

Livelihood Security of Tea Plantation Workers:

A Review

Introduction

Tea workers community, erstwhile called by different names, even derogatively, such as ‘tea garden coolie’, ‘tea tribe’, ‘drunkards’ and so on is a section that derive ones livelihood resources from tea plantation works. This is a population that is fearful and anxious about its basic subsistence, due to its dependence or over-dependence on low and insecure income, inadequate social services, and a shrinking labour market which is faced with gloomy prospects. A glaring example of livelihood challenge can be found among the tea plantation workers of North Bengal. Studies by CEC (2003) shows that wage cuts or delay in wage payments, increasing job reduction leading to more unemployment, and above all, rise in malnutrition and starvation deaths are producing a negative effect on the psyche of tea workers. Moreover, in recent years, a large number of these workers are threatened by further tea plantation closures; while in plantations that remain open, workers are suffering wage cuts, tougher picking demands, increased short-term insecure contracts and appalling living and working conditions (Goddard: 2005). The issue of livelihood insecurity among these marginal communities constitutes a serious issue in different tea region of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and with all probability in as well.

Livelihood: Understanding the terms and concepts

The term ‘livelihood’ is closely connected to the concepts of economic development and poverty alleviation. According to Carney (1998), Davies (1996) and others involved in the development studies, livelihood concept is a valuable means of understanding different factors that influence or impact lives of people especially the poor households in developing countries. This understanding in turn helps in grasping the intricacies related to dynamics and processes involved in household livelihoods. Despite its early history, it was only in 1970s that the term ‘livelihood’ became significant in the development lexicon. As a matter of fact, before livelihood issues became global concerns with some NGOs and international organization, nutritional and food security were considered important issues at poor household levels.

Brundtland Commission in its report “Our Common Future” (1987) gave impetus to the concept of livelihoods by substituting the term “jobs” with “livelihood” and later substantially spoke about ‘securing the livelihood of the rural poor’ (Chambers: 1992). Later it brought to use other phrases, such as ‘adequate livelihood’, ‘livelihood opportunities’ and ‘livelihood security’.

However only after five years, that is from 1993, that many influential organizations like OXFAM, CARE International, IISD Canada and UNDP picked up the term and used it and gave it meanings so that ‘sustainable livelihood’ took off as a practical concept.

It generally accepted that livelihoods deals with ways and means individuals and households ‘make their living’ while meaningful livelihoods is that which sustains and ensures that poor households live with dignity and hope for the future. In the field of development, as is the wont, various definitions have been provided, with some consensus as noted earlier. Perhaps the most widely accepted definition of livelihoods stems from the works of Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway: which Carney (1998) has put succinctly: ‘A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities

and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base' (Carney: 1998, p. 4). Others like Ellis (2000) defines this concept as "the activities, the assets (eg., natural, physical, financial, human and socio-political capital), and the access that jointly determine the living gained by an individual or a household".

Household Livelihood Theoretical Framework

The concepts of livelihoods, livelihoods security, and livelihoods analyses are relatively new concepts in social science discourses. The concept of livelihood security issues are closely intertwined with the concept of 'sustainable livelihoods', inherent in the anthropocentric wing of ecopolitical¹ thought. Brundtland Commission Report (1987), which has conceptualised 'sustainable development', contains an early yet rudimentary definition of sustainable livelihoods. However, the concept came into vogue only in the 1990s, closely associated with poverty reduction strategies (Hiremath: 2007).

According to the United Nations' Declaration on Rights to Life and Livelihoods (1986), securing of one's livelihood is considered an important human right issue that needs addressing especially with reference to the rural poor. Livelihood security constitutes various ways and means which the rural households utilise to obtain their necessities of life. These necessities of life include food, water, shelter, clothing, health care and education. Thus, livelihood security is a broader concept, and is much more than just food security, which concerns chiefly with the procurement of food for living. Livelihood security, on the other hand, deals with the procurement of food, shelter and clothing, besides the ability of the households to cope with shocks without the permanent depletion of assets (Ellis: 2000). It encompasses food security, social security, and psychic security.

