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Research Paper Economics



Socio-economic Conditions of Tea Plantation Workers in Bangladesh: A Case Study on Sreemongal

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ABSTRACT

Tea is the second most popular drink in the world, after water. For a number of developing countries it is an important commodity in terms of jobs and export earnings. The tea industry in Bangladesh annually produces about 55 -60 millions kg of tea. It ranks 10th in the list of 30 tea producing countries of the world. Bangladesh earns 2,000 million taka (Bangladesh Currency) every year from tea export, contributing about 0.8% to the total GDP of Bangladesh. The study finds that working conditions for pickers are often poor, with low wages, low job and income security, discrimination along ethnic and gender lines, lack of protective gear and inadequate basic facilities such as housing and sometimes even drinking water and food. The study is done to identify the present socio-economic conditions faced by the tea industry workers of Bangladesh and thus provides recommendations to solve the problems.

Keywords : Socio-economic condition, Tea Garden, Tea workers.

1. Scenario of Tea Plantations Workers in Bangladesh's

The workers at the tea plantations are one of the most exploited workers with working hours ranging from morning till late night, the wagers received being only $0.47 a day. Such miserable pay severely affects the daily lives of the tea workers. If compared with wages of the Indian tea workers, the wages of Bangladeshi tea plantation workers is much lower. Bangladesh's tea industry constitutes about 3.3 % of the country's total employment by nearly 3,59,080 workers are directly employed on the tea estates of which over 75% are women and many more people are employed indirectly in other sectors related to tea. . Employers prefer to engage women for plucking tea leaves since they do a better job and are paid less than the men. The tea worker communities are one of the most vulnerable people of Bangladesh. They deserve special attention of the State. But unfortunately they continue to remain socially excluded, low-paid, illiterate, deprived and disconnected. These conditions allow the profiteers from the tea industry to continue exploiting them. Deprived and exploited, the majority of the workers of tea plantation in Bangladesh live an inhuman life. According to the BRAC census, only 5 ethnic minority groups live in the tea gardens, among 69 minority groups in Bangladesh, they are Bangli, Bhujpuri / Deshwali, Oriya, Saddri, and Telegu. The British companies brought them from Bihar, Madras, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and other places in India to work in the tea gardens in the Sylhet region.

"The tea gardens are managed like an extreme hierarchy: the managers live like gods, distant, unapproachable, and incomprehensible. Some even begin to believe that they are gods that they can do exactly what they like." -- Francis Rolt, British journalist, 1991.

"Managers have anything up to a dozen labourers as their personal, domestic servants. They are made to tie the managers shoe laces to remind them that they are under managerial control and that they are bound to do whatever they are asked." --British writer Dan Jones, 1986.

2. Objectives

This study has the following objectives:

Investigate the working environment and living standard of the tea plantation workers in Bangladesh

To find out the major problems faced by the tea plantation workers

To identify the gender discrimination faced by the tea plantation workers

To assess the activity of the Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union and its performance in solving the problems of the tea plantation workers

3. Methods of the Study

Analysis in this study primarily depends on qualitative and quantitative data drawn from interviews and discussions with the members of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union, employers/ owners, members of the Panchyaet (garden unit of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union) and tea plantation workers at the grass root level. Qualitative data have also been collected from focus group discussions with the tea plantation workers. According to the Bangladesh Tea Board (2008) there are 163 tea gardens in the country. To collect information from the workers, Ten tea gardens (Dinarpur, Mirzapore, Nurjahan, Zareen, Shafinagar, Junglebari, Clonal, Hossainabad, BTRI, Balisera) at Sreemongal were randomly selected from a 90 tea estate in Moulvibazar.

4. Respondents

The total number of randomly selected respondents was 150. Out of 150 respondents, the number of male workers was 34 and female workers 90. There were 15 panchayet members, 06 staffs of management committee and 05 union council members.

