

**PLANTATION
LABOURS
OF
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**



**R.K. BHADRA
MITA BHADRA**

Plantations of Northeast India provide employment to a large number of tribals as workers. Sociological research on the tribal workers are rare. The present volume is a collection of papers which provides various sociological perspectives of tribal labourers engaged in this industry. The book is divided into three sections based on social, economic and health aspects. Social explanation of economic dimension of plantation has been discussed in several papers by the authors. Organizational structure of the plantation system, trade union, economic interaction of labourers, growth of women labours, commitment of the workers, absenteeism, class consciousness, condition of surplus plantation labourers, impact of plantation on the agrarian structure of the region, etc. have been discussed in these papers. Socio-cultural aspect of labourers has been dealt with in some papers. Migration of workers to the plantation and consequent changes, changes in family, authority, status of female, their interaction with the neighbouring non-tribal population, ethnicity dimension of labourers etc. are analysed in depth. Being economically poor the labourers can not care of their health properly. However, they do not have traditional barrier for acceptance of modern treatment etc.

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Introduction

TEA PLANTATIONS in India provide employment of over 9,24,239 workers. Roughly about 7 lakhs of workers are found to be working in the tea plantations of north-eastern India. These workers belong to various tribal communities of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Madras. Due to scarcity of workers in the locality the employers had to recruit them from such a long distance. In response to the manpower requirement during the 19th century planters recruited labourers from outside and thus created an immigrant enclave community having almost no interactions with the neighbouring societies. The bulk of the labour force consists of Oraon, Munda, Santal, Baraik, Kheria, Ghasi, Gond, Mahali, Sabar, Khond, etc. except a few Nepali workers of tea plantations of Darjeeling hills. The wider social background of plantation workers of north-eastern India has a considerable sociological importance.

In Assam tea plantations were started by the British Colonial government in 1835. In 1850 the actual acreage under tea was 1876 acres. The period from 1901 to 1911 experienced

a slow growth in the acreage covered by tea plantations. In 1947, 30 per cent of the 1.5 millions acres of land were occupied by the tea planters. At present there are approximately 725 tea gardens in Assam.

In Tripura the first tea garden was started only in 1916. In 1931 there were 50 tea plantations covering an area of 8,386 acres. There were 7,668 workers in plantations in 1954.

The first tea estate in West Bengal was established in 1866. In Jalpaiguri the total area of 11,984 acres were under tea cultivation in 1892 and the number of tea plantations was 182. By 1885 tea plantation took firm roots in Darjeeling. In 1885 the number of tea plantations was 175 and the cultivated area was 38,499 acres. In 1905 the number of plantation was 148 as against 186 in 1895. From 1905 upto 1935 the number of plantation remained same but decreased to 142 in 1940.

Due to the industrial capitalist nature of organisation of plantations local peasants were not attracted to take wage works in the new employment sector. Non-availability of labour was the main hurdle faced by the planters at the initial stage of growth of plantations. In solving this problem the British government adopted two major steps for increasing the availability of labour supply from the locality which were—abolition of slavery and imposition of heavy tax on the subsistence farming of the local peasants. However, only up to 1860 local labourers could run the tea plantations who were 10,000 in number. After 1865-66 it became almost the sole form of labour supply from outside. A large number of labourers were brought from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, etc. Bihar's tribal areas supplied the bulk of the labour force who mainly came from the districts of Ranchi, Hazaribag, Santhal Parganas, Dumka, Chaibasa, Gaya, and Mayurbhanj, Ganjam, Sambalpur, and Puri of Orissa and Raipur, Rampurhat and Jabalpur of Madhya Pradesh were also the important places from where labour migration took place. These labourers belonged to the various ethnic groups like Oraon, Munda, Santhal, Baraik, Kheria, Ghasi, Gond, Mahali, Sabar, Khond, etc.

The number of imported labourers from 1872 to 1880 was 26,321 in Assam. In 1872 they were 40,000. In 1905-6 the adult labour force in tea plantations swelled to 4,17,262. In 1923, about 527,000 labourers were recruited in the plantations. After 1931, import of tea labourers in Assam gradually declined and it was totally stopped by 1941. By 1941, the total number of migrant labourers rose to 10,00,000 in Assam. In 1931 there were about 1.4 million tea labourers of which 9,00,000 were in tea plantations and 5,00,000 were living in the neighbouring villages as peasants. During 1946-47 about 43,007 persons immigrated to Assam, during 1951-52 about 38,477 persons and during 1954-55 about 24,829 came to Assam. By 1971 the immigrants increased to 22,40,000 in Assam.