'Livelihoods' as defined by Chambers and Conway (1992) and Ellis (2000), comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities that are required by households and individuals for a means of living. This definition primarily focuses on three basic component elements of livelihoods: work and employment, poverty reduction, and well-being and capabilities². At a very basic level, one's livelihood may include wide and diverse range of activities people engage in to find sources of food, fuel, animal fodder and cash to make or improve their living (UNDP: 1999). Pursuance of livelihood strategies involves the possession of basic material and social, tangible and intangible assets, generally understood as capital, natural, economic, human and social. Non-possession of any of the capitals, say for instance, lack of proper physical or mental health (an element of human capital), is apt to jeopardise livelihood opportunity or create a situation of livelihood threat to an individual. Non-possession of the assets as stated above may owe to a number of factors. One, though subtle in its appearance, is the process of 'otherisation' of a group, or a community by a dominant 'other'. Various socio-cultural factors embedded in the social structure reinforce the process of otherisation and perpetuate 'exclusion' of a community/society in terms of their share of social, cultural and economic resources in society. Such social exclusions have led to denial of rights of some communities in India (Nagla: not dated) for centuries, including the right to livelihood. Therefore, without doubt, livelihood security remains an essential component in the economic development of a society or community. Any threat to livelihoods opportunities causes stress in

the social and economic development of a community, making it vulnerable, if no viable livelihood alternatives are available.

Tea Plantation Workers in North Bengal

In West Bengal, although the majority of the population comprises the dominant Bengali community, Table 1 below shows that the highest percentage of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the entire state are found in North Bengal, particularly in the tea regions. In fact, the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri are characterised by a sizable proportion of Scheduled Tribe population (21 per cent and 13.8 percent respectively) as compared to the State average of 5.6 per cent (North Bengal Report: 2002). The other districts of North Bengal, namely, Cooch Behar, Dinajpur and Malda, too, are characterized by high proportion of Scheduled Caste population (Ibid). The region, though pre-dominantly rural, having agriculture as the major livelihood activity, also has tea plantation work that constitutes the central livelihood source for a large number of the population. The scheduled groups, belonging to the economically backward and socially marginalised tribal and lower caste communities (of Nepalese and Bihari origin), constitute the fulcrum of the work force in the most important industrial sector of the place, that is, tea plantation. This labour force in the tea gardens of North Bengal, the second major tea producing region in India, was brought as indentured migrant workers from the central provinces of India more than a century ago (Bhadra: 1992, Bhowmik *et al*: 1996, Kramatempel *et al*: 1999). On a daily basis a large number of both permanent as well as casual workers are employed in the tea gardens of Hills and Terai of Darjeeling and Doors of Jalpaiguri tea regions (Table 2). One significant aspect of the tea workers' community in the North Bengal tea region is the ethnic diversity. Ethnic groups, belonging to diverse ethnicity, caste and tribes work in these tea gardens. Bengalis, Nepalese, Rajbansis (Koch) and *Adivasis* of Chotanagpur-Santhal Parganas origin (Oraon, Munda, Kharia etc) are some of the major groups while Bodos, Garos, Meches and some smaller groups are also found in these tea gardens (Barma, 2007). It is significant that most of these groups fall under the category of STs or SCs. Although there is no logical basis for relating to high ST/SC population with low human development indicators, several empirical results in tea regions indicate lower development trend in diversification of income base and literacy rate: North Bengal has much lower literacy rate (50.13 percent in 2001) as compared to 61.7 percent in the rest of West Bengal (North Bengal Report: 2002).

Table 1
Distribution of SC/ST population in the three North Bengal Districts of West Bengal

District	Percentage of SC Population			Percentage of ST Population		
	1981	1991	2001	1981	1991	2001
Coochbehar	47.03	49.84	51.76	0.61	0.57	0.60
Darjeeling	12.58	14.25	16.15	10.60	14.75	13.78
Jalpaiguri	34.02	34.61	36.99	19.35	22.20	21.04
N. Bengal	27.69	29.91	29.10	11.21	11.29	16.29
W. Bengal	25.22	21.98	23.62	5.72	6.63	5.59

Source: India Census: 2001

Table 2

Average daily no. of labour employed in Tea plantations of North Bengal

State/Dist	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Darjeeling Hill Region	51,515	51,938	52,671	52,547	53,363	53,412
Darjeeling Terai Region	38,420	38,874	39,426	40,165	39,897	39,925
Jalpaiguri Duars region	163,524	164,757	167,085	167,624	169,412	169,365
North Bengal	253,459	155,569	159,182	260,336	262,672	262,702
North India	873,400	883,400	895,900	896,272	896,717	897,500
South India	336,655	348,700	359,200	359,938	360,893	361,300
Total All India	12,100,55	12,321,50	12,551,00	12,562,10	12,576,10	12,588,00

Source: Computed from Report of Committee on Legislation Plantation Sector, 2007

Tea industry:

Among beverages perhaps tea is the most consumed after water. Though China is credited with planting of the first tea plant, it is the British in India that commercialised the plant as cash crop as well as internationally drunk brew. (Ref) .

