estates if they cannot give the workers free rations.
  5. Most tea estates, such as the ones operated by RBT cannot be reopened again as most machinery, bungalows and amenities have been illegally sold to third parties. Huge investments will be required to make these estates work again.
  6. There are almost no workers between the productive ages of 17 and 45. Therefore, it may not be possible to increase productivity.
  7. Many workers have chronic and occupational diseases and lead a pathetic life.
  8. Managements that resorted to large scale misappropriation of resources when the estate was abandoned may not have a real interest in reopening the estates again, even if Government financial support arrives.
  9. When it comes to worker welfare, government deems the tea sector an industry and when it comes to taxes government considers the sector and levies 65% agricultural tax.
  10. Trying to rejuvenate tea bushes that are older than 80 years is meaningless.

### **3.4 Suggestions/Solutions**

1. It is advised that Government should not give any financial assistance to owners directly to make estates reopen. If this is done, the estates might reopen and again divert funds and equipment for their own purposes.
2. The Government might support the replanting of tea bushes, as a long-term solution.
3. The Government may use section 16 (E) of the Tea Act to acquire assets and estates.
4. Reopened estates may be asked by the Tea Board or by other governmental organisations that are supposed to support and promote tea plantations to shift to organic tea, along with the appropriate marketing being provided. Such tea commands a higher price in the national and international market.



5. Steps could be taken to induct more workers of productive ages.
6. Rules should be applied stringently to stop double jobs.
7. A study regarding the efficacy of 'free' rations and the use or misuse of free rations should be conducted.
8. The Government should insist on professional management before giving any assistance.
9. The decision making authority should be decentralized and accountability increased accordingly.
10. Stringent control mechanisms should be instituted to control unwanted expenses, the diversion of funds, the misuse of vehicles and the utilisation of employees as servants by the management.
11. The Tea Act should be amended, making it mandatory for a fixed percentage of sale proceeds to be spent on agricultural inputs such as pesticides, fertilizers and replanting.
12. Replace free rations with subsidized rations, as workers might now want gardens to remain closed because of the free rations.
13. Since there is a high level of migration, excess labour might have left. Ensure that only an optimum number of employees is employed.
14. Amend the Plantation Labour Act and other laws to close loopholes. For example, the Act should be amended to provide that medical facilities should be given only to those family members who do not work elsewhere.
15. There is a high level of adulteration of tea powder, discouraging consumption. Take measures to punish adulterers and promote tea.
16. Take immediate action to stop the spread of reported AIDS cases in the area.
17. Use technological innovations in plantation input and maintenance and in plucking green tea leaves. Haileyburia Estate, for example, changed plucking methods and increased production from 16 kg per person to 28 kg per person. This will offset the high cost of labour, the highest component of total costs.
18. The mode of operation of the former Tata Tea, Munnar estates may be tried out by making employee cooperatives run estates.
19. Make workers and trade unions aware of the dangers of striking during the peak yield season.
20. Conduct a detailed study of plantations that are operational to understand how they are managing to survive.

## **Conclusion**

There is no use complaining about issues that are beyond the control of the tea sector. In a market-driven world, only the fittest survive. Therefore, it is imperative that the sector should learn from past mistakes. There is a general awareness among workers and managers of their failures. Most operational plantations have cost control initiatives and measures to improve productivity. Suddenly, there are now efforts to make superior quality tea. However, if the quality of tea has to be increased, the replantation of bushes has to be done. Replant bushes and ensure the supply of inputs required to nurture the young plants. All parties will have learnt

their lessons. There is only one basic requirement, that the State and Central Government should think beyond politics.

## **Annexure**

### **1. Research Methodology**

The following methods were used for this research. Websites, catalogues, brochures, articles and studies were used for about 40 per cent of secondary data. Most data has been collected through primary research, namely, through structured and unstructured interviews with workers in different estates, trade union leaders of various unions, former and current managers of abandoned estates, managers of functioning estates, government offices such as the Labour Office, the Tea Board, the Plantation Office, the PF department and with lawyers who deal with cases of abandoned estates.

### **2. Limitations of the Study**

1. The time period of the study was too short to collect adequate primary data and verify the validity of the available collected data.
2. In many cases the data supplied by various interest groups does not tally. In such situations, a correction factor is used, based on interviews, to arrive at an approximation.
3. An intensive study would require a lot of effort and money.

Due to the paucity of time a lot of important data could not be included in the report.

# Closed Tea Gardens in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala

Elizabeth Mathew

This paper attempts to analyse how the economic changes have created the prevailing condition of tea labour, while highlighting the problems faced by women.

## Introduction

The cultivation of tea is one of the oldest examples of organised agriculture and industry in India and has been providing livelihood to many in the country. In Kerala, plantations have been providing employment to almost one lakh workers, both men and women, in remote and backward areas of the State, where no alternative employment is available. Unfortunately, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Indian tea industry is in the spotlight for the pathetic condition of those connected to it. The most affected labourers in the tea plantations are women and children.

The Indian tea industry has been severely affected by liberalisation and globalisation, whereby production has dropped, liberalised import policies have reduced domestic prices and impediments faced by export markets have reduced possibilities for exports. Tea prices have been declining from 1998 in Indian and international markets. After 2003 prices have been increasing but stronger competition in international markets have led to India losing out on quality production, hampering the further growth of this industry.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the Tenth Plan had made special provisions for funds for replantation and the development of the tea sector.

In Kerala alone, which accounts for around 15% of India's total tea production, economic decline can be seen from the drop in production from 68 million kg. in 2000 to 49.7 million kg. in 2004. In 1999, Kerala had 36,821 hectares under tea plantation, employing 84,000 labourers. In addition, there were 10,000 small growers. With the growth of costs of production, as compared to prices realized many plantations in the corporate segment either closed down their estates or reduced their inputs.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in a sharp fall in production from major estates in the Idukki and Wayanad districts. This discrepancy in costs

and earnings affected medium and small growers much more and they have also neglected or abandoned their tea plantations. Some have even left them without plucking green leaves. Growers in Idukki said that the reason for this was that the price received by them was much less than the cost of labour.<sup>3</sup> With the closure of estates, many regular workers in tea estates had to go out for other jobs in order to survive. This is the state of labour intensive plantations which used to provide year-round employment in the in rural and backward areas of the State.<sup>4</sup>

### **Women in Tea Industry**

The unique feature of tea labour is that it gives maximum employment per household, both in field and in the industry. Workers on the plantations include the males, females, children and adolescents. In the tea industry, jobs in which woman are preferred are the manual tasks of sieving, sifting, sorting, grading and stalk picking. Tea labour is governed by the Employment Act and the Factories Act, covering wages, benefits, welfare and other matters.

In 1988, the contribution of work done by women tea workers in 37 factories in Assam and their rewards and positions in the community was reported by a study conducted by the Ministry. According to the study, women workers generally constituted nearly 23% of total employment in the tea sector and as much as 73.7% were involved in stalk picking of tea leaves. Other jobs they were involved in included sorting, sieving, grading, packing, minor jobs in rotor vaning /rolling machine work, material quality, leaf carrying, drying by machine and sweeping.

The occupational status of women in the tea industry was also studied. It showed that women got lesser wages than men, and in 5 out of 8 factories studied, women's wage was lower than men's average wage of 11.15 by 17 or 18 paise. Similarly, in 7 out of 9 factories in West Bengal women workers involved in sorting and grading jobs were not being paid the appropriate amount for the post to which they were appointed. This was found to be so due to the existing concept of women being 'lesser' than men. In most of the tea factories under this study, women engaged in stalk picking, sieving and sifting operations were never provided seats and worked in overcrowded rooms that were inadequately lit and ventilated. For those involved in sieving, no masks or protection of any kind was given. Some women also operated in unenclosed sheds. Only 12 out of 37 factories that were legally obliged to have crèches had them, and they were found to be deficient. Separate washing and toilet facilities were also missing.<sup>5</sup>

### **Methodology**

The following tea gardens were selected for study in Thiruvananthapuram district:

1. Mahavir Tea Plantations, at Bonacaud
2. Invacaud Estate at Ponmudi
3. Braemore Estate at Edinjara
4. Ponmudi Tea Estate at Ponmudi
5. Southern Field Ventures, at Ponmudi.

No files or data regarding these plantations are available with the nearest Assistant Labour office, at Vithura, Trivandrum, except for a paper showing that gratuity was given to workers at the time of the closure of the Invacaud estate. Hence the Invacaud estate or garden can be regarded as closed and all others as abandoned. The former workers of Invacaud Estate have left the plantation to join other plantations or work in jobs outside. Hence, they are not available for inclusion in this study. Considering the availability of garden respondents, this study has concentrated on only one abandoned tea garden, namely, Mahavir Tea Plantations, Bonacaud.

The selection of respondents for personal interviews and focussed group discussion was done among 11 male and 4 female workers, their 3 Union representatives from the INTUC and the BMS (two of whom were earlier in INTUC) and 2 officers at the Labour Office.

**Method adopted:**

- a) Case Study of the Bonacaud Tea plantations.
- b) A transect walk was done while conducting personal interviews with the key informants (workers / union representatives) to understand the prevailing situation and the kind of social life that exists in the plantation.
- c) During the walk, focussed group interviews were held with women workers and worker families.
- d) Three special cases were selected from among worker families residing at Bonacaud tea plantations to represent the impact of closure on the workers families and women in particular.

**Limitations:**

- 1) it was difficult to get information from men & women who were apprehensive of strangers who, they feared, might reveal information about their illegal activities, such as arrack distilling, leading to their arrest.
- 2) Trade union leaders were uncooperative because they were unpopular and had lost power among workers.
- 3) Data collection from workers was difficult during the day as male workers would be weeding far away on the plantation and women workers were trying to pick tea leaves.

**Case Study of the Mahavir Tea Plantations, Bonacaud  
Profile of the Tea Plantations,**

The plantation was started in 1966 by the Mahavir Tea Plantation Company and was managed by employees appointed by the owners to oversee the work in the plantations and run the factory and office. This plantation was one among several plantations owned by the Mahavir Group in the country. The workers were brought *en masse* from Tamil Nadu and were given housing on one part of the plantation. Basic welfare measures such as health services, clothes and blankets were also given to these illiterate labourers once a year. The company was doing well up to about 1995, according to respondents. The workers were getting several benefits over their wages, such as festival allowance, medical allowance and housing maintenance allowance. The labourers look back in regret at the illness of the owner, as he was unable to

visit the company several times a year as he used to do before. When his children took over the ownership and management, the children borrowed Rs. 8 crore from the Union Bank by pledging the plantation. It is reported that the young owners visited the plantation often and collected money from the factory at each visit. The labourers do not report having felt any improvements in the operations of the plantations after this change in leadership.