In Bengal there were 8,000 tea labourers in 1870. The figure of population born outside the district of Jalpaiguri was 4,54,177 recorded by the 1961 census. The bulk of the tea labourers immigrated from Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas of Bihar. During 1891-1947 immigration of such labourers in the district increased. Their number increased to 188,223 in 1901 compared to 143,922 in 1891. Migration records revealed that 80,836 immigrants were from Ranchi and 10,562 from Santhal Parganas. Persons numbering 126,214 born in Ranchi were found enumerated in Jalpaiguri district in the Census of 1911. In Darjeeling district 67,000 immigrants were recorded in 1961.

In Bengal 44,279 persons were employed in tea plantations in 1921 and 61,540 were employed in 1940. After 1950s tea plantations stopped immigration of workers due to availability of surplus labourers in the locality. In 1950 number of labourers was 323,034 which reduced to 283,593 in 1954. Gradually, this number declined to 187,612 labourers in 1967 and increased to 228,705 in 1980.

In the district of Darjeeling 96,444 persons returned themselves as belonging to eighteen different types of scheduled tribes. The Oraons were 14,433 the Mundas were 5,993 and 4,045 belonged to Santhal tribal group in 1941.

Cinchona plantation is government enterprise of West Bengal. It is located in the Darjeeling hill. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 is applicable to it. Its labours, similar to that

of the tea plantations, were immigrants from Nepal but they belong to some castes and tribal groups. Cinchona has more or less same bureaucratic structure as well as agro-industrial base. Workers live in the similar multi-community social environment within the plantation. It has, thus, similarity to a large extent, with those of tea plantations. It employs 6,359 workers of both men and women in four divisions of Cinchona plantation in the Kalimpong sub-division of Darjeeling district. The proportion of men workers slightly higher than that of women workers similar to that found in tea plantations.

The immigrated tribals had peasant and artisan background. The planters provided them with residential accommodation within the plantation. The village based free tribals started living in the enclaved plantation environment under more or less captive condition. They were kept under strict vigilance and were forced to live in isolation. The planters had adopted this policy to avoid labour crisis in the plantation and to control the runaway tribals who wanted to return to their free life. Industrial bureaucratic organisation of the plantation having agro-based productive system gave them a new working and living environment bringing impact on the traditional life of the tribal workers. Transformation of agrarian wage workers to industrial wage workers was a phenomenon also in plantation capitalism. The process had obvious impact on economic structure as well as socio-cultural life of the tribals. Such a transformation had impact on the various following social processes. Nuclearisation of family, reduction of kinship obligation, changes in the marriage rites and rituals, conversion to Christianity, Hinduisation, changes in traditional political system, interpersonal and inter-ethnic relations, etc. are examples of the social process. In the plantations multi-ethnic societies are in close interaction among themselves as well as with neighbouring societies. Migration and adaptation in the new cultural environment is the other dimension of the social process in the life of the tribal workers during the entire phase of plantation history of north-east India. All these bear considerable sociological

significance which draw our attention for studying socio-cultural life of the plantation workers. Recognising such an importance we have been interested to edit this volume. The book is a collection of essays from a number of distinguished scholars of different disciplines of Sociology, Social Anthropology, Economics and Political Science.

The book contains twenty papers based on in-depth research on plantation workers. Some of these papers have already been published elsewhere either in journal or in book. There are some papers which were presented in the seminar organised by this department in 1984. We have published these papers with due permission from the respective authors. Other papers are fresh and are being published here for the first time. All these papers can broadly be divided into three sections representing specific dimensions of life of plantation workers. These are Section I: Economic Dimension, Section II: Socio-Cultural Dimension and Section III: Health Dimension. Economic dimension of tea plantation labourers has been dealt with in eleven papers of the Section I. One of these papers is based on entrepreneurial history of plantation while other is on working class perspective and in other one workers' participation in trade union has been discussed. One more paper is on women workers whose commitment to industrial work has been analysed. In another paper absenteeism has been discussed. Impact of plantation on the agrarian structure has been the focal point of one paper while in other general economic dimension of plantation has been taken into consideration. A detail discussion on organisational structure, economic interaction and features of plantation is found in three papers. Women's employment in tea plantation like organised sector of industry has been discussed in one paper. In six papers of the Section II one can find the changing aspects of socio-cultural life of plantation workers. Two of them show how tribal and Nepali caste workers with peasant and artisan background have adjusted themselves in the plantation industrial environment. Only one paper has concentrated on the changing aspects of family, authority and status among the tribal workers. Plantation society is a multi-ethnic society. Therefore two papers on inter-ethnic

interactions and relations have been thought essential for this book. Side by side ethnicity and inequality have been considered in one paper. Perspectives of workers' health under the Section III have been considered in this book as an important dimension of sociology of plantation. Due to this reason three papers are included here which have analysed the changing health behaviour of plantation workers.

