

A Critical Review of Recruitment of Women Labourers And Their Welfare In Tea Garden of Assam

Shikha Moni Borah

Designation: Research Scholar

Institution: Centre for Political Studies/ School of Social Science

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Abstract: Tea industry of India is one of the oldest industries in plantation economy having its root in British colonial period. Since then the industry has been growing subjected to changed socio- economic circumstances of early independence and then trade liberalization era. These changed circumstances in turn left its marks on the pattern of labour recruitment as well as their welfare. In this context, the paper seeks to review the pattern of labour recruitment and their welfare in various stages. The focus will be on women workforce of Assam that comprises more than fifty percent of the total workforce. Moreover, the state of Assam also bears immense prominence because it produces more than half of the country's total tea production.

Keywords: Plantation economy, tea industry, labour recruitment, women labour.

Introduction

Being recruited through 'indenture' and 'family based' system from places like Chattisgarh and Jharkhand, the labourers were subjected to harsh working conditions in the absence of any social security act during the colonial period. Under Planter's raj the relationship between the planters and workers was marked by exploitative master- slave relation. With India's independence, the production relationship moved towards formalization with the passage of Minimum Wages Act of 1948, Plantation Labour Act of 1951, and Payment of Bonus act. However despite such acts, cases of malnutrition, inadequate wages, starvation related deaths, hiding one's pregnancy in the fear of losing jobs, increasing infant mortality rate etc. still prevalent among the women workers. With trade liberalization, the labour market has reoriented itself from permanent to casual. In this scenario, the small tea growers are benefited because these entities do not come under the

Plantation Labour Act 1951, and therefore need not incur non- wage welfare expenditure of the labourers.

In this background, the paper will address the following questions: what are the reasons behind large number of women workforce in tea garden? How did the planters recruit them in colonial period? What were the acts enacted to ensure socio- economic security of the labourers? Whether there have been changes in labour recruitment and their welfare in early independence and trade liberalization era? Why despite being enactment of legislation like plantation labour act, social security of the tea garden workers still remain a distant dream?

In addressing the above concerns, the paper will divided into three sections. The first section will trace the brief history development of tea industry in colonial India with particular emphasis in Assam and the method of women labour recruitment and their welfare. The second section will deal with the formalization of relation between planters and workers in early independent period with enactment of various acts for the laborer's wellbeing. Third section deals with a critical engagement of success of these various acts in the period of trade liberalization followed by conclusion.

Colonial Era

Discovery of tea by a Scottish adventurer, Robert Bruce in 1823 in Assam set the motion of colonization of the region by the European planters. The planters' urge to exploit the new areas of investment of capital as well as exploitation of natural resources was facilitated by the colonial government's new legislations in this regard. There has been passing of new acts like 'Waste Land Rules' of 1838 that enabled the planters to hold land almost free of rent. Then came Lord Canning's 'Free Simple Rules' of 1861 which allowed outright sale of land to the tea planters at extremely low rate. Such enactment bring into light the close alignment between the European planters and the colonial Government because after all the later was the representative of industrial interest of the British metropolis. (Das, 2016)

After laying the foundation of tea garden, the first problem Planters of a labour intensive industry face was the availability of labour at a low cost. One immediate option was to recruit labourers from the local area. However they faced lot of difficulties in availing local indigenous labourers because the later were already blessed with the fertile land of Brahmaputra where they could

practice self-sufficient agriculture as well the nominal rate of land revenue they were subjected to. The British planters found some relief in the industrious ‘Kachari’ (an indigenous tribe of Assam) people who were willing to work in the garden. However more than willing, it was a kind of compulsion because in the name of wasteland, it was the forest land of these Kachari people that were accumulated by planters for setting up the garden. Deprived of their source of livelihood, the Kacharis were compelled to work in tea gardens. However gradually, the cost of local labour became high. Also the local people were preferring to work as agricultural labourers rather than plantation workers. Under such constraints the colonial planters introduced new forms of labour recruitment.

