

WOES OF TEA PLANTATION WORKERS IN NORTH BENGAL

Nestled in the sub-Himalayan front ranges of West Bengal India “*North Bengal Tea Region*” consists of Hills and Terai regions of Darjeeling and Duars region of the Jalpaiguri District. This second highest tea producing region in India was transformed in the mid-19th Century from a forested landscape to one dominated by extensive tea estates populated by indentured labourers brought from Central provinces of India and Nepal. In the initial years, expansion of tea plantations also created employment opportunities and served as the mainstay of local economy for more than a hundred year.

In the past 30 years, however, particularly from mid-1990s crises plaguing Indian Tea Industry seriously affected North Bengal tea plantations. Consequently, plantation-based economy no longer played pivotal role in providing sustainable livelihoods to the tea plantation community. In recent decades, even during normal days the workers’ livelihoods remains at subsistence level due to low wages, lack of land and alternative options and above all, due to over-dependence on tea management. One of the root causes of tea workers poverty is poor wage- being one of the lowest in India. In the last 10 years (2003 – 2013) wages have gone up by just 40 Indian *Rupees* (less than 1 Can \$) - from Rs. 45 in 2003 to Rs. 85 in 2013. At this rate, if a permanent worker earned Rs. 1,180 (about 35 Can\$) a month in 2003 he/she would earn Rs. 2,280 (Can \$ 41) a month in 2013. This is too low a wage for the subsistence of families (with about 4 dependent members) let alone investment for future and other expenses. Paradoxically a tea worker in North Bengal plucks 25 - 40 kg of tea leaves on a daily basis, which in a domestic retail market fetches about Rs.1638 to Rs. 2620 @ Rs. 65 a kg but receives pittance in return. With appallingly low literacy rate of about 36 percent, the tea plantation community fails to compete in the job market with only 10 percent securing smalltime private and public sector jobs; only 12 percent workers own land while only seasonal and low paying alternative works (eg. manual labour and livestock rearing) are available around most plantations. In the words of Ms. Shanti a resident of Belgachi Tea Estate: “*with about 1400 Rupees (28 Can \$) a month and no land or other livelihood options I can barely provide daily meal for my children. Where is the money to save for future? I feel like chained in poverty which I cannot break.*”

If securing of livelihoods becomes so challenging during normal operation of plantations one can imagine peoples’ condition when plantations are declared “sick”, closed or abandoned as happened in 22 tea plantations. People in these plantations had to face wage cuts, irregular or delayed payments and retrenchment which resulted in more unemployment and suffering. Workers in Munjnai, Dhekelpara, Ramjhora and Kathalguri tea estates were either not paid for several months or were forced to accept Rs. 15 to 20 (50 Canadian cents) a day as daily wages. During plantation closure management, besides stopping wages, also withdraws ration, medicine, electricity, water supplies, and statutory benefits. With no land and alternative options, many workers forced migrated to distant places for work on inhuman conditions while others survived by breaking rocks on river beds for paltry sum. People of isolated closed plantations faced the

toughest challenge for survival; they were found to survive on one meal a day by eating tree fruits/ roots, green leaves and even rats. In *Ramjhora* and *Mujnai* two of the worst affected plantations, more than 450 children and old people succumbed to starvation death related to malnutrition and water borne diseases. Karuna, a widow who lost 3 family members to starvation in Ramjhora (closed from 2003-2012) lamented: *“our ancestors and we worked for this plantation for generations but what did it give in return? I lost my sick husband and two young children after plantation was abandoned and wages and ration were stopped; we have no land and in this isolated place there is no other work that would give us food. Government-aid came after I lost everything”*.

With government apathy, even the plantation residents seemed to have resigned to their fate. But fact of the matter remains that plantation workers face constant threats to their livelihoods not just of losing jobs but grim future in tea plantations. To add to their woes come the bad news that the West Bengal Provincial Planning Commission has laid out its map on the urban expansion that will force the eviction and displacement of thousands of tea plantation residents. This will not only exacerbate the fear and anxiety of this community about its very existence but may even break the “backbone” of North Bengal tea industry.

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