Mita Bhadra has analysed various dimensions of women workers in tea plantations of West Bengal in five different papers. In the first paper Mita Bhadra has shown that more than fifty per cent of workers are recruited from among women in tea plantations. Employment of women in plantation is highest among all the organised sectors of industry and in West Bengal women's employment is steadily increasing in this industry.

In other paper Mita Bhadra has shown with evidences that tribal women workers of tea plantations are fully committed to their work. Although they have come with peasant background they have well adjusted themselves in the working system of plantation as industrial wage workers. Considering the rate of absenteeism, turnover and earning from leaf-plucking she has concluded that they are more committed than their male counterpart. Although absenteeism is higher among them in comparison to that of the male workers, it is found that their absence is not willful. They are heavily burdened with domestic works and social obligations which force them to remain absent from their work.

In another paper Mita Bhadra has discussed the nature of labour recruitment and migration to tea plantation on family basis and consequent impact on the socio-economic life of women workers. Tribal women have adopted themselves in the new industrial bureaucratic system of organised sector after coming from their traditional agrarian and artisan background. Tribal women have entered into an entirely new working environment guided by strict rules and regulations of an organised sector. Permanent wage work along with their husbands has given them an important position in the society. Status of tribal women workers appears to be better than that

of any Hindu caste women. The process of adaptation to the plantation economy has brought changes in their attitudes, political participation, role in the trade union, etc.

In other paper Mita Bhadra has analysed that there is a tendency of nuclearisation of labour families along with their transformation to wage labourers. Besides certain welfare policies adopted by the planters also have impact on the size of the family. Along with these changes interpersonal relations, socialisation, marriage rituals and practices have also changed. Kinship obligations have declined to a certain extent. Inter-tribal interactions have increased. Incidence of inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriage has also increased. Changes in the authority pattern and decision making process are also noticed where women as wage-earners play an important role in family. These overall changes have brought noticeable changes in the status of women workers.

R. K. Kar has contributed three papers based on in-depth research among the tea plantation labourers of Assam. In the first paper he has described the formal organisational structure of plantation which shows that the plantation does not have a complete industrial structure. This agro-based industry has a hierarchical structure of the staff from a manager to a worker, work schedule, work grouping, industrial wage pattern, leave rules, employment benefits, labour-management relations, etc. It employs different types of tribal groups as its labours belonging to both sexes.

In another paper R.K. Kar has analysed absenteeism among the workers of Assam tea plantations. In studying absenteeism he has clearly highlighted reasons of absenteeism. In this agro-based industry reasons for absenteeism is of unique type. Heavy rainfall and other natural calamities prevent the workers from working. Diseases in particular ecology are also responsible for absenteeism. Besides lack of certain facilities which they do not get from the management are also other reasons.

R. K. Kar in other paper has discussed health and sanitation among the tea labourers in Assam. He has noted the causes and treatment of diseases. He informs that the workers live in an extremely unhygienic condition. Poor

sanitation, inadequate and impure drinking water supply, inadequate and unhealthy housing, etc. are the normal living conditions of the workers which have been the main causes of diseases suffered by the plantation labourers in Assam.

R. K. Bhadra has presented two papers. In one paper he has pointed out all basic features of plantations. Here growth of plantations, process of labour recruitment, indentured labour, precarious condition of labourers, etc. have been mentioned. Formal organisation of plantation is a bureaucratic structure having capitalist features whereas role of a planter as a landlord gives it a feudal colour.

In his another paper, R.K. Bhadra has shown that how plantation economy has brought adverse impact on the life of the local self sufficient peasants. Spread of plantations occupied a vast area of peasants' land displacing them to be landless agricultural labourers. The situation was aggravated by the process of labour migration during the period from middle of nineteenth century to the early part of the twentieth century. The surplus labourers and the members of the next generation of the migrant labourers started to settle down in the neighbouring villages as cultivators occupying a vast area of land. The land reform measures implemented by the Britishers facilitated the planters to grab the land of the local peasants. The whole process geared the growth of agricultural labourers during the early part of the twentieth century in Assam.