Livelihood Insecurity of Tea Workers

Indeed, the Indian Tea Industry, since its inception in mid-nineteenth century, has contributed significantly to the national and provincial economy. **It has played a pivotal role in the initial development and economic growth of North Bengal as well by providing livelihoods to thousands of households for more than a hundred years (Sarkar & Lama: 1998).** In more than a century old industry, perhaps many ordinary entrepreneurs have become successful businesspersons and industrialists. And government coffers must have been filled with the revenue generated from the sale of retail tea in the domestic market. Likewise, government exchequer has been **complete** with the foreign exchanges earned by export quality tea from various hilly terrains, particularly the world famous Darjeeling Tea in India. If even a small percentage of the profit generated from this commercial cash crop was invested back for the well being of the workers, their descendents would have pioneered a new way of life with high standard of living as it happened to the proletariats of European countries. However, from the beginning of the Indian tea industry, the workers' community world over but especially in Indian tea plantations has faced livelihood insecurity.

It is true that apart from the rising production and labour cost, falling tea prices due to oversupply of tea and decline of demand in the global market, combined with stiff competition from many tea producing countries and other factors have caused a huge slump in the profit, leading to the crises in the India's tea industry (Goddard: 2005; Khawas: 2006). Notwithstanding, it can be said that even in the worst scenario, the large tea producing companies have not lost profit-making margin although smaller tea producers have suffered quite a bit on profitability due to different recurring

expenses. In the face of crises tea plantation owners have decided to reduce the permanent resident workers and instead take more seasonal, casual and contract workers including women workers who are cheaper and not entitled to any benefits (Sankrityayana: : 2005). The same can not be said about the tea workers and their dependent households whose livelihood almost exclusively depends on plantation work. That is why, whenever tea plantations face uncertainties in the form of “sickness of tea gardens”, temporary or indefinite lock-outs and ultimate closure, more than a million tea workers in India not only face acute livelihood insecurity but also threat to their very survival. According to the UK based *Actionaid*, “ Tea is a national institution in the UK but the tea plantations of India there lies a tale of poverty, hunger and a denial of workers’ rights” (Goddard: 20005).

Closure of Tea gardens in India:

State	no. of T.E closed	period of closure	workers affected	impacts
Kerala	19		25,000	near starvation
WB	26	2002-05	40,000	starvation death 240

Livelihood Security and insecurity of tea workers:

Livelihoods of tea plantation workers around the world constitutes chiefly of daily labour wage from tea plantation work. For majority of tea garden dwellers (workers and dependents) tea garden wages constitutes the central livelihood activity while for many others it provides ancillary jobs. As a matter of fact, the tea industry has played pivotal role in the India’s economy by providing livelihoods to thousands of households through direct employment as well as indirect sustenance in the form of ancillary jobs (Sarkar & Lama: 1998; Ghosh: 1987). Besides wages, tea workers have been dependent on the tea management for ration (rice/flour), medicine, firewood, water and electricity supply. In most, during the normal operation of tea gardens, tea workers also enjoy small percent of bonus from the management as dividend of profits. Additionally, permanent workers also get fringe benefits in the form of housing, medical care, equipment and others which constitute different ‘capitals’. On the other hand, workers’ lives seems to go haywire whenever tea gardens become “sick” or are indefinitely closed down. Sole dependence or over-dependence on wage labour for livelihoods has not only hampered economic development in the tea regions but has also led to the livelihood insecurity among tea workers at a time tea industry is undergoing a crisis and uncertain future, especially in India. It is under these circumstances that they face acute socio-economic crises as the management cuts down on the wages even while the statutory benefits are withdrawn. According to CEC Reports (2003), in Munjanai, Dhekelpara, Ramjhora, Kathalguri and some other tea gardens of Dooars tea region, workers were either not paid wages for several months or were forced to accept Rs. 15 to 20 per day as daily wages.

Analysis of Livelihood Capital Assets:

There are generally five to six livelihood capitals, also referred to as resources or assets. According to Ashley (1998) these are natural capital, physical capital, economic/financial capital, human capital and social-political capital, the availability and accessibility of which ensure livelihood security or insecurity of a household or a community.