The employed factory managers were not present in this area anymore to verify this claim of the workers. It is reported that the poor supervision on the part of the higher level management during this time and their lack of interest in promoting the venture led to poor management at the factory level. When the electricity supply was cut the factory had to close down. The workers regard this situation as the result of the fraud committed by the children of the owner rather than by the factory managers. The cut in electricity led to the stoppage of the tea leaf grinding and left the male workers with only job of packaging of ground leaves. Thus, operations slowed down and this suddenly culminated in the disappearance of the employed managers from the estate in 1996. The women workers who continued picking the tea leaves had nowhere to dispose of them and wages became uncertain. This left workers, both male and female, aghast at the situation. They had to tackle the grim reality of finding work for which they had no experience.

At the time of closure there were 1,200 workers. Since the company's function had totally stopped, workers suffered tremendously without support in the packaging and selling of tea leaves, the activities that provided them wages and proper living facilities. The nearby primary health centre too gradually failed as the staff could not provide medical help for the drunken workers who fought on their compounded problems. With the growing personal frustration many workers' houses became dilapidated and interest in maintaining the common facility areas decreased. The common toilets which existed are now inaccessible due to neglect and therefore the workers have to do without them. The whole estate suffered as a result of the cut in electricity supply to the factory. The roads inside the plantations also fell into disrepair. However, the State Transport service still continues to ply its bus once every morning and evening, making travel a horrible experience on the battered road.

Originally, every family had at least two members on the plantations, with an assured regular wage and benefits from them that were sufficient for the basic needs of the families. After closure, the men lost the work they specialized in and could not find similar opportunities. The women continued to pick the tea leaves but with diminished expectations of prices. Hence, worker morale was shattered.

### **1. Labour**

Before the closure of the garden there were about 1,200 workers and three unions, CITU, INTUC and BMS were women. Men weeded the plantation once in two months and worked in the factory, grinding, powdering and packing the tea leaves. Managers and most office staff on this plantations were also men. Most women labourers were tea pickers. They picked tea leaves for daily wages calculated per kilogram of leaf. After abandonment, situation their day-to-day life has become very difficult and has driven them into heavy debt. The education of their children and the availability of required medical care has also been adversely affected.

This specific gendered division of labour continued to exist even after the closure. This is evidenced by the fact that women workers continued tea picking as usual from the plantations to make their living by selling leaves to anybody who wanted it outside the Bonacaud estate. This work was being done regularly by women for almost 20-25 days a month. Men, on the other hand, could not do the usual factory work of grinding, powdering and packing tea leaves and could only weed the plantation once in two months. This meant that women were the major workers and earners who supported the families in the plantations.

Eight years after the closure, in 2004, union leaders of the three Unions took the initiative to control and manage the work in this garden. They mainly controlled the tea picking and sale of tea leaves by the women. Finally, through an arrangement between Unions, the leaves plucked by the women were to be sold to a nearby estate at Koluchikara. Here, only the good quality leaves were accepted and women received only between Rs. 3.50 and Rs. 4.00 per kg. During this time women were not getting any other benefits from the Unions. The non-payment of wages caused male workers to become disinterested in weeding.

It is however reported that an amount of Rs 6,19,000 was borrowed by the Union members from a man (who got the tender for rubber latex tapping from the plantations) to pay wages to the labourers. This exploitation of the workers by the Union became visible when the Union leaders dissuaded a prospective buyer of the plantation when he visited it. The sale of the plantation would mean the end of the Union's grip on the labourers. This was crucial to the Unions as they had organised women labourers to sell tea leaves to the estate at Koluchikara, for which the Unions would receive a cut.

Dissatisfied with the conditions of work faced by the women workers and the unemployment experienced by the men, workers decided to take control of the Bonacaud plantations themselves and thus, on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006, twenty one representatives from the three divisions in the plantations took charge. These representatives took a decision to auction the cardamom, pepper and coconut that were also grown on the plantations to fund the weeding and replantation of the estate. However, the Union leaders were against the idea of the labourers taking charge. Seeing the boldness of these workers the Union leaders then declared that the money from this auction of spices should be given to the leaders for the repayment of their debt. This situation caused conflict between the labourers and the Union, resulting in frequent conflicts. The Unions went to the extent of bringing musclemen and thugs to the plantation to coerce the workers. Since then, the workers have stopped collaboration with the Unions and the strength of the workers has reduced from the 1,200 at the time of closure to 264. Frequent conflicts and police interventions still occur.

However, the 21 representatives of the workers now function as the Garden Committee. They have recently decided to file a petition with the Palode Police Circle against these Union leaders, demanding wages for the work done. In order to know the truth about the debt created by the Union Leaders, they have also demanded that the Unions produce the Statement of Accounts for the period the plantation was under their control.

## **2. Migration**

The population of workers in the plantation dropped by 78%, from 1200 to 264. The actual proportion of migrants from the plantation could be much more. It is reported by present workers that most migrated to Tamil Nadu to work in their home towns where they had relatives and friends. Many migrated with their whole families. Other migrants include male workers who migrated to far off places outside the State in search of better jobs. Several young people, both boys and girls below 18 years, also migrated to their own home state, Tamil Nadu, to stay with relatives and pursue studies.

Migration from the plantation is a heavy loss for the families toiling for a living on the plantations. The greatest burdens are borne by the women who are often left behind with the children. When a woman decides to go outside the plantation for work, she is carrying with her the burden of her family in her mind while and also facing the hardships in the new work site alone.

## **3. Alternate livelihood arrangements**

The Garden Committee is fully accepted by the workers. Most women workers pluck tea and sell it to a new company from Vandipperiyar near Munnar that has been organised by the Garden Committee. The women are now receiving a higher price than before, between Rs.4.40 and Rs.5.00 per kg. High quality leaves are not demanded. Hence, they are able to sell more leaves. Price sharing is also being done among women by pooling the leaves plucked each day.

Women feel responsible for their work and for their families as the men have not been able to get daily work on the plantations. In this context of lost employment, several men and a few women have even resorted to quick and illegal ways of making money by distilling liquor (arrack) and through sex work. This has been seen on other plantations as well where workers often end up becoming HIV/AIDS patients.

### **CASE # 1 The Social Adjustment made by a Young Person**

As a young boy, Ratnam lived with his father, mother and two younger brothers at Bonacaud tea plantations. His father and mother were both employees of Mahavir tea plantations. Ratnam's father is a second generation employee of the plantation. After the lockout his father lost his factory job but his mother continued tea picking in order to meet household needs.

Soon afterwards, his aged father got bedridden and his mother continued to pick tea at Bonacaud. She got about Rs.40 daily from nearly 20 days a month of tea picking. This was not enough for the family and Chinnavar was not able to continue his studies. He, therefore, stopped his studies after the Tenth Standard and decided to support his family. He tried his hand at several jobs outside plantations. One such job was being a helper on a lorry. This was exciting as it took him to several new places. He even went to Mumbai on a trip and decided to stay on for better employment. He found a job as a security guard in Mumbai and continued there for nearly three and a half years, sending money home all the time. He came back to the plantations only when he was informed of his mother's illness. His father, by then, was no



more and his mother was suffering from diabetes and kidney problems. She needed money and assistance.

Back on the plantations, he faced the real misery of his family and therefore decided to look for a job nearby. He didn't think of any ethics or values. His only priority was to make money and this he did by joining an illegal liquor distillery working at the forests near the plantations. His job was to make the liquor and to transport it to nearby Vithura. He would get Rs 150 everyday for this job. Without much hesitation, he started work and has been working in this job for the past two years. Ratnam mentioned his dislike of this job, yet it appears to him to be the only possible opportunity for employment in the nearby area. His family circumstances did not allow him to go to cities for employment even though he was aware of the various opportunities available there.

He was highly ambitious and planned to take a different job after marriage. Meanwhile, he now remains optimistic about getting a better job on the plantations when it reopens. Ratnam is now twenty eight years old. Three years ago, he married a local girl. He gave up the arrack distillation and took up masonry in Cochin. He now works in the city while his wife lives with his mother on the plantations. His brothers have set out to make their own lives outside the plantations.

This case study shows the undying attachment of the employees to the plantation, even in times of loss of work, and even when they are aware of available work outside. This could be due to the work and life conditions on the plantations in their early years, which gave them a sense of security and community.

#### **4. Income**

Income patterns vary from family to family on a plantation in operation. This is because there could be several members working on the plantations and in some families there may be those who are working outside the plantation. In the present context, it is, however, reported that plantation families are getting approximately Rs. 600 per month. Eighty per cent of this amount is contributed by women. Men earn about Rs.100 every day for weeding and use the money they get for their own purposes and to buy alcohol while women use almost all the money earned per day (Rs.60) for the family even though they do not get the same wages as men do. This is no different from the situation in 1988 in Assam as reported earlier in this article and the inequality seems to have increased.

#### **5. Access to Resources**

##### **a) Drinking water**

Plantation workers mainly use water from wells near their homes and streams within the plantations. Drinking water is always boiled by the families before consumption. No electricity or permanent health facilities are available. A primary dispensary used to exist. However, health personnel from the Vidhura Health Centre visit these families once a week on Fridays.

## b) Education

There are few accessible educational institutions in the area. Only an Anganvadi and a lower primary school operate in the area and the teacher turnover is said to be high. Yet, most families strive hard to educate their children even though they have to face much hardship. Many children have been sent to their relatives in Tamil Nadu to be schooled while teenagers try to fend for themselves.

## 6. State intervention

### a) Govt. food ration.

The suicides that took place on these plantations and the poverty of workers caught the eye of the MLA in 2005 and workers began to get free rations of 5kg of rice every week. This supply was interrupted during State elections and has restarted in December 2006. Workers do not get any other item on ration from the State.

### b) Govt. Programme for Women's development.

As the women had little recourse to gainful activity in the plantations, many joined the Kudumbasree programme, a state-wide government programme for women below the poverty line, following the group approach. The Bonacaud ward forms part of the implementation area and at present there are 14 Self Help Groups having women members from the tea plantations. They are involved mainly in umbrella and soap making for the last two years. Other groups that are four to five years old have approximately 1 lakh rupees as savings among the 15-25 members. Loans between Rs. 5,000 and Rs. 15,000 are given by the panchayat at 1% to 2% bank interest. The panchayat also helps to start goat rearing units.

The women know that this activity can be made successful by them if they conduct their group work in other areas of work. However, they do not have the knowledge and capacity to bring about the desired changes. Hence, they urgently require training and support to improve these Self-Help Groups. Male workers are sceptical about the achievements of Kudumbasree units. However for the women, the groups are meaningful in that they bring them together for social and moral support, help meet their financial needs through microcredit and help them make a difference for the family. There is a need for further research to determine how financially beneficial these units can be to such communities.

### c) Electricity supply.

The lack of electricity on the plantations was a misery to those workers who enjoyed the benefits of it earlier. However, the Government has announced in February 2007 that electricity will be restored to closed tea gardens shortly. It is hoped that the electrical supply will be resumed as promised.