The colonial planters invented the ‘indenture system’ in recruitment of labour. Under this system, the workers had to agree to serve in the garden for a fixed period after which they could return to their home. Although the system seemed to be an improvement over slavery but in reality it was another form of slavery. It was difficult although not impossible for the migrant workers to return home because of the far distance as well as the low wages that they got out of which they could hardly save money. Hence in most of the cases workers prefer to stay in the garden even after the end of their serving period as they had nowhere else to go. (Biswajeet, 2009)

In employing indentured system of labour recruitment, the Planters basically practiced family based labour recruitment to ensure availability of cheap labourers at a continuous basis. Under family based recruitment, the members of the whole family: father, mother and children used to work in the field. The planters promote family based recruitment because they wanted cheap labour who would permanently settle in the plantations and had no opportunity for alternative employment. Also, family based migration ensured availability of workers through reproduction which in turn eased to a great extent the problem of further recruitment in the future (Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1999; Mitra, 2010).

Thus the imperative to ensure a continuous base of cheap workers resulted in large scale recruitment of women workers to the tea plantation of Assam. Over the time women’s expertise in tea plucking activities facilitated by their nimble fingers became manifest. Also because of their disciplined and meek nature, they were found to be more suitable for this job. At present they comprise more than fifty percent of the total workforce.

The wellbeing of the coolies¹ did not matter who took very dreadful journey to Assam infected with cholera in the journey, some even died. While legislations were enacted like The Act III of 1863 introducing licensed system of recruitment that entailed provisions for protecting the interest of the labourers but in reality these were largely ignored with colonial state taking a blind eye to the planter's use of physical and extra- legal measures in recruiting, maintaining as well as controlling the labour force in the tea garden. These extra- legal measures included constant surveillance of living quarters of tea garden workers known as 'coolie lines', detention of labour without informing the district authorities, various forces of physical coercion, including beating etc.

Behal (2010) referred to Sir Percival Griffiths, the official historian of the Indian tea industry who termed planter's attitude to the labour force in the nineteenth century as 'benevolent paternalism'. The migrant labourers in the alien land of Assam were completely dependent upon the management. The focal point for the tea garden workers was the manager who controlled everything ranging from building houses, establishing market as well as regulated prices, supplying rice when necessary. Being the source of such wide range of activities, it created a sense of responsibility and brought out the best in any naturally humane manager. Their method were rough and ready and sometimes included personal chastisement, but there is little doubt that the lot of a tea garden coolie was much better than any other ordinary Indian labourers at that time in India. At the same time, Griffith acknowledged that such relationship of total dependency could sometimes lead to managerial excess.

However, Behal disagree with Griffith's benevolent paternalism. The former argue that the indentured system of Assam tea plantation was based on the modern industrial system of wage labour. Labour relations under the indentured system manifested features akin to Atlantic tea plantation characterized by export orientation and industrial organization of agricultural production.

¹Verma (2013) defined "Coolie" as a generic category for the "unskilled" manual labour. Sharma (2009) pointed out that the term 'coolie' is believed to be originate from the Tamil word for wages 'kuli'. It denote workers at the lowest rung of the Indian Ocean labour market.

The tea garden labourers did not have any bargaining power in the labour market. They were forced to sell or coerced into selling his labour power for an indefinite period of time, thus transforming himself into a commodity and a virtual slave(Gupta and Chatterjee, 1981). Historians of labour such as Ranajit Das Gupta, Rana Behal, Prabhu Mahapatra and Samita Sen have shown that the coolie system of Assam's plantations developed along racialized and exploitative lines similar to disciplinary and legal regimes on other imperial plantations, creating a distinct enclave economy ruled by a Planters Raj (Sharma, 2011).