Natural Capital: Natural Capital refers to the natural resource flows that provide livelihoods to people, particularly, the indigenous people or forest dwellers that directly or indirectly depend

on forest product and land. Most tea plantation workers are deprived of natural capital as they do not have rights to land or other natural resources in the tea gardens that are leased out to tea planters by government. Study conducted by ICIMOD (2003) concludes that the plantation workers have no legal property or ownership right; they are mere daily wage earners with no control over plantation assets, or participation in decision-making processes. Therefore, Subba (2001) maintains that tea workers are not able to engage in agricultural activities or raise livestock to diversify their livelihood sources because they have no ownership right of the land they occupy. Furthermore, they can not claim rights over common properties like water, vested land, and forest lying in the vicinity of their tea gardens due to denial of common property rights to industrial workers category under which tea workers community falls.

Physical Capital: this capital refers to the infrastructure (road communication, access to electricity, water,) and production units etc. that helps in pursuing and enhancing livelihoods. Unfortunately, majority of tea gardens are located in far-flung and remote areas where transport is inadequate; electricity and other infrastructural facilities are often limited to company offices, factories and managerial bungalow depriving the labour colonies (Khawas: 2006). Health centres (hospitals, dispensaries etc) across tea estates more often than not lack basic medical facilities, required by the garden labourers. The lack of these physical capitals becomes a big hinderance in accessing good education, health and other faculties for the well being or raising the living standard of tea workers. Consequently, their livelihoods get diminished instead of enhancing and income shrinks instead of getting diversified.

Economic/financial capital: this refers to the banking, credit, cash and other financial power that strengthens a household besides working as intervention during the crises or vulnerability period. Tea workers with such low wages and paltry economic entitlement can barely save or invest for the future security. Their assets in the form of cash, bank is either very poor or almost nil; consequently, their poor purchasing power makes them vulnerable during any crises period, such as tea garden closure or abandonment. In “sick tea gardens” workers are paid irregularly or half wages while in closed and abandoned tea gardens they are not paid wages and other associated entitlements (Khawas: 2006).

Social capital: this refers to the social network and organizational membership or affiliation that households have in a social system and how they help in accessing and enhancing their livelihood and social security. In tea gardens with “island” kind of society, mostly excluded from other rural social groups, workers can have organization membership or social affiliations only among themselves (even the managers have their exclusive group). These group affiliations may bring the group together for social functions but can not enhance their social or livelihood security.

Political capital: These refer to the political connection etc that help in the pursuit of livelihoods or in accessing some benefits. While, with the wind of changes in recent years political parties have entered the tea gardens through trade unions, tea workers are still insulated from political influences. In many regions, outsiders enter into political foray while illiterate and ignorant workers are only used as vote banks before or during election to be forgotten soon afterward.

Human capital: refers to skill, knowledge, and other facets that help enhancing the livelihoods of individuals and households. Unfortunately most tea workers and their households are still kept in illiterate or semi-literate state. While according to PLA in India, while the existence of a good number of primary schools is commendable, technical/vocational, professional and higher

education institutions are conspicuous by their absence. Moreover, due to inaccessibility of good high schools and poor socio-economic condition or other circumstances among tea garden households, most students either drop out or are forced to discontinue their education. So they are not able to acquire skills to compete with the outside world. Workers themselves are unskilled daily wagers but companies neither send them for skill-driven trainings nor equip them with any latest technique. Consequently, during crises in tea gardens they become vulnerable due to their inability to pursue any other profession or engage themselves in meaningful livelihood strategies to secure their livelihoods.

Therefore, while the tea industry *per se* may survive through the process of merger and acquisition of smaller tea estates by larger tea producing companies, the socio-economic condition of the workers—the “backbone” of tea industry—will continue to deteriorate if their livelihoods are not secure or some alternative options are not made available. Following the study conducted on Sri Lankan tea industry, UNDP (2006) reported: “while the tea plantation sector is one of the highest revenue earners for Sri Lanka’s economy, the plantation community comprises one of the poorest segments of the total population”. The same may be said of the tea workers’ communities in India and Bangladesh.

There are various factors that contribute to the livelihood insecurity/challenges of tea garden workers of North Bengal. Firstly, for generations of tea workers in North Bengal wage labour has been the only source of livelihoods. Consequently, they suffer livelihood threats whenever tea industry faces crises in the form of tea garden lock-outs or abandonment by owners or proprietors. During these periods, tea workers, besides losing their daily wages, are also deprived of the benefits enumerated in the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) 1951, such as, ration, bonus, medicine and firewood while electricity and water services are withdrawn from them (Goddard: 2005). UNDP Report (2006) and studies conducted by Talwar *et al* (2003) and Biswas *et al* (2005) in the North Bengal Tea Regions have shown that closure and abandonment of tea gardens had led to the humanitarian crises in the form of malnutrition and hunger, which in turn resulted in various sicknesses, hunger and starvation deaths. While, the aged, children and women are most susceptible to sicknesses and malnutrition, the tea workers’ community as a whole becomes vulnerable to shocks and stresses resulting from the loss of their primary livelihood source (North Bengal Report:2002).