5. Economic Conditions of Tea Plantation Workers

5.1 Workers Income

Size of income is the best indicator of the economic conditions of a person. But this indicator can not reveal the economic conditions of the tea workers properly since a permanent tea worker gets many facilities in kind. Some of the respondents (workers) do not have regular income. Many of the workers earn on daily basis and a few earns a fixed amount of money

monthly. The wages are often still very low; often around minimum wage levels, although this does not normally constitute a living wage in tea-producing countries. Pickers' wages are therefore under pressure when market prices for tea go down. Many workers, and temporary workers in particular, are paid at a piece rate, with a fixed price per kilogram of green leaf picked. The result is that worker income varies according to factors such as skill, working hours, health, strength and high and low season. Secondary labour provisions such as education, medical care, accommodation and food are sometimes provided or are included in the total wage of estate workers. All these factors make it difficult to gauge average wage levels and whether they are "living wages". In most of the countries studied, permanent workers have a better income than the seasonal plantation workers who represent the majority of workers. A permanent tea plantation worker gets a house including water and latrine facilities, schooling facilities for the children, health care facilities and ration or cultivable land facilities from the garden authorities. Also it seems that seasonal labourers on large plantations are in turn better paid than those on smallholder farms, where piece rates are often lower. The result is that workers need to supplement their income with other jobs and that they often cannot afford to send their children to secondary school. The maximum daily cash pay for the daily rated worker in 2008 was Taka 32.50 (less than half a US$).According to the World Bank, those income are below $2 per day, is considered below the poverty line.It is support that, of all of the daily basis workers are below the poverty line. This miserable payment having a severe effect on the daily lives of the tea workers. Although the workers get rations at a concession, a family can hardly have decent food items on their plate. They indeed have very poor quality and protein-deficient meals.

5.2 Household Income

Number of earning family members is another determinant of household income of the tea plantation workers. Our study shows that two-third of the households of the tea plantation workers have more than one earning member. And one-third households have more than two earning members. Earning members are more in the female workers' households than in male workers' household. It was found that most of the earning members are employed in plantation work. It is mainly due to the fact that the tea industry management by agreement provides work to at least one child. Moreover, as the plantation population is geographically isolated, they find difficulty in getting jobs elsewhere.

6. Social Conditions of the Tea plantation Workers

6.1 Working Environment and Living Conditions

Working conditions affect the productivity of workers. Wage rate and incentives, fringe benefits, working hours, leave facilities, social and physical working conditions – all these components of working conditions affect the productivity of tea plantation workers.

The authority of tea industry provides each permanent worker with a house. Their children inherit this house after their death. Living conditions in these houses were found to very subhuman. More than five people live in a room of only 222 square feet. Cooking and living are done in the same room. It was observed during our field visit that in many cases, cows and goats are reared in a corner of the same room by building a partition. Not only is the room small, but its windows and doors are also very small. Most of the rooms have mud walls and straw roof. During the rainy season, living conditions in such houses becomes deplorable since rainwater enters the room through the broken roofs. Minor portions of the respondents of the tea workers said that they built a second room at their own expense. It is disappointing that major portions of the tea workers use an unhygienic sanitation. It is also alarming that about 30 per cent of workers drink water from wells. It was found that most wells are uncovered. The number of tubewells was also found to be very rare. Female workers complained that due to the shortage of tubewell they have to walk a long distance to collect drinking water. It is a violation of the Tea Plantations Labour Ordinance, 1962, according to which the employer should ensure the supply of adequate quantity of pure drinking water. Only 13.4% of the tea garden households use electricity where 31.5% of the households use nationally (BBS-2003). But the tea workers were very honest in reporting that in most cases they use electricity illegally. All workers reported that they use firewood for cooking. Moreover, their allocation is riddled with allegations of corruption, tribalism and sexual harassment.

6.2 Literacy Conditions

Educational status of the respondents has been found frustrating in the tea gardens in Sreemongal. Education, an important ladder for transformation of a community or society for betterment is at the root of the social exclusion of the tea workers. There are schools in the tea gardens. According to the Bangladesh Tea Board (2004), in 90 tea gardens in Moulvibazar. Given that the employers provide education, the government schools in the tea gardens are just a few. In the recent times, the NGOs run significant number of primary schools. The quality of education provided in these schools remains to be a concern. An overwhelming majority of the children of the tea plantation workers drop out from school before they can use education to step into other professions and thus they have to enter the tea gardens as laborers.

