THE CONDITION OF TEA GARDEN WORKERS OF JALPAIGURI DISTRICT IN COLONIAL INDIA

Shyamal Chandra Sarkar
Assistant Professor of History
P.D. Women’s College, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India
E-mail: shymalchhs@gmail.com

Abstract

Manufacture of tea is the major industry Jalpaiguri district. The staple resources of the tea industries are tea leaves. The northern strip of the region is a hilly tract, which is congenial for tea cultivation. Jalpaiguri is the second largest producer of tea in West Bengal. The brand Jalpaiguri tea is extremely popular worldwide. The ample production of tea in the region laid the foundation of the tea industry here. Tea industry including the processing and tea packaging of tea involves a large-scale employment, thereby supporting the local economy of Jalpaiguri. The tea industry lends dual support to the economy of Jalpaiguri. Most of the tea garden workers were imported from Chhotanagpur, Santal Pargana, Ranchi of Bihar and Nepal. But the condition of workers was not well. They always deprived by their proprietors and their obedient. The main object of this work is to highlight the conditions of tea garden workers of Jalpaiguri district in Colonial India.

KeyWords:

Tea, Jalpaiguri, labourers.
Introduction

Manufacture of tea is the major industry Jalpaiguri district. The staple resources of the tea industries are tea leaves. The northern strip of the region is a hilly tract, which is congenial for tea cultivation. Jalpaiguri is the second largest producer of tea in West Bengal. The brand Jalpaiguri tea is extremely popular worldwide. The ample production of tea in the region laid the foundation of the tea industry here. Tea industry including the processing and tea packaging of tea involves a large-scale employment, thereby supporting the local economy of Jalpaiguri. The tea industry lends dual support to the economy of Jalpaiguri. Most of the tea garden workers were imported from Chhotanagpur, Santal Pargana, Ranchi of Bihar and Nepal. But the condition of workers was not well. They always deprived by their proprietors and their obedient. The main object of this work is to highlight the socio-economic conditions of tea garden workers of Jalpaiguri district in Colonial India.

Historical Background of Tea Industry in the district

The tea industry of Jalpaiguri District is situated on a vast area of Dooars Region. A large number of poor people worked here. The tea industry of Bengal was established in Darjeeling district by the English tea planters in the decade of 1840. A vast area of Dooars was captured by the English after Anglo-Bhutan war (1864-1865). After the establishment of Jalpaiguri District in 1869, the tea gardening was opened on the bank of Tista River near Gajoldoba by Richard Haughton, the pioneer of the tea industry in the Jalpaiguri district, in 1874. In this regard, English tea planter Dr. Brougham, former minister of education, played an active role. From D.H.E. Sunder’s Settlement Report it appeared that the tea industry in this district began in 1874-75 and the first lease issued to 22 gardens in 1877. Gradually, so many tea gardens were set up after the settlement of Gajoldoba tea garden. These are Fulbari tea garden (1875); Dalimcot tea garden, Bagracot tea garden (1876); Kumlai, Damding, Washarbari, Manabari tea garden (1877); Manihope, Patabari, Ranichhera tea garden (1878). In the same way, more than 150 tea
gardens were growing up during 1874-1930 AD. The total area comprised in them was 1,39,751 acres at that time.¹ Most of the tea gardens were under the ownership of English planters. Very few of the tea gardens were under the ownership of middle class Bengali Babu of Jalpaiguri Town.² The following table illustrates the growth of tea industry in the district during the period from 1876 to 1907:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of gardens</th>
<th>Acreage under tea</th>
<th>Outturn of tea (in lbs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>29,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6,230</td>
<td>10,27,116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>38,583</td>
<td>1,82,78,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>76,403</td>
<td>3,10,87,537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>81,338</td>
<td>4,51,96,894</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Rapidly extension of cultivation of tea in these years changed almost completely the physical characteristics of the subcontinent country over a great area. The greater part of the primeval forest disappeared and mile after mile of the countryside was replaced by tea gardens. The table, given above, shows that the area under tea nearly doubled between 1892 and 1901, while after this period the extension of cultivation had been comparatively slow. All the tea gardens situated in the Western Dooars of the district with the exception of Denguajhar, a small tea garden lying at a distance of 4.5 miles (7.2 km.) from the Jalpaiguri town.