The second factor contributing to the livelihood insecurity of North Bengal tea workers is the low wage structure. The tea garden wages (Table 3) in West Bengal are too low for the workers and their households to make any meaningful savings or investment for future. Generally, wages in the tea plantations of North Bengal are fixed after long negotiations, between the government, planters’ associations and the unions (Ghosh: 1987). But these wages are quite meagre and economically not viable, and hence, can not trigger development. It is merely at the subsistence level that is not adequate to grant them any purchasing power in crisis situation, such as indefinite lock-out or abandonment of tea gardens. With minimum daily wage of about Rupees 49.22, tea workers simply can not sustain their livelihoods with continuing price-rise of daily commodities³. Moreover, there are other dependent members in the household to feed while maximum of only two members from a family can be employed in the tea gardens of North Bengal.

Table 3

Wage (Rs. /Day) Differential in Tea Gardens of Different Tea Growing Indian States/Regions

States/Region	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009 onwards
North Bengal*	48.40	50.90	53.40	56.40	57.40
Assam*	51.10	53.40	56.10	59.00	62.70
Karnataka	71.00	73.00	75.00	77.00	81.44
Tamil Nadu	73.00	75.00	77.00	79.00	84.44
Kerala	78.36	80.36	82.36	84.36	88.80

Sources: Computed from Report of CEC (2003) and Report on Committee on Legislation Plantation Sector, 17th Sept. 2007. *the wages in North Bengal and Assam excludes the ration the workers and their dependents receive as 3.26 Kg and 2.44 kg wheat per week.

The Table 3 reveals that from amongst the prominent tea producing states/regions in India, the North Bengal Tea Region is characterised by lowest wage rates. A comparative study of the recent wage structure reveals that the wage rates of North Bengal Tea Workers is around 35.36 percent lower than that their Kerala counterparts. This not only speaks of the magnitude of their economic exploitation, but is also self explanatory of the inherent challenges to their livelihood security.

It is indeed ironic that despite large revenues generated by the Indian Tea Industry, there is a huge disparity in the economic status of tea workers vis-à-vis the tea garden management or proprietors. It is a paradox of social order that despite being the ‘backbone’ of tea industry in North Bengal as elsewhere, the workers have not been able to break out of the chain of poverty and socio-economic backwardness while the tea garden owners and tea auctioneers have continued to become richer—reaping the profit even during crisis period! Usually, the daily tea plucking of a tea worker in North Bengal is estimated to be somewhere between 25 to 40 2kgs which in a retail market would fetch between Rs.1637.50 to Rs. 2620. The Table below (Table 4) shows that North Bengal tea manufactured and sold in the domestic market has steadily grown even during its crises period. However, the tea pickers have been receiving pittance in return.

Table 4
Annual Tea production, sale and prices in North Bengal Tea region

Year	Tea sold (in tonnes)	Average price (in Rupee/kg)	Estimated Total price (in crores)
1996-1999	72,356	74.66	555.15
1999-2000	86,155	71.00	611.95
2000-2001	72,977	62.89	458.95
2001-2002	72,161	59.06	426.18
2002-2003	71,360	58.31	416.10
2003-2004	88,050	53.67	472.56
2004-2005	94,136	64.25	604.82
2005-2006	87,046	59.08	514.27
2006-2007	86,379	64.78	559.56
2007 up to Nov.	63,370	66.70	422.68

Source: The Telegraph, 2007

Third factor contributing to the livelihood insecurity is the absence of alternative livelihood options in and around the tea gardens of North Bengal. Viable livelihood options are necessary for securing food and other basic amenities whenever basic livelihood system like tea industry collapses. In North Bengal tea region, except tourism, alternative industry hardly exists; small scale cottage industries are conspicuous by their absence near tea gardens. To add to the hardships of workers, many tea gardens are located away from the urban and market centres which make the availability of work opportunities hard to come by. In recent years, many agricultural poor and landless labourers have been provided with work opportunities like '100 days work' under NREGA scheme (Hanstad & Lokesh: 2002). These welfare schemes or statutory benefits that function as short-term alternative livelihood options are aimed at helping rural poor particularly of SC/ST communities. The SC/ST tea workers, by contrast, have been kept out of the purview of these government benefit schemes. Indeed, in North Bengal the communities most affected by the tea garden crisis due to the tea garden closures are the Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) groups. The starvation cases in the North Bengal tea plantations (Talwar et al: 2003; Biswas et al: 2005) are the indicator that tea workers from the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes sections are the most vulnerable to shocks and stresses like malnutrition, hunger, and diseases after the abandonment or closure of tea plantations on which their sole livelihoods depend. According to the studies done by Talwar *et al* (2003) and CEC (2007) from 2003-2007 during and after the closure or abandonment of about 18 tea gardens in the Dooars region, majority of children, women and aged who had succumbed to starvation death due to sickness following malnutrition and other factors belonged to the scheduled groups (see Table 5 below for details).

