Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyse the living conditions of the tea garden labourers of a tea estate and to compare the wage structure of unskilled and skilled labours.

Design/Methodology: A primary survey is conducted on 80 labours of the tea garden, both male and female, unskilled and skilled.

Findings: The study reveals that the conditions of the tea garden labourers is very pathetic although they avail the facilities from the garden authority.

Practical implications: The results of this study would help to better understand the conditions of the labours and may throw light for further development of them.

Originality/Value: This study is probably the first to determine the living conditions of Tea garden labourers of Sarusarai tea garden.

Keywords: Living conditions, labourers, unskilled, skilled.

Paper Type: Research Paper
Introduction:
India is one of the leading producers of tea in the world. The country produces both ‘CTC’ (‘Cut, tear & Curl’) and ‘Orthodox’ types of tea. The most common tea consumed in India is CTC. About 27 percent of the world’s tea is produced in India. India is also the world’s largest consumer of tea. About 22 per cent of the world’s consumption is in India. Tea production is both land as well as labour intensive activity. Tea Plantations are predominantly located in North-Eastern States of India, particularly Assam and Southern States of India.

Of the agriculture based industries, tea plantation occupies an important place in Assam. In Assam, tea is grown both in the Brahmaputra and Barak Valley. Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon, Sonitpur are the districts where tea gardens are mostly found. Assam produces 51% of tea produced in India and about 1/6th of the tea produced in the world (The Govt. of Assam, official website). In 1911 a Tea Research Centre was started in Toklai at Jorhat for developing more scientific and fruitful methods of cultivating tea plants, applying fertilizer testing soil, selecting sites for tea garden and processing tea leaves. This is the oldest and largest Tea Research Centre in the world. For a better marketing of the tea produced in Assam and the entire North-Eastern States of India, a Tea Auction Centre-Guwahati Tea Auction Centre was established in 1970 at Guwahati. This is the world’s largest CTC tea auction centre. It now auctions more than 150 million kg of tea valued at more than 550.00 crores annually.

Tea industry has contributed substantially to the economy of Assam. About 17% of the workers of Assam are engaged in the tea industry and is one of the biggest contributors to the organised workforce of the economy. (The Govt. of Assam, official website). The tea industry of Assam has also been empowering women by giving them job opportunities in the tea garden.

The working class in the tea gardens of Assam is perhaps the most exploited class in the organised sector of economy. Low wages, poor housing and lack of avenues for social mobility have been a recurring theme since its inception in the early 19th century. The tea garden labour lines have unique identity as it is neither an urban nor industrial nor a rural area. Among the total tea garden working labours in each tea garden only 30-40% of them are permanent employees. During the peak season, each garden employs casual labourers (also called as ‘Faltoo labours’) at same wage structure but less benefits than that of the permanent labourers. There is also no maternity benefit scheme for the tea garden workers. It has been observed that during pregnancy and post-natal period, women continue to engage in hard works. Besides poor socio-economic condition, illiteracy, over-crowded and unhygienic living conditions in the residential colonies makes tea garden populations helpless to various communicable diseases and underfeeding.

The study area
This study is carried out in Sarusarai Tea Garden which is located in Jorhat district of Assam. Jorhat is located at 26°35’ N to 27°08’N Latitude and 93°35’E to 94°57’ E Longitude.). Jorhat district has three sub-divisions (a) Jorhat (b) Majuli (c) Titabor. It is characterised by low topography, with river Bhogdoi traversing it. Jorhat experiences hot moist summers and cool dry winters. The main economy of the district is agriculture where land use shows about 70% of the land under agriculture. Jorhat Town is the headquarter of Jorhat district and situated on
the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra. It has 6 revenue circles and 8 developmental blocks with an area of 2852 sq.km. (2001 census). Sarusarai Tea Garden is situated to the west of Jorhat Town and about 6 kms from the centre of the Town. This garden consists nearly a population of about 1800.

Jorhat is also called ‘the cultural capital’ of Assam with highest literacy rate amongst the other districts of Assam.

Objectives of the study:
1) To analyse the living conditions of the tea garden labours and the welfare amenities provided to them.
2) To compare the wage structure of unskilled (tea garden workers) and skilled workers (working outside tea garden).
3) To suggest certain measures to improve the conditions of the labours.