Post- colonial era

Although tea plantation has been linked with British colonialism, such link is not structural. With colonies getting freedom, new set of production relations started developing. The relationship between the planters and workers has been tilting more towards formalization with the passage of various acts like Minimum Wages Act of 1948, Plantation Labour Act of 1951, and Payment of Bonus act, Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 etc. The enactment of these acts have been accentuated by the emerging political pressure from trade union groups like INTUC, AITUC and CITU asserting their voice to get protection and security of employment to plantation workers.

While tea plantation industry under British colonialism was marked by overt exploitation, in the independent India such exploitation is still continuing in covert form. After independence, every agency became passive spectators of the exploitation of the workers over which the workers had to live with innocence, illiteracy and devoid of any human excellence. (Sharma and Das, 2009).

While coming to labour force, the colonial period's family based labour recruitment still continue to sustain the availability of cheap labourers in the post- colonial independent India. The migrant labourers from different tribes and communities over the time settled in various parts of Assam and still it is from these communities that labour force has been drawn. The women labour force dominate the total tea plantation workforce.

In considering the welfare and social security conditions of the tea plantation labourers, the Tea Plantation Act, 1951 can be considered as a milestone. Immediately after independence in view of the pathetic socio- economic and working conditions of the tea labourers, the Parliament of

India had enacted this law. The act entailed provision like registration of the plantation, appointment of chief inspector of Government to verify the enforcement of the provisions of basic facilities like healthcare, drinking water, sanitation, canteen, crèches, recreational facilities and housing facilities etc. Under the act, the state government is empowered to appoint a labour commissioner to look in to the issues of wages, conflict with management or any other legal matters. The act stipulates that no adult worker and adolescent or child shall be employed for more than forty eight hours and twenty seven hours respectively in a week and that every worker is entitled for a day of rest during every period of seven days. The government also set up the Tea Board of India through an act of Parliament to provide facilities for the growth of tea industry in India as well as to combat the depression in tea prices across the world. (Biswajeet, 2009)

However these legislations with welfare provision remained only in paper. In other words there have not been proper implementation of these provisions. Many loopholes remained. The failure of these provisions is self –evident in deteriorating conditions of the tea garden workers whether in terms of wages, education, health etc. As Das pointed out, the wages of tea garden workers have been nominally increasing since 1947 period. But it is not sufficient. It hardly fulfill the constitutional mandate of ensuring ‘living wages’ for the workers. Talukdar (2016) referred to the severity of maternity mortality rate in Assam that stands at 328 per 1lakh birth compared to the national average of 178. Among tea garden workers the rate of maternal mortality is very high. There has been increasing pressure from tea garden trade union for amending the provisions of Plantation Labour Act.

Coming to the wages of the women worker, until the enactment of Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, they were paid less wages than their male counterparts. In fact one of main cause behind greater recruitment of women labourers was low wages. The 1976 legislation has made differential wage structure illegal although it took time to persuade the Indian planters to equalize gender wage rates. Subsequently, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986 made employment of children under fourteen years of age illegal, depriving the plantations of another major pool of labour recruitment. The 1986 legislation has reduced the number of child labour in tea plantation, one of the largest sector employing child labour as indicated already under colonial era family based labour recruitment, but in reality it is not come down to

zero. Similarly, the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 ensure equality in basic wages for female workers along with male workers, but the piece rated incentive wage system ensures that her time contribution has to be much greater than her male counterparts to equalize earning at the end of the day. The incentive wage system thus very subtly perpetuated gender inequality among plantation workers, since the earning of male worker can easily exceed those of his spouse.