In most tea gardens of North Bengal, the tea workers belonging to these marginal and scheduled groups are not even granted Below Poverty Line (BPL) status despite losing their only livelihood source after the closure or abandonment of gardens (Rasaily: 2008). Thus, they are deprived of even short-term livelihood alternatives. That is why, despite being associated with tea industry for so long there is no real noticeable change in the socio-economic condition of tea workers nor has economic development of tea regions occurred. As a result, they have remained dependent on tea plantation for their food and livelihood security.

The fourth and probably the most important factor for the livelihood insecurity of tea garden workers is the lack of land and other resources ownership. Ownership of land and access to other resources are essential not just for the economic development but also for the enhancement of livelihoods security. Ownership of resources, particularly land, water and forest, provide livelihood security and aid the intervention against economic crises, besides, providing regular subsistence income for improving the livelihoods (Hiremath and Anand: 2007). Tea workers in the North Bengal tea regions (as elsewhere in the world with all probability) have been deprived of land or other natural resource ownerships since the inception of tea industry in India. As a matter of fact, they are, as it were, part of the plantation assets that are sold or bought from one owner to the next, without having any legal property rights of their own (ICIMOD: 2001). In an interesting case, though, Bhowmik (1978) recounts that some indentured migrant tea workers in North Bengal were lured out of tea garden by British forest officials to work in forest department in exchange for cultivation land. That seems to be the only incidence where the granting of land rights for tea garden workers was promised but led to conflict with tea planters

for fear of losing the cheap labour force. The argument for the denial of land rights is that tea cultivation fields are government lands given in grants or lease to the tea planters for a fixed period. Ironically, for reasons known only to garden owners and government, even the vacant and unutilised lands in most tea gardens are not made available for workers for cultivation and other uses. With such low wages, not many households have land purchasing power to diversify their income sources. That is why, tea workers' socio-economic condition has not improved in the tea regions of North Bengal despite unquestionable role played by the indentured migrant workers in the past and by their descendents in subsequent years (Bhadra: 1992; Mukherjee: 1997).

Table 5
Impacts of Closed/abandoned tea gardens in North Bengal (2003-2007)

North Bengal Tea Regions	No of Tea Gardens	No of Closed or Abandoned Gardens	No of Workers Affected	Starvation Deaths*	Other Impacts
Jalpaiguri-Dooars Tea Region	183	18	21,000	571	Malnutrition, Hunger, sickness, Suicide
Darjeeling Hills Tea Region	55	5	3,000	Not Known	Malnutrition, Hunger, sickness
Darjeeling Terai Tea Region	87	2	12,000	Not Known	Malnutrition, Hunger, sickness
Total	325	25	36,000	571	

Sources: Computed from *Report on Hunger in North Bengal: 2004*; *The Telegraph: 2007* and *The Dainik Statesman: 2007*. * According to "The Dainik Statesman: 2007", unofficial deaths toll due to starvation was about 2500.

If one were to compare the SC/ST rural households of agricultural- based society with those of tea garden households, the former seem to enjoy better livelihood security than those in the tea plantation sector. One of the reasons is that a good percentage of village-based households own land; and in West Bengal, under the Land Reform Act (1953), many landless poor have become beneficiaries of distributive land (Mohanty, 2001). Studies conducted in West Bengal by Hanstad and Lokesh (2002) suggests that even a small agricultural plot of land can play a role in improving the livelihoods of rural poor; homestead land and garden plot offer great potential for improving one's economic standing. And according to Singh et al (2006), agriculture and its allied activities support livelihoods of about 7% India rural population. Land being a primary means of production, the access to land, becomes perhaps one of the most important alternative livelihood sources in the agriculture-based rural economy (Mohanty: 2001; Bakshi: 2008). But, despite demands by tea garden trade union and workers communities, even small plot of land has not be transferred to the workers, which could have acted as buffer in crisis period. Therefore, denial of land ownership rights has led to the continuing poverty and backwardness of tea workers in the North Bengal tea region. More importantly it has led to the livelihood insecurity of workers in the closed and abandoned gardens.