## 7. Other interventions

Some NGOs had visited the Bonacaud plantations and promised help to these workers, including the provision of medical camps, but nothing has materialised so far. There was a recent visit from a leading hospital in Trivandrum, promising a free eye camp, which is yet to

take place. The church in that area is able to give the members only moral and spiritual strength.

Many workers were found to be firm believers in God. Their major relief from their hardship is their faith. There are three churches and one temple at the Bonacaud tea plantation. Workers believe that the problems faced by them can only be solved by the Almighty. Churches and temples are helping them to cope with their problems by giving them hope.

## **8. Social Problems**

### a) Alcoholism

Men on the plantations are known to be heavy alcoholics even though they have no regular income. The little money obtained by them is often squandered on alcohol. Many young men are also lured into illegal arrack distillation and consumption, which takes away their health and money. Such habits often take men outside the plantations for days together, causing the temporary abandonment of their families. Therefore, most female workers interviewed felt that the basic problem in this community now lies with the men.

### b) Suicides

Another crucial social problem is suicides on the plantations, in particular, an increasing incidence of suicides by female workers. In the past two months 3 female workers had committed suicide. Workers said that suicide was common as it was seen as an easy solution for any unsolvable problem or conflict. However, this is indicative of the great stress that women are under.

### c) Women Headed Families

About 35 to 40 per cent of women are heading their families either due to death or separation. These women face physical and mental stress. Many of them have infectious respiratory diseases. These factors indicate that women are bearing most of the consequences of unemployment and are becoming increasingly disempowered themselves.

## **CASE # 2 A Woman Headed Family**

Radhika is a 31 year old widow at Bonacaud. She was married at the age of 16 to Raghu and has three daughters between the ages 8 and 10 years and one son, 6years old. Raghu was a plantation employee and she was a housewife. Twelve years ago, Raghu died of an injury suffered while at work. She recalls that the company did not provide any compensation to her family and that they fell into a terrible crisis. She and her four children were all alone without any help or support from others.

Radhika managed to get a tea picking job in the tea plantation. However, the payment she got from her job was very low. She would get Rs.2 per kg of leaves. With this amount she could not make both ends meet. Like any other parent, she too dreamt of giving her children a good education, but in vain. After her husband's death, she sent her son, then only three, to her relative's house outside the tea plantations. They literally adopted her son because she did not

have any means to take care of the child. Both her daughters joined her in the work on the tea plantations.

Many workers migrated to Tamil Nadu and other States in search of jobs and better living conditions leaving Radhika without the friends she depended on. However, Radhika and her three daughters lived all alone with no one to help them. She even thought of putting an end to all her sufferings by taking her own life. However, her three daughters did not let her do that even though she and her children had often starved for days together. Radhika had studied until the eighth standard and could read and write Malayalam. Although she had plans to migrate to other cities in search of jobs, she could not make it because of a lack of money for travel expense. She also faced her own limitations as a woman and a mother of three young daughters in taking the risk of migration.

Radhika's three daughters had never gone to school but she taught them whatever she knew so that they too were literate. Two years ago, Radhika sent her elder daughter to Kannur with one of her uncles to work as a housemaid. The other two daughters are staying with her and they do help on the plantation with her. The maximum wages they receive are as low as Rs. 3.50 per kg.

Today, she is living a life full of pain, stress, frustration, and depression, trying to balance social mores regarding women and physical adversity. Sometimes she has feels motivated to committing suicide, but has refrained for the sake of her daughters and her son. She wants to give her children a better life and hence regains her confidence, thinking that her son and daughters have no one but her to depend on. Her faith and trust in God help her to look forward to a better day when there will be an end to all her misery and pain.

#### d) Workers lacking Leadership

Workers think that the Government will still rescue them by taking over the management and running the factory or, at least, will provide welfare measures since political leaders have visited this place and have given them the hope. The workers have lost faith in trade unions but are ready to welcome any party seriously interested in rejuvenating the plantations. They are not willing to leave plantations, as the scenario outside, is too competitive for them at their age. Youngsters, on the other hand try to adjust with the outside environment in various ways trying to manage survival.

### **CASE # 3 : The Aged**

Mr. Murugan is 68 and his wife, Mrs. Rani is 60 years. They have two sons. The elder one is 38 years, and the younger one is 36 years. The elder one is qualified up to his pre degree and the younger one has studied until the tenth standard.

Though Murugan and Rani have two educated sons, they are left alone at Bonacaud with no one to take care of them as both their sons have left them almost eight years ago. The youngest son and his family migrated to Chennai while the eldest son migrated to Tamil Nadu.

Murugan and Rani are from Tamil Nadu. It is now 40 years since they migrated from Tamil Nadu to Bonacaud, expecting a better life. This was initially true when both Murugan and Rani were working at the tea plantation in Bonacaud and were drawing sufficient money for their livelihood and their basic needs. They could educate both their sons and were leading a happy life. They say that those days are merely dreams now. The situation is now entirely different.

Misery hit them when the Company at Bonacaud was closed in 1996 and both lost their jobs. Thus, they could not satisfy their basic economic needs, which led to social and psychological problems for the family.

Murugan started drinking as a temporary relief from problems. The researcher, while talking to Rani understood that she used to be beaten by Murugan after he got drunk. He used to express all his anger and guilt to his wife by beating her and when sober, apologised. Rani says that their son left them due to poverty and because of Murugan's behaviour. These problems caused Murugan to become depressed. Rani also mentioned that such behavioural changes in Murugan began after he lost all his savings and hardcore poverty struck them. They have spent days without food. For days, they survived with just black tea without sugar. In order to fulfil their basic needs they started selling the valuables they had. The last thing they sold was their radio. Sometimes, as though through God's grace, they would get help from the neighbours who gave them food or rice and raw vegetables. Murugan and Rani are very grateful to them for the help they provided. It was during this period that their sons left them, unable to withstand the poverty in the family and their father's drunkenness.

Murugan and Rani recall the time they joined the company. They were guaranteed work till fifty-five years and a pension. All this was in vain after the closure of the company. In addition, Murugan had some money deposited with the company which could not be obtained as well

Recently, Murugan fell sick and was taken to the hospital for a check up. He was diagnosed with acute kidney problems which could turn chronic if regular treatment is not given. The doctors asked them to start the treatment as soon as possible. Unfortunately, they do not have anyone to help them financially and also do not know the whereabouts of their two sons, in order to seek their help. Murugan was getting weaker every day. Rema has finally decided to go for some tea plantation related work, as there is no other job available nearby. The plucking of tea leaves will fetch her three to four rupees for one kilo of tea leaves, but she is apprehensive about her age being a problem for employment now. Therefore, she knows that this is just wishful thinking.

For Murugan and Rani all doors to help are closed and they do not have any alternative. Rani is very bold and strong despite her old age. They still believe that one day their sons will come to help them and they will be rid of the misery they are now in. They have not lost their faith in God, which is their only ray of hope.

They have faced most of the suffering that a human being can undergo in this world, due to their economic backwardness. They continue to hope that the tea factory will reopen and that

their problems would be solved when their pension and other benefits are received. As an ageing woman, Rani is suffers as a caretaker unable to help an ailing husband.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Case Study showed the present abandoned plantation situation to have adversely affected the families with the greatest burden resting on the women who were to feed the family. All the families are facing immense economic problems after the company has been closed as they were completely dependent on the company for their livelihood. It is very clear that economic problems are the major problems faced by workers, which have led to various other problems.

Thus the problems faced by women in the context of losing security of wages has led to difficulties in maintaining the stability of families. The sudden loss of facilities such as maintenance of housing, free clothing, medical care, education, loans and bonuses left the male workers with no alternative to compensate them. Their lack of skills and insecurity towards other jobs dissuaded many from leaving the plantations. Young adults migrated to other places to learn new jobs and earn a livelihood, which split many families. Many were helped by relatives who took care of their children. However, for those remaining, their contacts with the outside world seemed very difficult. Thus, they suffered within the plantation, and even contemplated suicide.

The closure of the company also disrupted the comfort and security in which second generation labourers were bringing up the third generation. The loss of economic security often removed children from their families in the search for survival. Many of the younger generation are not interested in living with their family members on the plantation due to various problems the families face. Such youngsters stray from the plantations or choose arrack distillation and other illegal professions that may bring them some quick money. All these point to a breakdown of family system.

Women who continue tea picking are exploited by those to whom they sell as they are no longer organised and are economically helpless. Women still remain the backbone of the family, in the face of all misery. The **areas of women empowerment** are seen in the following: 1) Women's practical strength in fighting poverty through the acceptance of the available price for tea leaves and her sacrifices in providing for the family with this small means 2) The strong belief and faith in the Almighty 3) The community feeling that exists among the labourers especially during festivals, all tend to express the strength and level of self empowerment. The **areas of women disempowerment** are: 1) the lack of education and knowledge of how to obtain other kinds of work available to women. 2) Inability to take decisions about her own life which differs from decisions taken by her husband. 3) Lack of courage to make substantial changes in the ordinary life.

The Government's intervention has been vital yet very slow when considering the delay in providing food rations. Therefore, the recent announcement of the resumption in electricity supply is to be welcomed if it is not delayed further. A recent announcement of the reopening of the Mahavir plantations was a welcome relief to all workers concerned as measures for paying the arrears in wages was also being considered.

A few suggestions can be made for the improvement of the lives of these ignorant workers who are even now, trying to live their lives in the hope of depending on a source of income that they knew for generations but is not so forthcoming now. The delay in compensation of these workers on plantations should take into consideration the following ; 1) immediate absorption of the male and female workers into the Panchayat employment guarantee schemes. 2) Continuous training programmes for men, women, and teenagers are required for enhancing their life skills and creating a mindset that will accept change. 3) The illegal occupations on tea plantations must be replaced with honourable ones by Government adopting stringent measures and 4) The plantations should be supervised by senior officials so that security on these plantations are restored. 5) Finally, the Anganvadi and Primary School education facilities must be improved so that young children can remain with their parents while being educated and also integrate into the family labour.

**Notes and References :**

1. Earlier India was next to China in world exports but after 2003 India is lagging behind Sri Lanka, Kenya & China. See Nabard, Tea industry in India: a Survey, 2005, Occasional Paper 39.p.6.
2. The average cost of production in the corporate sector varied from Rs 60 to Rs 65 a kg while the auction prices remained much below that level. See. Nair, G.K.; Kerala tea output continues to slide, The Hindu Business line, Thurs 28, 2005.
3. Ibid; Nair,G.K.;
4. Op.cit. Nabard, p. 7
5. Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour; Socio-Economic conditions of women workers, 1988, GOI.

# Profile of Closed/Abandoned Tea Gardens in The Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu

Ullash Kumar R. K.

## Introduction

The Nilgiris are situated in the *Western Ghat* mountains that run parallel to the South Western coastline of India. The British planted tea, coffee and many other monoculture varieties in Nilgiri by cutting some of the best forests in Gudalur and Wayanad in the 1800s. First, coffee was planted in the 1820s. Later, in 1848, tea was introduced in this area. Some big plantations like the Birla's Manjushree plantations took land on lease for a pittance from the Kovilagam. Among the many tea-growing areas in the region Gudalur is given special attention in this study due to the presence of many closed and abandoned tea gardens in the area.