Table 1: Educational Status of the Respondents

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
No Schooling	74	59.68
Primary Education(Class I -V)	46	37.09
Secondary Education(Class VI-X)	3	2.42
Above Secondary(Class XI and Above)	1	0.81
Total	124	100

Source: Survey of the tea garden workers conducted by the authors during 23-31 Dec.2011.

Around 60% respondents are illiterate; on the other hand, below 1% have completed above secondary level of education. It is a matter of concern that the literacy rate of females is poorer than the male adolescent girls are often asked to look after their younger brothers and sisters, not allowed to go to school. The poor socio-economic condition of the guardians is mainly responsible because of which the younger children usually remain away from education. The study also shows that the literacy rate of the Bangalis is significantly higher than the ethnic minorities in the tea garden.

6.3 Health and safety

Tea plucking is difficult, hazardous work. Workers are on their feet for hours on end, carrying tea-collecting baskets on their backs; back problems are therefore common. The uneven terrain and sometimes steep slopes on which tea is picked raises the risks of accidents and as a result fractures due to falling (from height) are quite common. In addition they are exposed to harsh weather conditions (hot, cold, wet), pesticides, mosquitoes and other insects, and poisonous snakes. ILO studies have revealed that two categories of illnesses - respiratory and water-borne diseases - account for 60 to 70 percent of the diseases affecting tea plantation workers. They also suffer from certain chronic diseases like gastric and urinary tract infection, chest pain, etc. Tuberculosis was also found to be prevalent among them. The distance from modern health facilities remains a problem for plantation workers. However, these services range from estate hospitals that are better equipped than state hospitals down to "only" having an ambulance on hand. They are the most economically deprived and therefore the most vulnerable to disease and ill health. Malnutrition resulting from insufficient and low-quality food is widespread. As a result, low birth weight is increasingly a problem in the study areas. The levels for maternal and infant deaths are declining but continue to be high. Child and

infant mortality rates are often more than twice the national average. Many workers interviewed complained about the poor standard of the free lunch in the field. Most of the management provides the workers with the dry food, in order to save the plate cost. The workers, however, claim those foods to be unhygienic, resulting in many diseases among them. Workers in tea gardens are often isolated from mainstream society and interaction with mainstream society is very low. The low rate of literacy and poor health status of the workers always stood as major constraints in giving them access to educational and development initiatives and programmes of government and other organizations and in contributing to the productivity.

6.4 Discrimination and Gender Inequality

Historically, the opening up of tea and other plantations worldwide has been built on unskilled migrant labour. Generations on, tea plantation workers are still discriminated against because of this historical context. Most of the workers of tea plantations for example are from migrant, marginal and tribal communities. This is why they are most vulnerable people of Bangladesh. They deserve special attention of the State, not just equal treatment. But unfortunately they continue to remain socially excluded, low-paid, overwhelmingly illiterate, deprived and disconnected. They have also lost their original languages in most part, culture, history, education, knowledge and unity. In the labour lines of a tea estate, they seem to be living in islands -- isolated from the majority Bangali community who sometimes treat them as untouchables. Without fertilization of minds, they have lost dignity in their lives. These are perfect conditions for the profiteers from the tea industry to continue exploitation of the tea workers. Deprived, exploited and alienated, the majority of the tea workers live an inhuman life.. Another form of discrimination which can be seen on tea plantations is gender discrimination. Yet in most gardens women do most of the fieldwork on tea plantations. Women are the favored workers on tea estates, because they are considered better pickers and are more docile and tied to the plantation (child and/or family care). Women workers are asked for sexual favors in exchange for favors by superiors, and refusal can lead to repercussions, such as being allocated too much work or being sent to work in lonely or dangerous plucking zones. The minimum wages of industrial workers at Tk. 3,500. The tea plantation workers, who got lower wages in cash than this minimum wages. If compared with wages of the Indian tea workers, the wages of Bangladeshi tea plantation workers is much lower. In Darjeeling, Terai and Doars of West Bengal in India the daily wages of a tea plantation worker was Rs.53.90 in 2008. The wages, increased in three steps, will reportedly become Rs.67 in 2011. Strong labor movements have been instrumental in such wage increase. In West Bengal about 400,000 workers will get this increased wages. Compared to the Bangladeshi tea plantation workers, the Indian workers also get a better deal in accessing fringe benefits such as rations, medical care, housing, education, provident fund benefits, bonus, and gratuity. What puzzles one is that the auction of prices of tea in Bangladesh is high compared to the international auction prices while its production cost is comparatively lower than other tea producing countries (India, Sri Lanka and Kenya for example). Of course the productivity of tea per unit in Bangladesh is lower compared to those countries. Many believe that there is no justification for low wages of the tea plantation workers in Bangladesh. They deserve much higher wages.