The sixth factor is the socio-political exclusion of backward and marginalised tea workers in North Bengal. Social exclusion is a process through which certain groups are systematically discriminated against (Nagla: not dated). Social exclusion keeps a social group outside the power centres and resources⁴. The notion of social exclusion may be widened to incorporate the notion of rights, for instance, the right to livelihood, etc. In India, the process of social exclusion involves some sections of population like the Dalits and the Adivasis who are forced in to isolation, discriminated, and deprived of equal access to social and economic opportunities (ibid). Whenever the tea industry faces some crises, such as garden lock-outs, the plight of tea workers is ignored while government shows apathy towards the marginalised workers. During the crisis period, sustaining the tea industry that generates huge revenue is of paramount interest for the tea producers and government. But addressing the problems of (cheap) labour always becomes a very low priority mainly because workers do not enjoy any significant bargaining power in the political arena. Moreover, in the entire plantation economy wherein the labour class is the single most important factor in the growth of the tea industry, the cheap labour is not only deprived of the due share in the total revenue earned but is also treated as a commodity (Mukherjee: 1997). Moreover, as is evident from our discussion in the relevant sections above, and the data provided in Table 3 suggests that although tea plantations elsewhere in India could afford to pay about 35% higher wages to plantation workers, North Bengal tea region has conspicuously maintained low wage rates for the labourers, which cannot be shelved aside as a matter of chance and fate or a consequence of some accident. This deliberate act of social exclusion and marginalisation is deeply embedded in the social structure which has systematically marginalised these sections of the society for centuries. In this age of globalization, social protection of workers is kept out as the profit- making becomes the central concern. Case in point is the transformation of Chandmani Tea Garden into ‘Sattelite Township’ near Siliguri⁵. The land promised to the permanent workers was given only to those with some political clout while ordinary workers were deprived of even casual work in the construction sites (Ghosh: 2007). The acquisition of the tea cultivated land and displacement of the workers became possible because the majority of the workers belonged to voiceless ST/SC communities without any real political backing (ibid).

Thus, it can be said that there are a combination of factors that create insecurity of livelihoods of tea workers in North Bengal, even during normal operation of gardens. During closure or lock-outs, the challenges to livelihoods are compounded. For majority of tea workers, the tea plantation labour work constitutes the only livelihood sources in the “enclave economy” created by the early planters. Secondly, the labour wages in the North Bengal tea gardens are very low to allow for savings for future to counter any livelihood insecurity in case of any crisis like garden lock-outs. Thirdly, due to isolation and remoteness of many tea gardens, workers can not access alternative sources available in urban centres while livelihood options within a garden are rare. Land being one of the most precious natural resources can serve as the means of tackling the problem of long-term livelihood problems. However, despite living in the tea gardens for over a hundred years, tea workers have not been granted any land ownership rights of even some unutilized lands. Most of the workers do not have land purchasing power due to low wages and lack of savings. Moreover, tea plantation sector is still considered outside the purview of government welfare schemes or statutory benefits. Consequently, tea workers are neither considered landless labourer nor people below poverty level despite the loss of their only source of livelihood, that is, plantation labour wage. Since these factors have not been addressed in

North Bengal, the tea workers continue to feel threatened and insecure when it comes to sustaining their livelihood.

Concluding Observations

From the above discussions it is revealed that the tea plantation workers of North Bengal Tea Region, most of who belong to the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes groups have been subject to a vicious cycle of livelihood insecurity, which gets reinforced by socio-culturally embedded processes. There is a need to break this vicious cycle to enable these marginal communities come out of livelihood insecurity. Several possible remedies have been recommended by several social scientists. Scoones (2001), Mohanty (2001), and Bakshi (2008) stress on land as the most viable as well as valuable source of livelihood security in rural areas of India. Roth (2008) shows that there is a direct as well as indirect relationship between land/property tenure rights and food security; he identifies how securing of land rights and improving land access helps in providing wage and income to buy food. Hanstad and Lokesh (2002) while linking poverty and landlessness suggest that land reform is the answer to securing better livelihoods through the allocation of small homestead or garden plots. Hansdad and Brown (2003) while commending the land reform efforts of West Bengal Government through redistribution of homestead plots, distribution of agricultural land and regulation of sharecropping relationship, advocate granting of ownership to *bargadar* and female sharecropper. Subba (2001), Sircar *et al* (2002) and Rasaily (2008) in their studies show that wage labour is the only source of livelihood for most tea garden workers. Likewise, based on their study in Bangladesh, Sircar, Islam and Gain (2008) point out that the absence of land right of the tribal community in tea gardens is the prime factor responsible for their poor livelihood security. Wickermasinghe (2003) on the other hand, speaking on the similar plights of Sri Lanka plantation workers states, “the workers’ housing question has changed into a land question, with demands by unions and political groups for alienation of plantation land for landless Sinhalese villages”. Therefore, Bhadra (1992), Talwar *et al* (2003) and Goddard (2005) argue that vulnerability of tea garden workers is mainly due to their over-dependence on tea management for securing their livelihoods. Since the tea workers have no ownership right on the land they occupy, they are not able to engage in agricultural activities nor raise livestock to diversify their livelihood sources (Subba: 2001).