The land in the Gudalur area, excluding the forest lands, can be categorised as lands that once belonged to the Nilambur Kovilakom, Naduvattu Mana, Nelliyalam Rathi, Kottar Kudiyiruppu and Kurichier Kudiyiruppu plantations of the British era. Nilambur Kovilakam had more than 1,20,000 acres of land. The British government invited people to utilise the uncultivated lands and forests for the production of food and other agricultural products. The aim was to increase the food production of the country as a response to recurring famines in the region. Many adventurous people thus migrated to the Gudalur area from Travancore and Malabar and sought work in the tea sector. The workers in the tea plantations in Nilgiri area were mainly migrants. Even before the states were reorganised into Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Madras) people migrated from different parts of the country, to work in the coffee, tea and cinchona plantations.

## Closed Tea Estates in Nilgiri

The major plantation crop of Nilgiri is tea. There are about 12 major plantations besides a number of small scale plantations in Gudalur area. A government-run plantation, TAN TEA<sup>3</sup> is also in this area. Due to the steep fall in the tea prices and due to the government's liberalisation policies that began in the early 1990s the plantation sector has suffered badly. Even the big plantations are finding it tough going. As a result, two plantations of Mahaveer

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<sup>3</sup> Tan Tea has three divisions in Gudalur. The TAN TEA estates are in about 8000 acres of land. The estate was created by removing the forest cover. It was done mainly to accommodate the Sri Lankan Repatriates way back in the 1970s. The other government-operated factories are INDCO; the small growers give their leaf to INDCO factories.



Plantations Pvt. Ltd in the Gudalur area were closed down. This report attempts to highlight the present status of these two closed plantations, namely, Yellumalai and Seaforth Estates.

Mahaveer Plantations have four estates in the Nilgiris district. Two are in Naduvattam area and the other two are in O'valley area of Gudalur. The estates they own are:

1. Naduvattam Estate (Naduvattam Area)
2. Liddle Dale Estate (Naduvattam Area)
3. Yellamalai Estate (Gudalur Area)
4. Seaforth Estate (Gudalur Area)

Among these Yellumalai estate and Seaforth estates are still closed down. The Naduvattam Estate and Liddle Dale Estate have been reopened very recently about four months ago. Naduvattam is an estate about 18 kilometres away from Gudalur on the Ooty road. The Liddle Dale estate is about three kilometres away and is in a place called TR Bazaar.

From 1996 the owners of Mahaveer Plantations have neglected the estates and not paid attention to the staff and labourers. The workers had protested for years by blocking the highway between Ooty and Gudalur many times. The owner has threatened to lock the estate permanently if the workers persist with their demands to improve their situation. For the last ten years the people have managed to run the estate with the help of few staff members. The owners filed a case in the High Court saying that tea leaves have been robbed from the estate. The owners also filed a complaint at the Naduvattam police station. Despite all this the workers managed to run the estates. Today, the owner has come back saying he will pay them Rs 70 per day for their work, but they must not ask for their benefits. The workers, both men and women are now paid Rs 70 per day. However, the workers never got their gratuity and Provident Fund benefits. All their efforts for years have not been recognised.

The situation in Yellamalai and Seaforth Estate is however grim. The owner is not bothered about these estates. For the last ten years, he has not bothered to look into these estates. It has been left to the staff and the workers to run these estates on their own. The estates are as good as closed.

### **Yellumalai and Seaforth Tea Estates: Case Studies**

Yellamalai and Seaforth Estate are in the O'Valley area of Gudalur. It is about 24 kilometres away from Gudalur. These estates come under the Section 17 of the Janmam Act of 1969. The Yellamalai estate is about 118 hectares in area and the Seaforth Estate is about 123 hectares. Totally both estates are about 700 acres of land. The estate was initially owned by an English man called Mr. Gafoor who sold it to Mahaveer Plantations in 1976.

There were 21 staff members including managers for both estates. The total workforce was 350 (200 female and 150 male) in Seaforth and 250 (150 female and 100 male) in Yellamalai estate. Apart from this they employed part time workers too. All these permanent workers and staff were given quarters in the estate area. Till 1976 the estate flourished and the entire

workforce was happy. Workers say that their problems began after the property was handed over to Mahaveer Plantations. The workers say that was the turning point.

Stacker, a lorry driver recollects what it was like to be in Seaforth estate during the good days. "There was no rest. There was lot of work and I used to do overtime too. Today, there is absolutely no work."

Simrose who has been working in this estate for more than 40 years remembers the golden era. She says, "In the 1980s too we used to get Rs 72 for plucking 14 kg of leaf per day." In a day with overtime she used to earn Rs 126 per day<sup>4</sup>. Today there is no work and even if there is, she gets only Rs 40. She finds it difficult to make ends meet. Simrose is the head of her household and has to look after her four daughters. Mohammed Ali, another worker in Yellamalai estate says, "There were days in the early 1990s when we got about 1,88,000 kilos of tea per month (25 days of work) from the two estates".

In 1996, there were days when as much as 20,000 kilos of tea were harvested from both the estates on a single day. Such was the quality and quantity of the harvest. The downfall of the estate began when the owners diverted funds for some of their other projects such as processed green tea ten years ago. The workers say it is pure mismanagement of funds.

From 1996, the owners have done nothing to ensure the improvement of the estate, the staff and the labourers. It has been like an abandoned estate. Today there is hardly 10 days work per year and the yield is only about 15,000 kg from one estate. The wages of the labourers are only Rs 40 per day. And mostly there is no tealeaf to pluck since the estate has not been taken care of at all. No weeding is done, no fertilizers are used, and nothing is done to see that the tealeaf is in good condition. The labourers wait for tea to grow, and then pluck the leaf. The estate owners are not bothered about the estate.

### **Condition of Workers in these Estates**

Out of the 350 workers in Seaforth and 250 workers in Yellamalai Estate are looking today at these estates for their livelihood. Since the estates have been closed down, they are working as labourers with small growers who give them seasonal work. On days when they can pluck leaves here they do so. Some go to Gudalur to do some other work and others go to Tirupur to work in the hosiery units. Some go to the upper Nilgiris to work in vegetable farms.

But the workforce continues to live in the quarters provided by the management. The only difference is that each household have to pay for the repairs of their own homes and their own electricity bill. Water is not a problem in this area since water is easily available. Most of these homes are in bad shape and have not been repaired for years because most people do not

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<sup>4</sup> Till 1995 the wages in these estates used to be Rs 72 per day for plucking 14 kg of Tea. On most of days there would be overtime too. Women used to pluck 30 to 32 kg for overtime work. For overtime they are paid Rs 2 per kilo, this amounts to Rs 64 for 32 kg of leaf. So totally they used to earn Rs 126 per day. Today most of the days there is no tea to pluck. And when they pluck there is a maximum of 20 kilos for which they are paid Rs 5 per kilo. But they have to pay the estate management too from their wages, so they end up getting Rs 40 to Rs 50 per day if there is work.

have money to repair their homes. Gudalur receives the second highest rainfall in the country. These houses are old and not suitable for living. The houses leak and no one knows when the structures could collapse and fall. All the reapers that support the roofs are in bad shape. In winter, the homes are freezing cold. The conditions in which these people are living are inhuman.

Even those who have money are not able to repair their houses since the forest department does not allow them to do so. They are not allowed to bring in wood or cut wood from the forest nearby. The forest department also harasses these workers badly. They do not allow the workers to buy any material from the town and take it to repair their homes. The forest department says that the area falls under Section 17 and that they are illegal occupants. The forest department constantly threatens them and harasses them. These workers who are already finding it difficult to make their ends meet are under tremendous pressure from the forest officials, who threaten eviction. Strangely the forest department does not allow the people to repair the houses, even if actually they buy the wood and materials from Gudalur.

### **The Current Situation in these Estates**

The estates had 21 administrative staff between them earlier. Now only 8 members of staff remain.

The staff structure of the estate is as follows: two managers, two field officers, one nurse, one mechanic and two clerks

Most of the young staff members have left the estate. The staff members have also not got any of the statutory benefits from the estate such as the gratuity and PF benefits. The staff members are living tough lives too. They are today dependent on the labourers to make a living. The two managers and two field officers are hoping that they would get some benefits. They do not have any other place to go, so they are just hanging on. The owners owe gratuity to nearly 30 individuals. The gratuity amounts to Rs 4 crores approximately.

The owners also owe gratuity to the families of deceased employees. Even when the government tries to help, the attempt is thwarted because the owners have good political connections. The tahsiladar and others stops the funds from being released. In other cases the kin of the deceased is driven from pillar to post to get the benefits. Finally they do not get any benefits. This has been the scene for the last ten years.

The owners have not stopped harassing the workers. The owners have instructed the buyers not to buy the tealeaf for more than Rs 5 per kg while the current price of tealeaf is Rs 8/kg. The workers in both Seaforth and Yelamalai estates say that the owners get a commission for this from the buyers.

### **Problems of Women Workers**

Work on tea plantations, especially the plucking, is labour-intensive and depend on women to a large extent. Women in the closed estates of Gudalur suffer a wide range of problems. Women run many of the households. Often they are heads of their families since either the

husband is dead or is unable to earn a living. All they have is shelter. So the women have to either contribute significantly to the family income or earn enough to meet the needs of the family. Women workers face the following problems.

1. The Seaforth and Yelamalai estates do have enough tea for daily work. This work is available for a maximum of 10 days per month. Workers are able to get only Rs 40 per day even if there is work.
2. So the women go to other estates owned by small tea growers who pay Rs 70/day. Small growers do not have enough land to give these persons daily work. Depending on the amount of land the grower has, it varies from a maximum of 5 days to 7 days work per month.
3. So the women go in search of work to bigger estate owners who own 10 to 12 acres at least. Here they get Rs 55 per day. Those going to Tan Tea get Rs 85 per day. Tan Tea is a government estate and has its own permanent labourers so they do not take part time staff. So mostly the women have to settle for this Rs 55 per day work.

### **Problems faced by the women**

For women work in these estates is difficult. Though they have a wide range of jobs and a heavy workload, they only earn a pittance. When the Seaforth and Yellamalai estate was functioning these women had not too many problems. At that point they earned enough to sustain themselves and also had medical facilities. Today they have to work very hard to earn a living. To work with a very small grower who has about 2 to 3 acres land is not difficult. These small growers often are sensitive to the situation of the workers but can't give them more than 5 days of work. Working with estate owners with holdings larger than 10 acres is a different ball game These owners pay only Rs.55 per day and only if the women pluck 35 kilos of tealeaf.