Scope of the study
The scope of the study is restricted to assessing the working and living conditions of the workers in the organised sector of economy i.e tea industry. However, in view of the importance of this labour force and also the dominance of unorganised sector in the Indian economy, where more than 90% of the labour force is engaged in unorganised sector/employment, the scope of the survey was extended to organised sector only.

Database and Methodology
A sample of 80 (40 employed in the garden and 40 employed outside the garden) labours have been taken for this study. A random sampling method had been used. Data was collected through a questionnaire and by personal interview method. Secondary data have been collected from books, published literature of the plantation companies, associations, journals, reports published by different organizations and various websites. Most of the sampled population belongs to age group of 20-45 years and males comprise of 78% and females 22% amongst the respondents.

Both permanent and casual tea garden labourers and other skilled workers have been interviewed for the study. During the course of survey, data is collected on the existing wage structure in the tea garden.

General Characteristics of Plantation Industry
Plantation is a unique sector, where most of the establishments are known to be century old. In plantation industry, majority of the workers employed are unskilled and many of them are not aware of the provisions of Minimum Wage Act, 1948, Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and the various other labour acts enacted for their welfare. The high rate of illiteracy and low level of awareness make them more vulnerable to exploitation by the employer. Workers working beyond the normal hours have to be paid at double rate for overtime work, as is mandatory under the act. Majority of the workers are leaf pluckers in the tea garden and they are mostly female.

The working conditions of workers employed in plantations are governed by the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 and the rules promulgated by the State Governments. The Plantation Labour Act inter-alia requires the employer to provide to the workers and their family members medical, housing, sickness and education facility and various other social security
benefits. Provisions of welfare amenities in plantations were commented upon by the Royal Commission on Labour, the Rege Committee and Dr. Llyed Jones in their reports. A legislation known as the Plantations Labour Act, 1951 was passed in October, 1951 which came into force with effect from 01.04.1954.

Section 15 of the Plantation Labour Act requires every employer to provide and maintain necessary housing accommodation:
1) For every worker (including his family) residing in the plantation.
2) For every worker (including his family) residing outside the plantation, who has put six months of continuous service in such plantation and who has expressed a desire in writing to reside in the plantation.

Section 10 of the Plantation Labour Act requires that every employer shall provide medical facilities for workers and their families. The Plantations Labour Act makes obligatory on the part of employers to provide and maintain such free and easily available medical facilities for the workers and their families as may be prescribed by the State Government. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 prescribes that for every adult worker, one day earned leave for every twenty days of work performed by him should be allowed and for a young person, one day for every fifteen days of work.

The Plantations Labour Act, 1951 make it obligatory on the part of employers to maintain primary schools in the plantations where the number of children between the age group of 6 and 12, exceed 25. However, an employer can be exempted from this obligation, if there already exists a school run either by the State Government or a local body providing free education to enough number of children.

**Primary data analysis**
Sarusarai Tea Garden is a privately owned tea garden. The total population of Sarusarai Tea Garden is around 1800 where only 300 people are permanent workers and 200 are casual workers. Out of 300 permanent workers 153 are female workers and 147 are male workers and out of 200 casual workers 160 are female and 40 are male workers. During the course of survey, information on basic wage, various concessions (like free ration) etc. is collected. The survey was conducted on 15th August, 2013 and continued till 27th August, 2013.

**TABLE 1 : No. of Manual Tea Garden Labours in the Garden:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labours</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Researcher’s survey, 2013*
Wage Structure
The wage structure of the labourer is based on 12 day basis. No worker is paid on daily basis. The survey results reveal that the average daily earnings of the workers employed as plantation labour works out to be at Rs. 90.50 irrespective of permanent and casual and male and female labourers. The average monthly salary of worker is Rs.2172/- which is very nominal. It needs to be mentioned that the system of wage fixation and payment in tea gardens varies from State to State. In many states, the wage rates of workers are fixed through bipartite agreements between the representatives of employers and employees of the tea gardens.

Medical Facilities
Regarding the provision of medical facilities in the tea garden a dispensary is provided by the Tea Garden Authority. Certain health problems like mal-nutrition, diarrhoea, worm-infestations, tuberculosis etc. are common among the tea plantation labourers. The existing dispensary provided by the tea planter is under-staffed and not fully equipped and do not store the required medicines for which during medical emergencies they have to rush to the nearest Primary Health Centres or to the Civil Hospital. A weekly health camp under the aegis of Government of Assam is being held every Wednesdays. Children are immunized in the health camps.