Moreover, there are many other challenges to livelihoods in the closed tea gardens of North Bengal that accentuate the vulnerability of tea workers. Besides the lack of ownership rights of land and other natural resources, the lack of alternative livelihood options within or in the vicinity of tea regions, pose serious threats to the livelihood security of the tea workers community. The absence or lack of other livelihood options may be engrained in the history of tea industry in India, whose “colonial culture” refuses to go away (Mukherjee: 1997). Today many large national and multi-national companies, such as UniLever and Titley have entered the foray that could easily arrest the slide in tea industry and provide alternative industry and even train the unskilled workers. But that does not happen, because profit becomes the sole aim of these companies. Nevertheless, there is need of alternative means to supplement present livelihood system through other diverse livelihood sources. The wage structure in the tea industry at present is quite meagre; it provides the workers just enough for subsistence but inadequate for

economic well being⁶ of the households. It is in this context that the provision for alternative livelihood opportunities in the tea gardens or in the vicinity becomes imperative.

If land ownership constitutes the primary source of livelihoods and expands the possibility of diversification of their livelihood resources, question could be raised: why hasn't the government granted land ownership or operational land holdings of some unutilised plantation land to these tea workers so that it may act as buffer during tea garden crises, particularly, garden closure? Why has the government not distributed some land acquired under highly acclaimed West Bengal Land Reforms Act, to tea workers, especially to the vulnerable SC/ST households? Question can be asked as to why such a profit-making industry and government, the beneficiary of large revenue from this industry, are not able to provide for alternative livelihoods for these workers who help generate the revenue. If the lack of food security and alternative livelihood options following the loss of wage labour are responsible for their livelihood threats, what steps has been taken to address this situation? But, if the livelihoods status of these tea workers remains at the subsistence level even during the normal operation of tea gardens then another question must be asked: what role has the tea sector played in enhancing the living standards of these tea communities? Is providing employment with a mere subsistence wage in tea plantations alone adequate or should the industry ensure the enhancement of economic status of tea workers? Exploring and establishing some viable alternative livelihood opportunities in and around tea plantation in North Bengal is a must which may act as livelihood interventions, thereby, lessening the workers' vulnerability to stress and shocks, through sound planning and proper implementation of programmes and policies developed from time to time.

NOTES

¹ See Padam Nepal (2004). 'Ecopolitics and Ideology: Relocating Green Themes in Modern Ideological Thinking', in *Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. LXV, No. 4, (Oct-Dec), explicating the concept of ecopolitics.

² This concept of capabilities is taken from Amartya Sen. Sen (1987) has explained the concept of 'capability' in terms of what people can do with their entitlements.

³ The wages of tea workers in North Bengal tea region is below the minimum wage of Rs. 90/day that agricultural workers receive and Rs. 100/day given under NREGA.

⁴ The term exclusion was originally used in France in 1970s to refer to various categories of people, labelled 'social problems', who were not protected by social insurance. The process of social exclusion is embedded in the social structure and its relations to people's capability. Social exclusion has two basic characteristics: (a) the deprivation caused through exclusion in multiple spheres, showing its multidimensionality; and (b) it is embedded in the societal relationships (Nagla, B.K., n.d; Peace, Robin: 2001)

⁵ In 2003 the tea workers' families of Chandmani Tea Estate, located about three kms away from rapidly growing Siliguri Town were forcibly evicted with police help and settled near Nepal border with no proper housing or any access to water, electricity and market centres.

⁶ Well being is a component of the livelihoods. The concept of well being as integral to livelihoods has found its best exposition in Chambers (1997).

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