**Origin of workers in the district**

A large number of workers were needed after the settling down of tea garden in different parts of Dooars region of the Jalpaiguri District. But it was not possible to fulfill the need from the local people. Local labourers were not employed even when available, because they held comparatively better bargaining positions and enjoyed the freedom of retaining to their former occupations if they chose to do. The density of population in these regions was very inadequate. Their profession was agriculture-based and they were self-sufficient. They were not needy. They hated work in tea garden. In this circumstances, it
was needed for English planters to import a huge number of workers from out-side the District. To ensure regular supply of outside labour, the planters utilised the services of Sardars or professional labour-recruiters that persuaded workers from backward tribal areas such as Bilashpur, Chhotnagpur, to migrate to the tea plantations of Bengal and Assam. In the first few years of the tea plantation enterprise in the Dooars, the labour employed was almost entirely Nepali from the neighbor district of Darjeeling. In connection with the demographic composition it should be mentioned that the hilly tract of the district came to be inhabitant by, among others, a sizeable group composed of several Nepali castes. In 1921 they numbered nearly 20,000. A very large proportion of them were employed on tea gardens as labourers.

It was soon found that the supply of Nepali labour was not sufficient to meet the growing requirements of the tea plantations. Further, the local inhabitants were reluctant to work in the gardens. Under the circumstances, the planters had to look elsewhere for securing labour and the experience of the Assam plantations indicated the areas from which labour could be procured. Within seven years of the launching of the first tea garden of Gajoldoba in 1874, a trickle of Chhotnagpur labour started arriving in the Dooars of Jalpaiguri district for relief from their economic crisis. In their homelands, the Oraon, Munda, Santal tribal people belonged to peasant communities’ differentiation among who was of limited extent. Their agriculture was, however, closely linked with magico-religious practices, the major cultural traditions. It is noteworthy that despite considerable differences between the different tribal groups, these communities had social customs, cultural traditions and religious beliefs which were similar in many respects. Further, each of these groups had a powerful community bond.

Since the seventeenth century these tribal groups were in a state of turmoil as a consequence of massive social, political and economic influences emanating from their neighbours. Following the penetration of British rule in the second half of the 18th century and consequent socio-economic changes, their economy, livelihood and social life came to be severely dislocated. One inevitable result was a series of tribal rising against the British and also the Indian exploiting and oppressing interests who were in league with them. At the same time, the impoverished tribal peasant tended to be pushed
out of their traditional habitat. This took the form of huge migration fostered and organized by the tea planters of Assam and the two northern districts of Bengal under the direct projection of the colonial state. The movement to the Dooars of Jalpaiguri district was a part of this historical process. Of the various tribal peasant communities which moved to the Dooars, numerically the largest group consisted of the Oraons. The 1881 Census recorded 210 Oraons and small numbers of other immigrant tribal groups. The number grew rapidly in subsequent years and by 1901 a sizeable labour force was built up. In 1901 the number of Oraon was 62,844 and, further, to 1,15,350 in 1921. The Mundas, the second largest immigrant tribal group, numbered only 1,855 in 1891, but by 1901 rose to 11,672 and by 1921 to 34,601. The Santals numbered 10,857 in 1901 and about 24,000 in 1921.  

While Nepali immigrants from the Darjeeling district continued to constitute a fair proportion of the labour force in the tea gardens located in the hilly areas of the Dooars, the overwhelming majority was recruited from distant Chhotnagpur and the Santal Parganas. There were 188,223 immigrants in the district as a whole. The bulk of them were enumerated in the Dooars and about half of the immigrant’s tea garden workers from Chhotnagpur and Santal Parganas. The Migration Settlement showed that 80,436 immigrants were from Ranchi district and 10,562 from Santal Parganas. The number of persons born in Ranchi and enumerated in Jalpaiguri district was no less than 126,214. After joining in tea gardens as labourers, they settled permanently at the Dooars region of Jalpaiguri District. The following table illustrates the growth of tea industry and labourers in the district during the period from 1874 to 1941:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Gardens</th>
<th>Total under tea (in acres)</th>
<th>Approximate production (in lbs.)</th>
<th>Average in lbs. Per acre of mature plants</th>
<th>Number of labourers employed</th>
<th>Permanent</th>
<th>Temporary</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>29520</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>.....</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conditions of workers

Tea garden workers of Jalpaiguri district played an important role in Colonial Indian society. The society will never be complete without the involvement and contribution of workers. So, it is necessary to study the socio-economic condition of the workers. The study on the socio-economic condition of tea plantation workers of Jalpaiguri district is important from sociological, historical and anthropological point of view. Tea garden workers in Jalpaiguri district in general, and children and women in particular, have, long been a disadvantaged, deprived, under-served, exploited and alienated group. The tea garden labourers of Jalpaiguri district were not free from coercive methods of labour control. Direct as well as indirect, and sometimes outright terrorization techniques were used by the planters and their agents in procuring labour, putting them to work and keeping them under control. The Dooars plantation labour was wage labour put under various types of non-economic constraints which severely restricted the mobility of labour and it turned out as labour held in bondage in a free market.  