Educational Facilities
Children in the tea garden have low levels of enrolment and education and a special effort is required to bring them into the school system. This is perhaps because both parents work in the plantation and the elder children, especially girls, often have to stay back at home to look after their younger siblings. There is one primary school which is run by government supervision. However, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for the tea tribes is 67.04 against 84.97 for the State, the percentage of children never enrolled is 21.35 against 19.26 and percentage of currently not-enrolled is 51.99 against 33.37. This clearly reflects the poor status of primary education in the tea garden areas. However, in the primary survey it was found that there is about 100% enrolment in schools due to implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Mid-day meals scheme by the Government but after few months or a year the number of drop-out is also high due to the above mentioned factors.
Housing Facilities
The tea garden authority also provide land to the labourers. Most of the labour reports remarked that gardens with plenty of cultivable land were 'popular' with labour. Most of such grants were conditional; the labour had no occupancy right over such land and he could hold it only so long as he performed labour in the tea garden. The land could be taken back on "disciplinary" grounds. While not every labour received land for private cultivation, the size of holdings given, was small.

Average family size
The average family size of the labours is 5 per family. Although government have initiated family planning schemes they are yet to achieve those facilities due to lack of proper awareness and illiteracy.

Fuels used for cooking
They use firewood for cooking which they procure from the nearby shops or from the nearby villages. The permanent workers receive some allowance to procure fuels and this is not available to the casual workers.

Provision of Electricity
The terms of electricity supply to labour quarters is as per the Assam Government norms. The tea management authority extends grid power supply to the labour quarters provided to them by the state electricity board. The cost of internal wiring and maintenance inside the quarter is entirely borne by the management. But the cost of procuring electric bulbs and consumption of electricity is totally borne by the workers themselves.

Public Distribution System
The Public Distribution System (PDS) in the tea gardens is the oldest food distribution system in the country. It was started during the latter part of the nineteenth century by British tea merchants to provide rice and other items to the indentured labourers of the tea gardens. During the twentieth century, the system was rationalised and food items were provided only to those who were employed in the gardens. During the post-Independence period, the term 'ration' was extended to include many items that are now being provided to the workers in the tea gardens.

Although the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, has not made it mandatory to provide rations to the tea labour community, the management has been continuing with this practice, which has been prevalent for the last 100 years. Under the present system, the tea industry is allotted food grains through the PDS quota under the APL Scheme. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) supplies food grains to tea garden employers at a rate fixed by it. (Biswaajeet Saikia, 2008).

Thus, two systems of the PDS are running in the tea gardens- by the government and by the tea management. The items provided by the government are - rice, wheat, sugar and kerosene to those who are having valid ration cards. The PDS items provided by the tea management are rice, wheat and tea to those permanent and casual workers. But the casual workers do not receive PDS to the whole family members.
TABLE 2: PDS items to permanent workers by Tea Management:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>2kg/week/member</td>
<td>0.55paise/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>2kg/week/member</td>
<td>0.55paise/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Tea</td>
<td>300gms/month</td>
<td>0.55paise/kg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Researcher’s survey, 2013

Sanitation
The Tea Garden Management does not have access to appropriate water supply and sanitation technology. The facilities provided therefore are not in adherence to the standards set by the government programmes that are normally implemented in the rural areas in the country. The toilets are, for instance not sanitary. Mostly direct pit toilets (without water seals) connected to open pits are used. The superstructure are mostly made of local materials (bamboo and thatched) walls but are often too cramped to allow individuals to use the toilets comfortably. Only 5% of them have proper sanitary toilets.

Water Supply
Hand pumps are the most common source of water supply in the Tea Garden. Notably, one hand pump is provided for 4 to 5 families at an average, which is a much higher ratio compared to the norms followed by the water supply programmes of the Government of India. However, mostly shallow hand pumps are used in the Tea garden.