Sexual harassment at the workplace is another issue the women workers face in these gardens. From the interviews it seems that sexual harassment of women labourers is greater in Valparai area compared to that of the Nilgiris district. But some women workers in the Nilgiris reported sexual harassment too. Mostly harassment takes place in small tea estates owned by individual proprietors. Women are often harassed at the tea estates in different ways. The owner gives them the hardest work and makes it difficult for them to get the wages promised. For the Rs.55 per day, they have to listen to a lot of verbal abuse.

### **Work conditions in the estates**

Every worker has to pluck a minimum of 35 kilos of tea daily. As estates are huge and one has to trek a long way, women have to start from their homes by 7:30 AM in order to pluck their daily quota. Women do not normally have breakfast but make maida roti for teatime and rice for lunch. Plucking usually starts at 8:30 in the morning. During lunch they have rice and pickle. From 8.30AM to 1 PM they have to pluck 20 kilos of tea leaves. From 2 to 5 PM they pluck 15 kilos. Afterwards, they have to pack the tea and load it into trucks. This occupies them till up to 7 PM. Then they have to trek back to their homes. By the time they reach their houses they have no energy but have to cook dinner and look after the children, their husband and other members of the family. They end up working till late in the night despite the fact that

they have to get up early. To leave by 7 30 AM, they have to get up at 4 AM, which, in the cold weather of the Nilgiris, is itself a task. Then they have to prepare breakfast for the children, send them to school, make breakfast for their husbands and then make their maida rotis and their lunches. By the time these things are ready, it is already time to trek to the estate for work. They work like machines without rest.

It is impossible to work like this daily, so women usually work for only 15 days a month. Estate owners are merciless and do not employ more than 10 persons for an estate of 10 to 15 acres. Therefore, one cannot take leave as that will cause them to lose their jobs. Therefore, women rotate their leaves. If one of them takes leave, another does her work, because otherwise the estate owner might hire another person.

The leaves collected for the day, have to be loaded into bags and taken to a collection point. They have to be weighed and transported quickly to procession plants within 12 hours of harvesting. The process involves the crushing of leaves and the controlled fermentation of the liquor.

There should usually be one tea shed every acre or one shed per field. However, most tea estates do not have required number of sheds. Weighing is done at noon and at 4.30 PM. During overtime days weighing is usually done 4 times. Sometimes, sheds are far away and women have to trek often to the shed. Most women walk 5 to 7 kilometres on difficult terrain daily. It is difficult to carry heavy loads over large distances, resulting in back pain and illnesses. There is nothing nutritious in their food and as a result, women are usually unfit.

In addition to plucking, workers have to spray pesticides, weed, prune and do other tasks as well.

There is no crèche facility for children in estates, except in one or two large plantations in Gudalur, like the Manjushree plantation. Tea plucking itself gives workers severe back pains and are exposed to toxic pesticides while plucking tea and spraying pesticide. Snake and insect bites are hazards. Women carry water for long distances over hilly terrain to mix with pesticide, aggravating their back pain. Spraying pesticide is an arduous task that can take up an entire day.. Sometimes, the improper use of chemicals and a lack of knowledge among sprayers results in serious health problems such as cancer. Women working here also lack adequate protective clothing.

### **Stress and Related Problems**

Working in the estates for a pittance is torture and the lives of these people are treacherous. Often people come home without any energy. They have to tend to family problems and housework as well. Family pressures and pressure from in-laws adds to the tension. Often, women suffer nervous breakdowns. If they are strong, they survive and if they are weak, they commit suicide.

Incidentally, suicide rates, in Gudalur, especially among women, are high, compared to the national average. A total of 36 cases of suicide were reported from Gudalur in 2006 (Table, 1). Some cases could be attributable to problems related to the tea sector like such as stress, work pressure, abuse by family, family problems and sexual harassment at the work place, but there has been no serious research done in this area.

*Table 1*

<b>Incidents of Suicide in Gudalur in 2006</b>		
No	Age group	No of persons
1	10-19 years	7
2	20-29 years	8
3	30-39 years	11
4	40-70 years	10
<b>Total (all age group)</b>		<b>36</b>
Source: Newspaper reports (various)		

### **Conclusion**

Labourers working in this closed tea estates of Gudalur are living on the edge of extreme poverty. They have an uncertain future. Their plight is same even in other big estates. Even in working estates such as the Manjushree plantations and the Silver Cloud estate, workers are suffering badly and have not been paid wages for months.

While workers in tea estates are suffering, they are worse off in closed estates. It is high time that the government intervenes and takes over these estates and helps these poor workers. Tan Tea can take over such estates and give labourers government wages of Rs.85 per day. The government should also instruct the forest department to allow these people to repair their homes.

The two trade unions that are functioning in these two estates, including INTUC are as good as dead. They have done nothing for these workers. It is high time that the unions voice their concern on the condition and plight of these workers.

# Not Everyone's Cup of Tea

P.T. John and Mohan Mani

“The cup that cheers” – so claim numerous endorsements of this beverage. However, for a large number of workers and people dependent on the tea industry, the situation in the past five years has provided little to feel cheerful about.

India is the largest producer and consumer of tea in the world. According to some estimates, the sector employs over 2 million workers (both permanent and casual), with over 50% of them being women. Around 10 million people are dependent on wages earned from this sector. Therefore, the crisis faced by tea plantations from the turn of the millennium has had a catastrophic effect on a very large section of the population. It has adversely impacted wages and economic development in tea plantation regions.

Take the situation in the Kerala tea sector. Estimates by the Plantation Working Class Union (PWCU) put the total employment in tea plantations at 84,000 workers. In addition, there are a large number of small tea growers. Around 2 million people are directly affected by the dire situation of the plantations. Studies report that in Peeramedu Taluk in Munnar alone, out of 32 tea factories 18 have been closed down and 13 tea estates have been abandoned by their owners leaving 30,000 jobless. The reported non-payment of wages is about Rs.100 crores.

In Wayanad, the Priyadarshini tea plantation was set up under a Central Government scheme for tribal welfare. The 995 acres of tea plantation were meant to rehabilitate around 200 families. Currently, workers survive by plucking leaves and selling them directly in the market for whatever they can get. According to P. T. John, General Secretary of the PWCU, “Sixty three workers are missing from Priyadarshini Estates. No one knows where they are, or even whether they are dead or alive. The Government which is responsible for their rehabilitation has no knowledge about the whereabouts of these workers. Last year, there was report of starvation deaths in Priyadarshini Estates. The neighbouring Makkimala and Fringford estates have been abandoned by their owners for 9 and 12 years. The situation of families in these estates is dismal. Hospitals and schools in the plantations are closed. Workers live in ramshackle plantation tenements that have seen no repairs for years. They manage to earn about Rs.50-60 per day for around 100 days in a year by plucking leaves and selling them directly in the market. This plucking is illegal in the eyes of the law, and so the tea factories

that buy the leaf take advantage of this and give workers about half the market price. The most pathetic condition is that of children who have no access to schooling. Many land up as child labourers across the border in Tirupur.”

What is it that ails the tea plantation sector? The interesting factor is that while tea plantations are in doldrums, the major players in the tea industry have been having an exceedingly good run. Tata Tea saw its turnover increase by 10 percent, from Rs.900 crores for 2004-05, to just under Rs.1000 crores for 2005-06. Profit after tax increased by a whopping 45 percent.

The reason for this is not hard to see – the sharp divergence between the retail market price for tea, and the price that tea fetches at the plantation. According to Tea Board statistics, for the period 1999 the average auction price for tea was Rs.76 per kg, while retail price was Rs.110 per kg. In the year 2002, the auction price declined to Rs.50 per kg., while the retail price increased to Rs.125 per kg. While tea price at the plantation level was around two-third the retail price in 1999, by 2002 it had declined to around a third. The plantation price for tea continues to be low, despite rising tea prices.

As per Tea Board statistics, about 75% of tea from plantations is sold through the auction system. This has been the principal mode of sale of tea from plantations since the first auction house was set up in Calcutta in 1861. The price of tea has been declining substantially at the various auction centres since the turn of the century. According to an article in Frontline, published on September 1, 2000, the average price of black tea at the South Indian auctions centres in Kochi, Coimbatore and Coonoor in 1999 was Rs.72.80 a kg. In January 2000, the average price for black tea at the Coonoor auction was Rs.43.21. By June the price had fallen to as low as Rs.34.73, a decline of over 50 per cent in just a year since 1999. This decline in tea price for plantations came about because of the control of tea auctions by a strong cartel of large traders.

An independent report commissioned by the Government through A. F. Ferguson & Co. focussed on three specific issues as responsible for the plantation crisis - cartelisation in tea auctions due to the dominance of big corporations in the tea trade; the tea export and import policy of government; and mismanagement of estates and the siphoning off of money for other businesses at the cost of the tea plantations. In a situation where plantations are no longer profitable, it is not surprising that the plantation owners are looking for exit options. The much talked about “Kannan Devan” experiment of Tata Tea is a case in point. It has been held up as a business model for emulation by various experts, including the Minister for State for Commerce, Mr. Jairam Ramesh. However it is important to take note of some salient features of this model.

Tata Tea passed on its estates on leased properties to a separate company in which about 75% of the shares were held by 13,000 employees of the plantation. This was done in the face of losses made by plantations, even when the company as a whole, made very good profits. A report in the Financial Express of March 23, 2005 quotes Mr. Percy Sigamporia, Managing Director of Tata Tea as saying that the new business model would reduce overheads and average employee cost by Rs 8 to Rs 10 a kg of tea. This is the heart of the Kannan Devan



model. Employment in tea plantations is covered by the Plantation Act, which requires the plantation to provide various benefits to workers. According to Mr. Rajendran Ambadi, a former manager in various tea plantations in Kerala, if these provisions have to be implemented, plantations would have to get around Rs.70 per kg, just to break even. As against this, the present auction price of tea in Kerala is around Rs.55 per kg. Therefore it was logical for Tata Tea to pass on its plantations and the liability for wages to the plantation workers themselves. It is interesting to note that in the process the company also managed to free two 'freehold' estates in Munnar and six in Annamalai region for conversion to other business activities. The leased properties could, anyway, not have been legally used for any purpose other than tea plantations.

It is evident that at prevailing prices, no plantation will be able to pay workers the wages and benefits prescribed by law. Plantation owners will have no other alternative but to cut wages, reduce spending on the estates and, finally, strip the estates of all assets and transfer the money to more profitable ventures. This is exactly what has been happening on the estates. A number of estates have forced workers to accept wage cuts. According to Gautam Mody of the New Trade Union Initiative, "At the Hindustan Lever tea estates, the wage level of tenured workers declined from Rs.79 per day in the mid nineties to Rs.71 per day (data available for 2005). At the same time, the required productivity per worker increased nearly two and a half times to 30 kg of leaves per day. The situation of contract workers is bound to be worse." Many estates have resorted to selling standing trees as timber, taking huge loans, diverting money to other businesses and even illegally transferring part of their properties to other activities. The large numbers of abandoned plantations stand testimony to this situation.