Post- market liberalization era

Operating within the framework of a gradually liberalizing national economy, the government proved to be more and more supportive to industry than labour. The government policy has become more solicitous to capital or the owners of the plantations than labour in an attempt to attract the sustained industrial investment from the outside investors as well as the internal investors (Sharma and Das, 2009). The opening up of Indian economy had the effect of reorganizing the production process that has led to the changes in the nature of labour market prevailed in tea plantation. It has accentuated casualization of tea garden labour force as manifested in:

1. The tea plantation has been diversified into small tea growing operations. With trade liberalization, Indian tea industry has been subjected to stiff competition from countries like Kenya, Sri Lanka etc. in terms of both productivity and quality of product. As these small tea grower entity does not come under the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, they need not incur non- wage welfare expenditure of the labourers. Therefore they produce tea at a cheaper cost. On the other hand, the established tea estates with obsolete technology, old tea bushes and increasing labour cost finding it difficult to sustain.
2. Readjustment happened within the field workforce, progressively leading to the displacement of permanent plantation workers by casual workers resulted in the marginalization of the tea garden workers, particularly women workers. (ILO, 2006)

There has been a trend of steeper reduction of male workforce than female in the resident field workers pointed out the fact that the later have been retained because of cheap labour cost. Thus casualization has facilitated the feminization of labour force in the tea garden that have provided tea industry with sufficient cheap labour pool without ensuring any social security for the later.

The casual workers are locally known as ‘thika’ workers. Increasing participation of women as casual workers is due to the reactions of fear and uncertainty unleashed by globalization process. The working of social security regime as well as harsh living conditions of the workers have been manifested in the increasing cases of starvation related death, increasing infant mortality rate among the tea garden workers. The Barak Human Rights Protection Committee (BHRPC)² in 2013 reported:

“In seven months last year, 34 people died of starvation or malnutrition-linked diseases on a single tea estate, Bhuvan Valley in southern Barak Valley, when owners temporarily shut operations and stopped paying workers for demanding better conditions and eight months of owed wages.”

France 24 Television, an international news channel based in Paris reported in 2012:

“People are still dying due to malnutrition and several others are suffering from diseases related to chronic malnutrition due to low wages and absence of medical facilities in violations of laws passed by the Indian parliament as well as international human rights laws.”

Recently there has been a proposal to amend the Tea Plantation Labour act, 1951 in order to improve the deteriorating human rights conditions of the tea garden workers. The proposal itself manifests that the state do recognize the existence of deteriorating living and working conditions of the tea garden worker. The tea industry does not pay statutory minimum wages saying that the monetized value of the facilities under PLA 1951 compensates for wages. However evidence suggest that even the facilities ensured in the PLA 1951 is not truly implemented.

Thus the tea sector in Assam being subjected to challenges posed by globalization has opted for a strategy of cost reduction as evident in increasing casualization of labour force. Given the specific characteristics of labour relations in plantations, it means the existence of a labour force

²Barak Human Rights Protection Committee (BHRPC) is a human rights organization of the nature as contemplated under section 12(i) of the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 and registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 vide [no. RS/CA/243/B/61 of 2002-03](#) dated 1st October 2002.

that lives within or in the vicinity of the gardens, but is forced to look for alternative livelihood opportunities. However evidence suggested that there has been limited opportunities for vertical occupational mobility within tea garden or outside the gardens. There seems to be a historical continuity in the range of constraints faced by plantation labour. While specificities of the plantation economy creates barriers for them to move to alternative occupations, restructuring of labour relations within the garden makes their livelihood all the more vulnerable and uncertain.

The capacity to endure the ongoing retrenchment and curtailment of previously assured benefits depends to a great extent on availability of alternative source of livelihoods. However lack of education and skill restrained them in moving to other occupations. Despite being reorganization of the sector in response to changing market conditions and state intervention, there seems to be limited mobility of tea garden workers or their descendants in terms of diversification of sources of earning and employment. The labour market conditions in tea plantation is unique. The supply side is governed by a set of factors like immobility, poor asset ownership and restricted skill set which confer it the characteristics of a reserve army of labour. On the other hand, the demand side of the labour market is highly responsive to market conditions. The market fluctuations in labour market conditions have been absorbed by one segment of labour force that is casual labour. The mutually reinforcing nature of the restrictions confronted by the tea garden labour force on account of the historical legacies of the plantation system as well as the increasing pressure for casualization determine their conditions of work. The social, economic and spatial embeddedness of labour relations continues to impact upon the 'choices' for mobility available to the workers and their families. (Mishra, Sharma and Upadhyay, 2011)