Method of recruitment of labour involved all sorts of unscrupulous methods, deceptions and not infrequently even outright violence to recruit men, women and children. At the time of recruitment, they were given an advance, partly refundable and
partly non-refundable. This advance was given to the recruits to pay off debts in their country and to enable them to sundry expenses. This practice gave them the impression that they were not free to move. This impression was strengthened by the further practice by which every new recruit was required to put his thumb impression on an agreement bond for work for a period of at least six months in the tea estate which brought him from his native place bearing all the incidental expenses. The managers enjoying the explicit or implicit support of the colonial authority and the mystique of the sahib were law unto themselves. Physical coercion, beating, and flogging – all these were quite common. Incidents of death from physical torture were not unknown. They were being thrown into furnaces of garden factories. The recruitment from a long distance, the separation of workers from their known environment, their total isolation from the proximate surroundings because of geographical location, ethnic, social, cultural and language distances and barriers, and various forms of open as well as concealed compulsion in organizing migration – made the workers particularly vulnerable to violence and coercion. That the Dooars plantation area was a non-Regulation tract meant that many of the ordinary laws and regulations were not in force in the area. This administrative feature gave virtually unlimited power to the English Tea Planters.

The conditions of work and living constituted a vital aspect. There was no law and no government supervision in the matter of emigration to the Dooars, wages, tasks and general management of the estates. They had to the most back-breaking work outdoors under conditions of intense heat, heavy downpour and severe cold. In the cold weather and rains plucking work was done from 7 a.m. till about 6 p.m. with two hours leave. In the Dooars gardens the sardar was in a sense the key element in putting the labourers to work and exercising discipline. Every tea garden workers were exploited by the tea planters and their obedient followers. All Indian and Non-Indian workers had to face the same problem. The local Rajbangshi, Muslims and other castes of people disliked the work in tea garden. Most of the workers were Oraon, Munda, Santal and Nepali community. According to Census of 1911, the numbers of workers in Jalpaiguri District were 1,59,606. Most of them came from Chhotnagpur region of Bihar. The numbers of Oraon and Munda tribes of workers were 55000 and 17000. The number of Workers
who came from Santal Pargana region was 11000 and the number of Nepali workers was 19000.\textsuperscript{12} They each signed a four-year contract that eventually obliged them to remain on the tea gardens for generations. That was the beginning of hard labour, erosion of cultural and captivity that never came to an end. Illiterate workers didn’t understand what the document contained when they signed it. This ignorance led to a life full of suffering for them and for their children.

Up to the mid nineteenth century, the tea gardens of North Bengal were like some separated islets. The tea gardens of the district were surrounded by dense forest. There were no roads for communications. Weather was very harmful to them. Most of the workers of this region were affected by \textit{kala-azar}, cruel forest animals, insects etc. But there was no medical facility. As so, they were helpless. They always enthralled by the tea planters. They could not come out from the guard-house except the day of weekly market. Watchmen of the tea planters always followed them. Their relatives could not stay with them without the permission of the tea planters. When they denied working 12 hours of a day, the planers bored the fingers of them.\textsuperscript{13} As a result, a large number of workers died.

The study confirms that the situation of children and women workers in the tea gardens of Dooars is considerably worse in some areas than for their peers in the district as a whole. The condition of women workers was very difficult. They were persecuted by the manager, watchmen and the others of the tea garden. Their sound of crying was reverberated in the tea garden, never reached out-side the tea garden. At that time, they were un-organized and so they were help-less. They bore this suffering tongue-tied. They couldn’t even arrange the marriage of the young ones without the permission of the Manager. They were bound to work hard with fever or other illness. They were always victimized by the exploiters. As a result, the lives of workers were intolerable. Certainly there was no ‘identified labour’ like Assam tea gardens. Logically, though they were free from any terms and conditions, but their life was like that of a very humble servant. They were under control of the Manager, Assistant Manager and Super-visior most of whom were European and Anglo-Indian and Indian officer like Dafadar (Police Officer holding a rank equivalent to that of a corporal), Watchman,
Sardar and Bengali Babu (Bengali Clerk) who was under Britishers. Manager was very powerful person. He was all in all and his injunction was law. He was the paramount ruler. Consecutively he was the police, judge and Majesty. Not only that, there was a hand in glove with tea planters and District Police Superintendent and Deputy Commissioner.14