The "Kannan Devan" model cannot be a workable general alternative within the present business framework. This was a possible model for Tata Tea, as the plantation business was embedded within its total business of selling tea, and the separation of the plantation business was a form of "outsourcing" for cost reduction that made eminent business sense. It is of significance to note here that while Tata Tea transferred its leasehold plantations to the new company, it kept the brand name "Kannan Devan" to itself. This ensures that at least in the short run, until the new company can develop its own retail brand, it will remain a captive supplier of tea to Tata Tea. We should add here that given the situation of the tea sector, employees of Tata Tea are still very much better off than their compatriots in most other plantations.

In the present context, there is no alternative to a remunerative price for the plantation business to succeed. This is only possible if the stranglehold of the tea cartels on auction prices is broken, or if the plantations manage to bypass the auction system and directly reach the consumer. The Tea Board's attempts to set up an India tea portal as an alternative to the antiquated auction system, with IBM as a consultant, does not seem to have taken off. There is some evidence to show that many of the better run plantations are progressively bypassing the auctions.

This is the context in which the Plantation Tea Workers Union, a registered trade union of tea plantation workers in Kerala sought to formulate a workable alternative for closed and abandoned tea plantations in the Wayanad district.

The proposal looks at four closed and abandoned tea plantations and one tea processing factory in one taluk, Mananthavady, in Wayanad district. Two plantations Makkimala Estate and Fringford Estate have been abandoned for more than ten years. In Fringford estate tea plants have been physically uprooted, and, as a result, the estate license stands cancelled under the Plantation Act. The third, Glenlaven, has been closed for over a year. The fourth, Priyadarshini Estate was set up by the Mananthavady Tribal Corporation Farmers Society for the rehabilitation of adivasi families in the region. The estate also has a tea factory owned by the Society. Both the estate and the factory have been closed for a year. In all estates except Fringford, workers get about a hundred days of plucking a year, during which they can sell the day's take of leaf and earn Rs.60-70. All the estates are on leased properties, and hence cannot be used for any purpose other than tea plantation.

A feasibility scheme has been prepared by a group of professionals from the tea industry with project management expertise. The scheme envisages the takeover of the Makkimala and Fringford estates and the Priyadarshini factory. As the Tea Act 1953 empowers the Tea Board to take over and transfer the management of mismanaged plantations to any new entity, the takeover of Makkimala and Fringford will be legal. The scheme also envisages the purchase of green tea from Priyadarshini and Glenlaven plantations for processing at the factory. The total project cost has been estimated on an actual examination of various facilities and an evaluation of present capacities and immediate inputs required. The sum amounts to a total of Rs. 3.5 crores over a five year period, including Rs.75 lakhs owed to workers for unpaid wages and statutory dues. These are liabilities of previous owners, and, therefore, not strictly project liabilities.

The cornerstone of the project is the marketing of organic tea directly to consumers. Expert opinion holds that tea from bushes that have had no chemicals sprayed on them or been chemically fertilized for between two and three years can qualify as organic tea. Therefore, tea from Makkimala and Fringford estates and from parts of Priyadarshini and Glenlaven would immediately qualify as organic tea as they were abandoned and no spraying of pesticides or application of chemical fertilizers was done.

As a worker cooperative the new enterprise would be able to reach out to workers through trade unions and cooperative societies. The region has the example of Dinesh Beedi as a successful worker cooperative model. The enterprise can also tie up with other companies such as Hope Plantations that are producing and marketing their own organic tea. This enables the enterprise to bypass the auction system and realise a much higher value for their tea. The proposal conservatively assumes a selling price of Rs.100 per kg for tea. We have examples of other organic tea manufacturers selling their products directly to customers at premium rates of more than Rs.250 per kg. The quantity of tea produced by the project is small, and can easily be absorbed by direct customer sales.

Under these assumptions, the project is viable and will recoup the total investment in eight years. The only requirement is for the initial investment. It is assumed that the government can provide this investment, in the form of grant and interest free loans. Considering that at full implementation, with all four tea estates and the tea factory participating in the project, around 3000 workers will get permanent and decent livelihood, the investment amount is not very high. To illustrate, under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the government is required by law to provide employment worth Rs.12500 per family (Rs.125 per day Minimum Wage in Kerala for 100 days) every year. This works out to more than the required initial investment of Rs. 3.5 crores each year for 3000 families.

This is a replicable model in regions where a cluster of abandoned plantations can be grouped together with processing factories. There are possibilities for other similar viable projects in central and south Kerala. With more projects coming up, there will be further synergies, including developing a distinct brand for cooperative organic tea. With the present political ferment in Kerala, with opposition to globalisation and multinationals in the form of anti-ADB and anti-Coca Cola struggles and with large sections of the population searching for alternatives, such a paradigm offers definite possibilities. And it is possible that the tea plantation worker can once again savour her “cup that cheers”!

## Case Study of Garden Society of Peshok Tea Estate

Neelkamal Chhetri

The plantation sector developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the much maligned economic development theory based on exploitation of land, environment and lesser or subject races.

In tea plantation systems, the structure and composition of the labour force has been determined largely by historical factors and by the characteristics of the crop produced in a monoculture environment.

One of the salient features of the early tea plantation system in Darjeeling was the importation of labour from outside the region that settled down on plantation land. The other was permanency of employment. Spaces in the plantation were meticulously charted, spoken for and inhabited by a hierarchy of master-subject personages. The socioeconomic needs of the resident garden society were the responsibility of the plantation system.

The system was based on a master-slave relationship and with the passage of time it embedded a dependent mindset into the psyche of the residents of the garden.

When plantations began closing down, the cushion that the system had provided all these years was suddenly no longer available. For the first time in their lives, the resident garden society was left to fend for themselves. And they were ill prepared to face this immense change. The abject failure of the legal framework and labour market institutions further compounded their misery.

The new environment they had been hurled into demanded an independent, decision-making mindset and new skills that would allow them to control their destinies. Unfortunately, their minds continued in the dependency mode creating massive socioeconomic problems in all walks of life and famine swept through the garden society.

In the recent past a number of tea estates have closed down and more are on the verge of closing down due to the unfair trading systems of Darjeeling Tea.

There is, however, one resident garden society in Darjeeling that has weathered these phenomenal and path breaking changes on its own. The residents of Peshok Tea Estate, which closed in 1993 have managed to re-engineer and reinvent their way of life and are prospering in a multicultural environment.

This successful evolution of the garden society of Peshok has highlighted the areas where changes need to be made to the existing Plantation Labour Act, the Estate Acquisition Act and to existing trading systems.

The origins of intervention in Sri Lanka lies in legislation to regulate the living conditions of Indian indentured workers on the estates, with the pressure for these regulations coming from the Colonial Government of India. Tinker (1974) has analyzed the role of the Government of Colonial India in regulating the process of indentured labour migration to Ceylon and other areas of the British Empire, including the West Indies, Mauritius and Malaya. Further demands, for example, on working conditions, were often seen as an intrusion into the internal affairs of the colonies concerned, and Tinker gives a fascinating account of how the India Office and the Colonial Office in London mediated these conflicts.

Orde Browne summarises the process well. Conditions of service had begun to receive the attention of the legislature as far back in the last century, with the ordinance on Contracts for Hire and Service dated 1866, but the main impetus to improve living conditions came from the gradually increasing requirements of the Government of British India.

This intervention led to the shift of responsibilities from the Estate administration to the Government of Ceylon, especially in education and healthcare.

The existing Indian Plantation Labour Act enacted in 1951 is a product of the colonial era, based on the master-subject relationship and supports only a monocultural environment. The ordinance relating to Estate Labour (Indian) passed in 1889 and amended in 1890, 1909, 1921, 1927, 1932 and 1941 was the basis of the 1951 Labour Act. It needs to be amended drastically to satisfy the aspirations of the resident garden society and ensure the entry of the garden economy into the mainstream economy. Unfortunately, the amended Act is still to be passed by the Indian parliament due to intense lobbying by those who stand to lose by it.

The International Labour Organization Plantation Code 110 was structured and written in 1958 when the process of decolonisation had just begun. Moreover, most plantations in Darjeeling were still owned by companies based in colonising nations.

Not surprisingly therefore, this code does not include the responsibilities of the companies that market Darjeeling tea, who make the most profits from Darjeeling Tea. Nor do these companies plough back even an iota for the development of the resident garden society.

Further, the International Labour Organization till date has primarily focused and published working papers on:

1. Factors affecting the productivity of the tea field and bushes.
2. Productivity improvement and labour relations in the Tea Industry in South Asia.

All these studies were on the premise that increased productivity would directly improve the socioeconomic conditions of the resident garden society and thereby improve the economy.

Unfortunately, this has not been the case and not even the ILO has documented or understood the devastating effect of the sudden closure of the plantation on the resident garden society and the immense socioeconomic problems that follow or the reasons behind those problems.

In tea plantation systems, the structure and the composition of the labour force has been determined largely by historical factors and by the characteristics of the crop produced in a monoculture environment.

The plantation system nurtured a master-slave relationship with the passage of time, this dependent mind-set was embedded into the psyche of the resident garden society.

When sudden change came by way of the plantation closing down, the cushion that the plantation system provided all these years was no longer available. For the first time in their life the resident garden society were left to fend for themselves.

They were ill prepared to face the new situation they were thrown into and the lack of government support further compounded their misery. All of a sudden, the new environment they were thrown into demanded an independent decision making mind-set, newer skills that would then allow them to take control of their destiny and help them manage the change.

Unfortunately, their mind-set were still in the dependency mode and this created havoc with their way of life creating massive socio-economic problems in all walks of life and famine swept through the garden society.

In the recent past, two tea-estates closed down in Darjeeling that has managed this phenomenal and path breaking evolution on their own without any governmental support and in the process re-engineered and re-invented their way of life. The residents of Peshok Tea Estate, which closed down in 1993, have managed this change successfully and are prospering in a multi-culture environment.

However, there is one resident garden society brought in a master-slave and monoculture environment in Darjeeling that has managed this change and in the process re-engineered their way of life and of their society.

Peshok Tea Estate in Darjeeling has been closed from 1993 and the resident garden society of this closed tea-estate has managed to improve their socio-economic situation dramatically. They have done this primarily by becoming self-reliant. They have re-invented their dependent mind-set and by acquired new skills. They were able to reinvent their wage labour mentality, the most important change, which allowed them to learn and acquire much needed agrarian skills.

**Agriculture:** The shift from a monoculture to a multicultural environment has been truly astounding. Earlier, the farming of crops like ginger, tomato, maize and oranges was given short shift as workers looked down agriculture and relied only on the tea estate for employment. Presently, they have got into agriculture in a major way. In 1998, around 12 lakh oranges were harvested and a number of families made a minimum of Rs. 20,000 selling tomatoes. The beauty of this is that these people had never grown crops like tomatoes when the tea-estate was operational, as they did not possess the mind-set that would allow them to learn new agrarian skills.