Conclusion

The above analysis uncovers the transition in labour recruitment and their welfare from colonial to post- colonial independent India. There has not been any radical transition. The labour market of tea plantation has not been allowed to develop freely. It has been manipulated and being

shaped according to the demand of planters to suit their interest in changed socio- economic conditions. However the enactment of the PLA, 1951 is not a mean achievement. It has formalized the relationship between planters and workers and entailed comprehensive provisions to secure improved socio- economic conditions of the workforce. However there remains various loopholes in implementing these provisions because of which there are growing demand from both trade union members and planters to amend the act. The trade union members representing voice of workers argued that this act has not been successful in securing their full socio-economic welfare. Again among the plantation workers, women are the worst sufferers who have to perform dual role, both as a worker and a laborer. They have hardly any voice or representation in the Trade Union activities. While the planters argue that because of the non-wage 'in kind' components of the act, they have to incur high cost. In light of such debate, the recent proposal to amend the PLA in which Government wants to share the cost of social sector scheme in the tea estate is a step in positive direction. Along with this every effort should be taken to ensure a 'living wage' for the plantation workers which will take into consideration requirement of health, education and overall well- being of the workers along with income. Along with this, as Deepak Mishra pointed out we need to map out a comprehensive reform in social, economic and spatial embeddedness of labour relations which give them the choice of mobility to other occupations of their choice as well.

References

Sharma, Jayeeta (2011). "Empires Garden: Assam and the Making of India". *Duke University Press*.

Sharma, K. R. and Das T. C. (2009). "Globalisation and Plantation Workers in North East India". *Kalpaz Publications, Delhi*.

Mitra, Debabrata (2010). "Globalisation and Industrial Relations in Tea Plantations". *Abhijeet Publications, Delhi*.

Das, N. K. (2016). "Making of Tea Tribes in Assam: Colonial Exploitation and Assertion of Adivasi Rights". *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)* Vol. III, No.1.

Saikia, Biswajeet (2009). “Development of Tea Garden Community and Adivasi Identity Politics in Assam”. *Dialogue*, Vol. 10, No. 3.

Sarkar, Kanchan and Bhowmik, Sharit K. (1998). “Trade Unions and Women Workers in Tea Plantations”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 52.

Behal, Rana P. (2010). “Coolie Drivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture Labour System”. *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 29-51. Cambridge University Press.

Chatterjee Suranjan and Ratan Das Gupta (1981). “Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 16, No. 44/46.

International Labour Organization, 2006. “Productivity and Decent Work in the Tea Industry in India”. A consultative meeting 24th March 2005, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi.

Barak Human Rights Protection Committee (BHRPC) at <https://bhrpc.wordpress.com/>

Tanti, Kamal Kumar (2016). “In Search of a new identity for the Adivasis of Assam”. *The Shillong Times* at <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2016/09/09/in-search-of-a-new-identity-for-the-adivasis-of-assam/>

Talukdar, Prabir Kumar (2016). “Women workers of Assam Tea gardens grapple with critical health issues” at www.nezine.com/.../Women%20workers%20of%20Assam%20tea%20gardens%20gra...

Ghosal, Debjoyot (2016). “Thousands of young mothers in India are paying with their lives to produce your cup of tea”, at <https://qz.com/.../thousands-of-young-mothers-in-india-are-paying-with-their-lives-to>.

OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati and Institute for Human Development, New Delhi on behalf of Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam (2014). “Assam Human Development Report, 2014”, at planassam.info/admin/files/assam_hdr_30sep2016.pdf.