6.5 Child labor and child work

Most of the respondents expressed their helplessness for getting their children engaged with works since they are socio-economically poor. Due to financial need and a lack of nursery or educational facilities, women plantation workers are often obliged to take their children to the plantation.

6.6 Recreational Activities and Cultural Heritage

Recreational facilities are very limited in tea garden areas. Most of the people do not have the time also for recreation. Most of the respondents said that they had to be busy always to earn a little so that they can run their family smoothly. Ultimately the children become the most sufferers. They do not have any field to play. Habit of taking alcohol among the tea plantation workers is pervasive although trade union leaders claimed that this habit decreased significantly due to their motivational activities. Traditionally, garden authorities themselves supplied alcohol among the tea workers mainly to keep them confined within the boundary of the garden. Now they have the practice of preparing their own drink known as 'Halida'. Both men and women drink this local brew almost every evening. In general, women drink less, through during their festivals both drink profusely. This affects their productivity adversely. Moreover, it also shrinks their income substantially.

7. Recommendations

(a) Mothers' Club of the "Cha Sramik Union" should further its motivational and welfare activities.
(b) The bargaining agent for the tea workers should be more than one in number.
(c) The minimum wage of the tea workers should be raised up to that of the industrial workers. In this circumstances, the role of the "Cha Sramik Union" can be of a catalyst.
(d) As the majority of the plantation workers are women, the social dialogues between the "Cha Sangsad " and the "Cha Sramik Union" should be much more gender sensitive.
(e) The employers must create socially congenial working environment for the garden workers.
(f) The employers must follow the "Memorandum of Agreement".
(g) The Government of Bangladesh must also be diligent in implementing the labour laws and must take initiatives to solve various problems faced by the tea plantation sectors in Bangladesh.
(h) All the organizations of both the workers and of the employers should be freed from the local-political influences.
(i) The NGOs should be encouraged to work among the tea plantation workers.
(j) All the parties of the social dialogues - the Government, the employers, the trade unions and, above all, the general workers – must work together to make the social dialogue a success.
(k) Both formal and informal educations may be introduced for the children of the tea gardeners, and of course awareness campaigns regarding education among the tea gardeners must be undertaken.
(l) The people should be made aware of the importance of education for the girl children too.
(m) Extensive socio-economic development programs, especially income generating activities need to be introduced by GOs and NGOs in the tea garden areas, so that, unemployment problem could be resolved.
(n) Electricity, pure drinking water, and proper sanitation systems must be ensured. Health services, especially for the women and the children, should also be encouraged.

Conclusion

As the majority of the tea gardens in Bangladesh is situated in Moulovibazar (Sreemangal-known as 'tea capital'), we have taken it as our case study. The problems found in the gardens we surveyed are typical for all gardens in the country. The tea plantation workers are not just poor, they are a particularly deprived marginalized community in captive situation. They have limited scopes to integrate with the people of the majority communities and face great difficulties in exploring livelihood options outside the tea gardens. In order to develop the living status of the workers, the joint venture of private and the public is required. However, it is good that at present, the Bangladesh government has vowed for a digital country which is supposed to remove social discriminations. If the government takes initiatives as per our recommendations to solve the problems we have located, the conditions of the tea workers must be improved which will ahead the vow as well.

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