**Education:** Earlier, there was only one school in the entire estate and even this school was only up to class eight. In case students wanted to study further, they had to go to Kalimpong or Takdah or to Darjeeling which entailed higher costs. Today, this school has been upgraded to class ten and in 1997 the first batch of students graduated. In 1998, 13 students appeared for secondary exams. Earlier, the estate had no nursery schools, while Peshok today boasts 4 nursery schools. The resident garden society has realized the importance of education.

**Employment:** During the days when the tea estate was in operation, the belief in resident garden society was that the only employment they could get, was that of a worker in the state. This made them neglect their children's education and education per se was not a priority. Today, some have learnt and improved their agrarian skills while others look beyond the tea estate for employment. Some of them have joined the army while others have gone to far away places such as Delhi, Bangalore or Mumbai to work. All return with different experiences and exposure that benefits society on the whole.

**Housing:** Earlier, the Plantation used to supply corrugated tin sheets, so they used to rely on the plantation and live in thatched houses. Today, most houses are tinned and some have even tinned their cowsheds.

Oral Testimony Of Kesharilal Tamang who used to be a worker in Peshok Tea Factory is given below. He is now a full-time farmer. He is a local from Peshok village in Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India.

Workers in our tea gardens began to increasingly depend on the management for everything. They would get their salary every Friday irrespective of how they performed. There were no incentives to work hard or perform better. They continued working in the tea gardens as they were convinced that they would not be able to secure any other job. The workers constructed their houses with the corrugated tin sheets supplied to them and ate the rations given to them despite their exceedingly bad quality. They even compromised on their children's education.

Most tea estates did not have any schooling facilities. In Peshok, there was only one school that taught children till the eighth standard. The students had to go to nearby Takdah, Darjeeling or Kalimpong for higher studies. I was lucky to have studied in Kalimpong and find employment in this tea factory. My position was a privileged one and tea workers had a high regard for me as I could read and write. I was often called upon to draft applications.

When the garden closed down the first time in 1969-1970 for 42 days, workers suffered tremendous hardships. Some were reduced to beggary. When the garden reopened, the workers became a little more cautious and began supplementing their income with other activities. They took up agriculture and each family began cultivating oranges, cardamom, ginger and maize on two to three acres of land. In 1993, workers, in a fit of anger burnt down the factory and the medical centre and the garden has remained closed.

When I asked one worker why he burnt these two places, he said the workers had begun to see the tea factory and the medical centre as symbols of exploitation. When I probed further and asked him what prompted this action and how they survived in the absence of the plantation, he said their actions were propelled by exposure to the outside world during the closure. Many of the retrenched workers went to villages dependent on agriculture like *Mangmaya basti* and Kalimpong seeking employment. They were inspired by these communities and felt that if the Gorkhas could ensure a decent life by cultivating crops so could the tea workers of Peshok. Some workers began to grow vegetables like tomatoes and *dale khorsani*, which they had never done before. Others enlisted in the army and some others went to cities like Delhi and Bangalore. It changed their worldview.

The worker told me that for the first time workers began to realize the importance of education and began to insist on nursery schools in their area. The earlier councillor who represented the workers at the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was an uneducated person and not able to articulate the problems of the regions. The workers replaced him with an educated candidate who worked as a clerk in the local bank in nearby Sikkim. All these changes have immensely benefited the workers, confided Kesharilal Tamang.

People, he says, have become more enterprising. Their houses have roofs of tin and so do their cowsheds. Very few people live in thatched houses. When I began probing into the reasons why the closures of another resident garden society- Va-Tukvar did not lead to a happy turn of events his answer was that other tea estates surrounded the Va-Tukvar estate. The workers were not able to move out of the tea estate culture and did not have the advantage of exposure to the outside world. They merely sought jobs in other estates.

**This successful evolution of the garden society of Peshok has highlighted the areas where changes need to be made on the existing Plantation Act, Estate Acquisition Act and the Labour Act.**

The existing Plantation Act, a product of colonial era, steeped in a master-slave relationship and supporting only a monoculture environment, has to be amended so that it supports an



employer-employee relationship and fosters an environment that leads to a creation of an independent mindset.

The Estate Acquisition Act has to be amended so that the resident plantation society finally gets the much-needed space that has been denied to them all these years and instils a sense of belonging. Ownership of the houses that they have been living has to be transferred from the company, to the respective families who have been working in the plantation for generations. A clause has to be added that ensures that the plantation land should be distributed among the resident garden society as and when the plantation closes down.

The existing Labour Act has to incorporate a social security net that will include multi-skill training, job counselling, retraining and social security payments. These additions to the Labour Act will stimulate a multi-skill environment in the resident garden society and prevent the occurrence of famine when the plantations close down.

The plantation society of the future has to be one that has moved away from a master-slave environment to the environment that is presently prevalent in Peshok. It has to move from a monoculture environment to a multi-culture environment where the resident garden society combines their agrarian skills and supplement their income from the plantations. When this happens, the existing dependent mindset is reinvented into an independent mindset.

A new development strategy must, therefore, improve the economic access of the resident garden society; ensure that its proposed solutions are conducive to local milieus and are efficient in welfare-terms rather than merely in productivity terms, and that these bring economic productions into closer consonance with the natural ecosystems. In practice, such solutions demand social innovation by re-orienting economic activity towards human development rather than technological developments. Such innovation comprises the integration of formal with informal activity, the proper utilisation of resources and, most importantly, institutional responsiveness and adoption of technology appropriate to mountain areas where these tea gardens are located.

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# Mineral Spring, Darjeeling, India, an Alternative to Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens – A Case Study.

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## Mineral Spring Geographical Location

Harsing, Dabaipani and Yangkhoo *bastis* lie on the Lebong Spur of the Darjeeling-Jalapahar Range, one of the great hill ranges radiating northwards towards Darjeeling from the central point, a saddle at Ghoom. Harsing *basti* is located 10 km away from Darjeeling Town. Yangkhoo and Dabaipani are further away across the valley. The extremity of Dabaipani would be 15 km from Darjeeling town. The *bastis* come under Darjeeling Sub-division; Lebong Valley II and Dabaipani Gram Panchayats, Block Development Office, Bijanbari, *West Bengal India*.

## Mineral Spring History

These *bastis* form the major portion of what constituted the Harrison's Tea Estate. Harrison's Tea Company was established in the year 1824. The tea estate was large by Darjeeling standards, with 1200 workers. The estate, in its last registration as Lebong and Mineral Spring Co. Ltd, with Registration Number 1973, had a gross acreage of 575 acres under tea. The tea estate is also part of the watershed of the Sanchel Wildlife Sanctuary. Documents show that the estate had income from cardamom and forest resources as well. Thus the tea garden was well endowed with natural resources and also a fair income.

The name Lebong and Mineral Spring has a special significance. The Mineral Spring part of the garden in Nepali is known as Dabaipani or 'Medicine Water'. Legend has it that an Englishman with festering sores washed himself in one of the natural springs and got cured, therefore earning the name Mineral Spring or Dabaipani.

During the World War II and early Post-Independence period, Darjeeling Tea faced tremendous problems due to numerous factors. The war effort made it difficult for British companies to run the tea gardens. Indian companies had no long term developmental goal, and were without any re-investment plans. Speculative owners and centralized management systems put

tremendous pressure on the gardens. With the financial monopoly of the British moving out and commercial financial institutions replacing, financial investments were very difficult for the tea gardens. *The British financial institutions provided highly subsidised credit facilities to the plantation owners. Post independence financial institutions started issuing credit at market rates without subsidy.* The changing political environment, changing legislatures and their gaps also played a crucial role in the difficulties. *The new owners did not have the tea experience; subsidised Indian tea did not adapt to the change in market and the management systems of the tea gardens became plains centric with no long term development plan of reinvestment in people and the tea.* This was true for Lebong and Mineral Springs too.

India's independence hardly made any difference to people working in the tea gardens. They were still exploited. The tea that they cared for, plucked, processed and later exported brought no positive change in their lives. With the passage of time they became more and more bound to the garden *coolie* life as their traditional, self-sustaining agricultural skills were lost to those of a daily wage earner in a tea garden, with no control over assets or participation in the decision making process of the garden. They became part and parcel of the garden, bought and sold along with the garden whenever the owner felt like it.

### **Mineral Spring Closure**

Between 1952 and 1960 the Lebong and Mineral Springs tea garden had 3 closures. 1952-53; 1955-56; 1957-60. An interesting point is that all closures happened after the plucking season and can be attributed to the mismanagement of the garden.

The Communist Party of India made its presence felt in Lebong and Mineral Spring in 1942 under the leadership of Mr. Ratanlal Brahmin and Mr. Bhadra Bahadur Hamal. The issue that they rallied upon was daily wage for workers at 50 paisa. The Gorkha League and the Congress Party entered the garden in 1948 and 1949 respectively. With the garden closing, the Congress Party demanded that the garden reopen at all costs. This was opposed by the Gorkha League which demanded the garden's permanent closure. This became a bone of contention and in 1961 there was a major clash between the two parties on this issue and a number of people were jailed.

### **Mineral Spring after Closure**

Workers survived by selling tea leaves to neighbouring estates during the plucking season and by working in the neighbouring estates. At other times, they felled trees in the tea garden reserve forest and sold firewood and charcoal. People lived in extremely difficult circumstances and lived in hope of the garden reopening.

By 1962 the reserve forest had been exhausted and the hope of the tea garden reopening had receded. People began to uproot some tea bushes and started cultivating other crops.

After 1965 people started "land grabbing", overcoming the fear of reprisal from the management. They distributed the land among themselves, giving birth to new settlements. The distribution of the land was done arbitrarily, with brain and brawn being the only criteria for

the size of the land grabbed. Elders remember only the verbal disputes at the time of distribution of land. This could be because there was land for everyone.

They began to grow maize and millet. The production was very low. The lack of knowledge of cultivation and the infertility of the soil were the causes for low productivity.

The people of these *bastis* were mainly 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation daily wage labourers in Lebong and Mineral Springs Tea Estate. They were engaged throughout the year in the tea estate at various stages of tea production. They depended solely on the tea estate for their livelihood and were not engaged in any other productive economic activity. Thus, agriculture was an alien lifestyle for them in which they failed miserably.

Cultivation of monoculture tea over a long period renders the soil unsuitable for agriculture. This is because tea is an exotic plant to Darjeeling and is grown as monoculture. Even after uprooting tea bushes it takes years before the soil becomes suitable for agriculture. Tea is cultivated in slopes whereas viable hill agriculture means terraced agriculture. It takes expertise to cut terraces in the hills while avoiding heavy soil erosion. Terracing was new for the garden labourers.

The people supplemented their subsistence income by selling milk. Most bought cows using high-interest loans obtained from village middlemen Interest rates ranged from 72% to 120% per annum. Milk was bought by the same middlemen at a mere 44 paise per litre. The annual income per family of Harsing *basti* was approximately Rs. 600/-. (National Social Service, St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling, Survey Report 1971).