Skilled and Semi-skilled Labours working outside the tea garden:
There are about 400 semi-skilled and skilled labours working outside the tea garden of Sarusarai. As it is not possible for the Tea Garden Authority to employ all the people in the garden they are bound to work outside the garden. If we categorise them the following shows the classification:

Table 3: Classification of skilled and semi-skilled workers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>No. of workers</th>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>Income per day(Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6th- 8th standard</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>Upto 8th standard</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily wage labour</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Upto 4th standard</td>
<td>180-200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-manual tea garden worker</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>10th standard</td>
<td>As per tea garden rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt. employee</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>10-12th standard</td>
<td>As per govt. rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Business</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>9th standard</td>
<td>200-300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Researcher’s survey, 2013
**Key Findings**

- Only 27% of the total population is employed in the tea garden as permanent and casual labours.
- The survey results reveal that majority of the workers engaged in manual jobs are female and are mostly unskilled.
- The pay period of the plantation labours working in tea garden is on 12 day basis where daily wage is Rs.90.50/- irrespective of gender.
- The rate of school drop-out is high due to poverty although GER is high. This is a very pathetic scenario.
- The medical facilities provided to them are also not satisfactory.
- Although land is provided to the labours the size of holdings is very small.
- They use firewood for cooking which is easily available but at the cost of environmental degradation.
- They enjoy PDS facilities from both Tea Planter and Government side but have to compromise the quality of the food items.
- Permanent labours of the garden receive PDS for the whole family but the casual labours receive for himself/herself only.
- They do not have proper sanitation facility and water supply facility.
- The average daily wage of the skilled and semi-skilled labours is comparatively higher than that of the labours employed in tea garden but they do not avail certain facilities from the tea garden authority.
- They live in an unhygienic environment without basic amenities.
Recommendations
There should be proper labour development programme covering various aspects like the following:

- Minimum wages are not adequate to meet basic needs, or have not kept pace with rises in cost of living so increase of labour wage and labour compensation is most essential.
- Elementary Education should be made compulsory among the tea labour children’s and school uniforms and books should be provided to every child.
- School drop-outs and the reasons for the same should be monitored.
- There should be one middle school also besides the primary school.
- Development of human resource employed in the tea gardens should be carried out through adult education, vocational and technical education.
- Provision of medical equipments of basic/elementary type.
- Provision of sanitation and proper drinking water facilities.
- Provision of sports activities and training to the labours.
- Raising awareness about good nutrition, health and sanitation practices through education programs.
- The plantation workers should be encouraged to produce the five most nutritious vegetables as well as raising poultry in their backyard for their own consumption can make a difference in improving diets for their households.

Conclusion
Despite the fact that the tea industry in Assam is the most productive in the country, the sector has faced many problems in the last few years. Declining international prices, contracting markets and increased competition from other countries on the one hand, and lack of investment, deferred replanting and inadequate maintenance on the other, have contributed to its problems.

Enrolment and participation of children depends on many factors - school and home related. Many children are not able to go to school or complete even primary schooling, for a variety of reasons. One major reason is poverty, which impacts on participation and completion rates, and even achievement. The cost of sending children to schools is a deterrent for the poor families. Even though education at the elementary stage is ‘free’, several studies show that indirect costs associated with children’s education are around Rs. 300 per annum at the primary level and more than Rs. 500 at the middle stage. First generation learners are disadvantaged by the fact that their parents may not be able to help them with their schoolwork. In such cases, children may fall behind with their schoolwork, lose interest in study and later, drop out. Girls are often entrusted with responsibilities of sibling care, and with domestic chores. This may impact their progress in school, or even prevent them from attending school.

The Government is strengthening the tea garden schools and insisting on additional investment by the tea garden management. Various steps are being taken to improve learning levels and enrolments in the tea garden areas. These include inclusion of these schools in the education department’s programmes for teacher training, academic support and supervision. Sarva Siksha Abhiyan has now been initiated in the 14 non-DPEP districts of the State.

A multi-pronged strategy is therefore needed to ensure physical access and regular participation in school of children in tea garden areas. Adoption of strategies like bridge
courses and residential camps to provide access to older ‘out-of-school’ children. Emphasis on adult female literacy programmes, to encourage the demand for children’s education. At the middle school stage, the problem of access and participation is even more acute and there is a need for the establishment of middle sections in many gardens. These requirements are being assessed, so that appropriate action can be taken.

Recently, the Chief Minister of Assam announced the creation of a new department exclusively for tea labour welfare, a move which was welcomed by every quarter. But the setting up of the proposed department can be justified only by ensuring the development of both the industry as well as the labour community. The proposed department could regulate all the tea gardens in Assam (including the small tea growers) by bringing in new legal provisions for the promotion of tea productivity, ensuring the quality of tea for export purposes, conducting research for adapting new technologies as well as sensitising the growers to undertake organic tea production (Biswaajeet Saikia, 2008).

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