The study found that the low wages had embittered the mind of the tea garden workers. There was no act or regulation regarding cost of work. Workers were bound to do over-duty without bonus money. Their cost of work had been reduced by the proprietors of the tea garden when abated the tea business or questions arise regarding cutting the expenditure short. They were deprived of the different opportunities. As a result, they couldn’t maintain their family smoothly. They had to spend the day half-starved. The cost of works of the tea garden workers were less than the other workers in this district. Where an in-expert general worker got an amount of Rs. 9 as a monthly salary, a tea garden worker got a monthly salary of Rs. 7 and 8 Anna. In the first half of the twentieth century, a woman tea garden worker got a monthly salary of Rs. 4 and 8 Anna up to Rs. 5 and of the a child tea garden worker got a monthly salary of Rs. 2 and 8 Anna which went up to Rs. 3. Women and Child workers got the additional cost of work at least Rs.10 per month for their over duty only at the time of profitable income.

It has been found that the percentage of the growth of the cost of work was very little. As a result, they were very poor. They had to borrow money at high rate of interest from the money-lenders. But they couldn’t pay back that money with interest. So they had to sell their children for relief from the abysmal poverty. Francis Rolt, a British writer, gives a vivid description of the severe discriminatory conduct of the hierarchy towards the tea workers that the tea gardens were managed as an extreme hierarchy; the managers lived like gods, distant, unapproachable, and incomprehensible. Some even begin to believe that they are gods that they could do exactly what they like.15 Another British human rights activist, Dan Jones said that- managers have anything up to a dozen laborers as their personal, domestic servants. They are made to tie the managers shoe lace, to remind them that they are under managerial control and that they are bound to do whatever they are asked.16 As a result, they suffered from the lack of nourishment and
some of them died from the lack of proper medical treatment. There was no school for teach the children and there was lack of safe drinking water. So they always tried to go to their original home-land. But they were always watched by the watchmen and the gangsters of the tea planters. So they could not run away from the tea garden.

The tea garden workers were illiterate. Their poor housing conditions, low wages, long working hours, social discrimination and de facto restriction on free movement deprived them from many basic human needs and rights that every human being must have for personal and societal progress. These conditions made sure that the children of the workers can do nothing else but become tea garden workers. Deprived, exploited and alienated tea garden workers lived an inhumane life. They were too concerned that they were depended on companies for food, medicine accommodations etc. They do not have choices about their life and amenities. That is because they had not a social standing position.

Ownership of a vast part of the tea gardens was in the hand of middle class Bengali Babu. Nationalists had no interest to form the Workers Union. The political leadership of this district was under higher class Bengali Hindu, who were educated in English. But tea garden workers were illiterate. They came from out-side this district. So, there were no good social relations between them.

Conclusion

In conclusion it may be said that, the life of the tea garden workers were indeterminate, unbearable and the rendered hopeless by the merciless control policy of the tea planters. They suffered from the low cost of work, high price of daily necessary goods, scarcity of food, disease for lack of nourishment, death, oppression, exploitation, physical torture etc. When the oppression and exploitation were un-bearable, the tea garden workers were compelled to protest against proprietors of the tea gardens.

This work finds that, the tea garden workers were highly deprived in all respects of socio-economic and political aspects. It is highly essential to create a good relationship among owners, managerial staff and labourers. There was a need to discuss on inclusive
development of the tea plantation economy in the district. In the last 150 years, the tea community in Jalpaiguri district never received adequate attention in the so-called development process witnessed by the state. If the tea garden community has been raising their voice under the banner of Adivasi tribes in Jalpaiguri for last decade or so by changing their approach, it was not due to only lack of place among the workers nationalization process but also their own understanding of the idea of development. Most of the tea gardens were remotely located and did not have proper connectivity to the nearest town areas. In Dooars of Jalpaiguri district, there was a need to set up a department exclusively for tea. Under this department, both welfare of tea garden labourer and regulation, management and coordination of tea business was needed to look much more effectively. Otherwise some bad incidents will continuously affect the tea garden.
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