No government help was forthcoming because of the tea garden status. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951, a Central Act, governs plantation life. The preamble to this Act aims at providing for the welfare of labour and regulating the conditions of work in the plantations. To implement the provisions of this Act, West Bengal Rules were framed in 1956. A suitable organisational set-up was also established to enforce various provisions of this Act and Rules. But the Act does not have provisions for action after closure or lockout of the plantation. As every aspect of tea garden life falls under the purview of this Act, government development and social welfare schemes were not undertaken in the gardens till the year 2000. Mineral Spring, in spite of the closure of the tea estate in the 1950's and 1960's had been designated legally as tea estate area and hence was deprived of the government development and welfare schemes.

Through the Kisan Sabha in 1977, official measurement and distribution of land among the people were initiated. On 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1983 the first Panchayat election took place. Lebong and Mineral Spring were divided into Gram Panchayats Harsing Hatta I and II in the early days.

A section of the reserve forest area of the erstwhile Lebong and Mineral Spring today forms a part of the Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary. Eco-Development Committees(EDC) have been established in Bhotay *basti* and Naya *basti*. However, during the formation of the EDC the lower reaches of Dabaipani were not consulted. The Wildlife Act affects them but the

provisions of EDC have not been applied to them. They are harassed by wild animals and have immense difficulty getting fuel wood and fodder but no benefit accrues to them from the EDC.

The people, therefore, have been rendered virtually destitute in their own land, bonded to the middlemen and resigned to their fate.

### **Mineral Spring Plantation to Agricultural Communities and civil society interventions**

The transformation into agricultural communities of an unorganised sector through individual initiatives has been a difficult proposition. Changing the mindset that thinks of oneself as a cog in the wheel of the lowest order in a plantation, to that of thinking of themselves as owners of land and agricultural entrepreneurs has required behavioural changes and the acquisition of skills that are tough to get and has brought new responsibilities.

The transition period has been tumultuous and has never been fully documented. However, one can gauge the difficulty by reading the call for help that led to the first civil society intervention by National Service Scheme students and teachers of St. Joseph's College, North Point and Hayden Hall Institute, Darjeeling. The initial intervention demanded relief camps for malnutrition and illnesses. Teachers recall poverty, ill-health and exploitation. A stark reminder of the dehumanising process is the inability of the people to communicate with outsiders when the relief programme was being undertaken.

While civil society intervention ameliorated the conditions of the community, government machinery was unable to address the situation. One also needs to note the lack of responsibility on the part of the owners to the workers. It must be noted that the 3 closures were always in the non-plucking season or the non-monetary income season, which also is the time for reinvestment in the tea garden.

In 1973, with the intervention of Hayden Hall Institute, Darjeeling, a dairy union was established and supported with medical and adult education programmes. The dairy union ceased to function once Hayden Hall withdrew in the mid-80s with the onset of the Gorkhaland Agitation. In 1996, with the intervention of DLR Prerna, a Darjeeling based NGO, the people of Mineral Spring initiated the proposed Sanjukta Vikas Co-operative with milk as its first product. DLR Prerna has been actively partnering with collectives since 1996, providing capacity enhancement support in terms of participatory planning, governance issues, organic farming and certification, linkage building and resource mobilisation.

### **Mineral Spring 2007**

Today, the people of Mineral Spring have organized themselves into a collective which is in the process of being registered as Sanjukta Vikas Sanstha. It has a membership of 450 families. The governance structure is based upon member families with 1 vote, 12 hamlet committees and a board of 26 members. There is a women's wing called the Sanjukta Nari Sangathan. The President and Secretary of the Sanjukta Nari Sangathan are nominated to the board. Elections take place once every two years. DLR Prerna has a non-voting advisory status within the collective. The board also has functional working committees and employees from within the members to implement its activities.

The collective is certified producer of organic under national and international standards since 2001. *The collective is certified producer organic under national and international standards since 2001.* The collective has an Internal Control and Internal Regulation Systems for organic farming (ICS and IRS). The ICS and IRS systematises the members' and collective's responsibility for organic farming and has become a pre-requisite for small farmers' organic certification.

The collective has a MOU with Tea Promoters India Pvt. Ltd., which processes and sells the tea exclusively as Mineral Spring Small Farmers Tea. Systems have been developed where strict accounting of quantity produced, processed and sold is maintained. Mineral Spring Small Farmers tea is thus sold internationally as a partnership between the collective, TPI and facilitated by DLR Prerna.

The collective has a savings and credit union, a drinking water collection and distribution system, is involved in milk, vegetables, horticulture and spices cooperatives, publishes a newsletter and conducts welfare activities.

Since 2003, the collective is 'Fairtrade Labelled' for small farmer's tea by the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International. The labelling guarantees defined internationally recognized standards and conventions through inspection and certification. This ensures that the product fetches a Fairtrade minimum price. The minimum price, being appropriate, covers the cost of production and planning for the future. The product can be priced over the minimum price, depending on the bargaining power. A premium price of 7 to 15% over the minimum price is quoted, which directly improves the lives of the communities and families of the primary producers.

### **Mineral Springs Features**

An important feature of the collective is that the land is owned by the own members. The members also practice polyculture in their farming systems. Most also have systems of agro-forestry. Thus, one sees a diversity of crops grown.

The communities of Harsing, Dabaipani and Yangkhoo have undergone tremendous changes in their development journey. From ancestors who migrated from Nepal to establish the tea garden to tea garden labourers to refugees in a closed tea garden to agriculture entrepreneurs to small farmers to a certified organic and Fairtrade labelled collective, their journey has been arduous.

### **Mineral Spring Challenges**

The collective has made economic gains and has become a model of development. However, challenges still face them, many of them internal challenges of equity and sustainability. The collective needs to decentralize further and enable its members to become proactive. Even today one can find the remnants of the tea garden labour mentality when it comes to decision making and responsibility sharing. Some members still look at the board as their bosses and not as their elected representatives.

A need for building second level leadership is essential to address the challenges. Land was distributed on the rule of the brain and brawn and this inequity of land distribution is still evident. The inequity is not just in land ownership and income levels but pervades power relationships in the collective.

The collective needs to improve gender equity in the power structure. In 2007, 3 women representatives were directly elected to the board by the members of the collective for the first time. The back breaking work on the tea garden is done by women but the decision-making body is overwhelmingly male.

There is need for the diversification and strengthening of the activities of the collective to include other crop resources. The major income base is the sale of green leaf tea. The collective needs to increase its control of tea processes and products as Tea Promoter India, still has the upper hand.

### **Mineral Spring Implications**

There are numerous implications of the Mineral Spring experience in the tea plantation scenario.

It is evident that tea workers have very little bargaining power in the decision making process of the tea garden but are the ones that suffer the most when a tea garden is locked out or closed. One can clearly see that for the management and the owner the workers are of no consequence as seen by closures pattern in the non-plucking season. One can say that the conspiracy theories ring true when they come to lockouts and closures. Closures and lockouts are abuse of power by the owners and management who shirk their responsibility towards the workers and reinvestment in the tea garden.

Plantations have a colonial heritage, with a dark history and rationale based on “a Master-Slaves Relationship”. This history, being the basis of the promulgation of the Plantation Labour Act 1956, ‘to ameliorate the living conditions of the workers’, is still a colonial hangover. It does not address the critical issues of ownership of assets and decision making and merely exchanges a *gora sahib* with a brown *sahib*. One must also note that the Act only covers permanent workers, who are only 20 per cent of the worker population. It is also true that without temporary workers no tea garden will be able to function. It is ironic to note in West Bengal, the land of land reforms, plantations still exist where the tillers of the land are landless even after 6 generations.

When tea gardens are closed or locked out one clearly sees the inadequacies in the Plantation Labour Act. With closure, the workers are devoid of any assets, skills or policy support for life and livelihoods. The starvation deaths that one hears about in closed tea gardens of North Bengal are the result of this inadequacy.



Even with the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) being enforced in tea gardens, one has to note that development and welfare programmes under the PRI are strongly based on the ownership of productive assets such as land, which workers do not own.

The need for a policy change is evident, and this policy change must not be based on the monoculture of the crops and mindsets.

The Mineral Spring experience challenges the dominant model of tea plantations. The experience is a more sustainable and equitable model.

It brings forth an example of polyculture tea, tea that is part of a more diverse cropping system bringing about more sustainability. It provides more food security to the people, directly reducing starvation deaths in closed tea gardens. Food security issues are universal for most small farmers in India.

Importantly, people here own their primary production asset, land, which is never possible in tea gardens. This model illustrates ways for people to own and manage land while producing tea. With the challenges facing Mineral Spring, the role of people in developing their assets is highly evolved, when compared to tea plantation workers who do not own the land they work on. Policing required in tea plantations is not required in Mineral Spring. Decision making and the structures of decision making are democratic, furthering equity and responsibility. The ownership of assets and the democratic nature of the institution promote human dignity and human rights while plantations dehumanise.

In the burgeoning world of organic farming, Mineral Spring, a collective of small farmers, has navigated stringent international and national certification processes. While certification is a cumbersome and expensive process, with proper systems and support, even small farmers can be certified.

Fairtrade tea from Darjeeling is primarily dominated by Plantation Tea. This is contradictory as Fairtrade has standards of participatory planning, accountability and transparency which are absent in the plantations. This raises the question of how fair is Fairtrade. For Fairtrade to function it has to sell its products too and there comes the challenge of existence as well as lack of alternatives especially when it comes to tea. *Fairtrade standards in letter and spirit are not strictly implemented as this would mean that the organisation would have very little tea to sell. Thus plantation tea is still the major quantum of Fairtrade Labelled Tea even though the very basis of plantations is the antithesis of fairtrade. How can a system of slave and master relationship of a plantation be qualified as fairtrade?* Mineral Spring is a welcome change as participatory planning, accountability and transparency, inherent in its system, are standards of Fairtrade. Thus, Mineral Springs is an alternative, even within the Fairtrade paradigm.

Civil society intervention has been an important aspect of the Mineral Spring experience. When one looks at the evolution of Mineral Spring, one clearly sees the role civil society plays. A long term partnership based on cross learning and continual evolution of theory and praxis is essential. This partnership of sharing life experiences between community and civil society has

been instrumental in the developmental journey of Mineral Spring. This experience is of utmost importance when one looks at alternatives to closed and abandoned tea gardens. Sustained civil society partnership is essential as it means addressing issues relating to the livelihood of isolated communities who, for generations, have worked as tea garden labourers only, with no other assets or skills.

In the world tea trade based on monopsony, the role of corporate bodies is critical. Corporate social responsibility, much touted, needs to be put in place, based on trusteeship and not exploitation.

Mineral Spring, thus, proves that tea can be grown in models more equitable and sustainable other than is prevalent in monoculture plantations and mindsets.

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