R.K. Bhadra and S. Chakravarty have compared health culture of tribal workers living in plantations of West Bengal having adequate health facilities with those of plantations having inadequate health services. They have indicated a sharp decline of traditional health behaviour and increasing acceptance of modern medical treatment among the tribals. Their traditional concepts of causation and diagnosis of diseases have been considerably replaced by modern concepts. The various aspects of health culture such as personal hygiene, mother-child health care, magico-religious practices, etc. are found to be considerably changed. These changes are perhaps due to presence of compulsory modern health services within

plantation provided by the planters under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. They have concluded that if modern health services are easily available to a society irrespective of its type, people will accept services without showing any resistance from tradition.

S. Chakravarty has shown that a project on parasite control and family welfare among plantation workers has brought tremendous awareness and acceptance of modern medicines. Workers covered under the programme for about three years have been aware of the causes of worm infection and inclined to take medicine for its cure. They respond satisfactorily to the stool testing by the project personnel. As a preventive measure they have improved, to a certain extent, the hygienic condition. Immunisation of child, pre-and post-natal care of mother, etc. have changed where traditional practices and beliefs are no longer getting primary importance. They are aware of the importance of family planning, but not found to be adopted any method of it. As a whole there is a positive response of the tribal workers to accept modern health practices.

S. Mukherjee's paper is a unique one giving the historical perspective of development of tea entrepreneurs in the district of Jalpaiguri of West Bengal. Basic features of plantation developed during the course of development have been discussed in the paper in detail. The entire plantation economy is based on cheap labour in comparison to the local agricultural labourers. This colonial pattern of economic development led the ruination of the local peasants. R. L. Sarkar has analysed the poverty condition of the plantation workers of the hilly region of Darjeeling district. He has examined Lewis thesis of culture of poverty in the context of plantation workers. He has discussed here the features of poverty of plantation labourers and its consequent cultural pattern. I.A. Khan has discussed that plantation workers live under the poverty level. Plantations provide them an environment where they live as peasants rather than industrial labourers. The economic features conform more to the pre-industrial features rather than industrial ones.

Malabika Dasgupta has reported formation of co-operative among the plantation workers in Tripura. She has discussed the growth of class consciousness among the workers where cooperative system has started to be functioning. There is a beginning of realisation of existing condition, in a small way, among the workers of plantations. The co-operative has promoted class consciousness. It has also brought changes in the condition of their work and living environment.

K. R. Sharma's study gives a picture of process of adaptation of the Nepali workers in cinchona plantations of Darjeeling hills. Migration of various castes and tribes of Nepal to the cinchona plantations has brought transformation of peasant economy to plantation industrial economy. The Nepali caste system has undergone considerable changes reducing the hierarchical distance among various castes. Hereditary occupations are no longer found to be in practice. Interdining is to be found in the new socio-cultural environment of plantation system. Although inter-caste marriages have been occurring endogamy persists with its traditional practices. The Tagadhari and Matwali dichotomy has still been continuing in the new socio-economic environment of cinchona plantation.

In another paper K. R. Sharma describes trade union movements in cinchona plantation in Darjeeling hills. Trade Union was formed in 1940. The knowledge of the workers about trade union is very poor. It is due to the high rate of illiteracy among the cinchona workers. None of the workers knew the name of the unions, 95 per cent of them are unaware of the functions of trade unions, and hardly 35 per cent of the workers are found to attend the union's meeting. Therefore they remain as passive supporters of trade union.

P. K. Dasgupta delineates inter-ethnic relations among tea plantation workers. In spite of living in the multi-ethnic social environment of plantations cultural boundary is maintained by each and every group of tribals. Intensity of social interactions has been increasing day by day through incidence of inter-ethnic marriage and interdining. The tribal plantation workers have also, on the other hand, maintained their

cultural boundary from the neighbouring non-tribal population in Assam and North Bengal.

D. N. Mazumdar in his paper describes social interactions of tea plantation labourers of Assam with neighbouring Assamese peasants. Under the process of interactions the plantation workers have been gradually adopting Assamese customs, manners, habits and behaviour. But the cultural and ethnic difference remain as distinctive features. Community feeling among the migrants and the local people has prevented their total assimilation.

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