

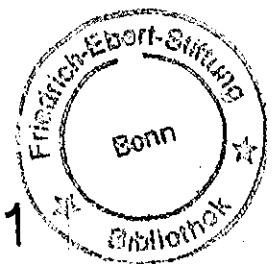
# Tea Plantation Labour in India



**Sharit K Bhowmik • Virginus Xaxa • M A Kalam**

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*Sharit K. Bhowmik*  
*Virginus Xaxa*  
*M.A. Kalam*



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## Foreword

India, producing about 750 million kilogrammes of tea, ranks first amongst the tea producing nations of the world. It is the largest consumer and exporter of tea. Geographically the Indian tea producing industry is confined to four States—Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

Tea plantations employ about 1.5 million workers. The tea industry is the largest employer of workers in the organised sector. Plantations practice the family system of employment. Plantation workers include adult male, adult female, adolescents and children. They are paid wages on scales different from the one prescribed under the Plantation Labour Act. The workforce consists of migrants who are largely ignorant and illiterate. In addition, the level of unionisation, particularly amongst the workers, is extremely low. These conditions, in turn, have resulted in a high degree of exploitation through low wages, longer hours of work, strenuous working environment, prevalence of child labour, poor or almost non-existent medical facilities, etc.

To focus on the ground realities in the tea plantations located in various States, a research study was assigned by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The objective was to unveil, with first hand knowledge, the conditions existing in plantations, make possible comparisons of the situations of plantations in different States, and to identify the reasons for variations, if any. The level of unionization among the workers and the extent of the implementation of the provisions of various labour legislations including the Plantation Labour Act, Industrial Disputes Act, etc. are also covered in the study.

This publication is an outcome of the research undertaken by Dr. Sharit K. Bhowmik in association with Dr. V. Xaxa of the University of Delhi and Dr. M.A. Kalam of Madras University. With the objective to cover the major tea producing states, Dr. Bhowmik undertook the study of tea plantation in West Bengal while plantations in Assam and Tamil Nadu were covered by Dr. Xaxa and Dr. Kalam respectively. The three

researchers, apart from providing the basic information particularly relating to the implementation of labour legislations have made comparative analysis of the issues concerning workers in the tea plantation industry. On comparing the findings of the three studies, Dr. Bhowmik concludes that although there exist a great deal of similarities in the living conditions of tea plantation workers of the three States, Tamil Nadu offers a higher wage rate and better sanitation facilities to its labour force. However, access to health facilities as also education for workers' dependents are in general grossly inadequate.

The opinions expressed in the publication are of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Friedrich Ebert Foundation) is a non-profit research and educational institution committed to the concepts and basic values of social democracy. Its wide-ranging activity in the field of education and assistance to partners in developing countries includes, among others, comprehensive projects in the areas of social development, labour relations, business, science and culture.

*Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, New Delhi  
August 1996*

**Horst Mund**

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

*Sharit K. Bhowmik*

This volume brings together three studies on tea plantation workers in India. These studies were conducted in the States of Assam, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu which are the three major tea producing States in the country. The data presented in the reports is contemporary as it was collected in 1995. The studies were undertaken by three researchers each of whom covered a State. Though the three studies are independent research endeavours, the researchers have attempted to make them comparative by addressing common issues relevant to tea plantation labour. Apart from providing basic information on the condition of tea labour and their families, the researchers have taken samples of around two hundred households of tea workers in each State and analysed their levels of living. This gives an in-depth understanding of the living conditions of the plantation workers.

The problems of tea plantation workers are often overlooked by those interested in labour studies because these workers are in many ways marginalised. Even though these workers number around 1.5 million they are isolated in their plantations, bound by low wages and poor working conditions. Their problems are rarely focused in the newspapers or journals or discussed at workers' fora. Neither the trade union movement nor the government have given much importance to this section of the working class in our country. The researchers are grateful to Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for sponsoring this project and thus enabling them to bring forth a comprehensive study on tea workers. We hope that this volume will help in creating that interest and bringing into focus the main problems of tea workers.

## Tea Industry

India produces around 750 million kg. of tea annually which makes it the largest tea producer in the world. It is also the largest consumer as well as the largest exporter of tea. Tea is hence not only a very popular beverage in India, it also helps the country earn its much needed foreign exchange. Apart from this, tea plantations employ nearly one million permanent workers and another half million as temporary workers. This makes the tea industry the largest employer in the organised production sector.

The four major tea producing States are Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Assam is the largest tea producing State and has tea plantations in practically all its districts. It has a total of nearly 219,000 ha under tea and produces more than 400 million kg. tea annually. The total number of permanent workers employed is around 560,000. West Bengal comes next with an annual production of 168 million kg. in 97,000 ha and a permanent labour force of around 240,000. The State has two tea producing districts, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, which are situated in its northern part. Tamil Nadu is the third largest producer with an annual production of 108 million kilogrammes. The State has 38,000 ha under tea which are recorded with the Tea Board of India and a permanent labour force of 97,000. Tea is grown in mainly two districts, Nilgiris and Coimbatore. Kerala comes fourth with 35,000 ha under tea and an annual production of 66 million kilogrammes. The labour force numbers around 72,000. The tea growing districts are Idduki and Kottayam.

A distinct feature of the tea industry is that most of the tea produced is through large tea estates. (See Table 1 for break-up on sizes of estates). While production of tea in Assam and West Bengal is exclusively through large estates, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have a sizable number of small growers owning small plots of land. In Tamil Nadu it is estimated that there are around 20,000 small growers in the Nilgiris district whose collective holdings total less than 20,000 ha. A large section of these growers are not registered with the Tea Board of India and hence their holdings and their production are not recorded in the official statistics on tea.

TABLE 1

Number of Tea Estates According to Size (hectares) in 1992

State	Below 100		100-200		200-400		400+		Total	
	No.	Area	No.	Area	No.	Area	No.	Area	No.	Area
Assam	179	9,094	135	20,255	184	55,905	221	133,563	719	218,817
West Bengal	34	1,885	59	8,838	96	28,310	99	58,001	304	97,034
Tamil Nadu	6,738	12,120	26	3,986	51	15,218	15	7,299	6,830	38,673
Kerala	4,008	4,814	24	3,510	52	14,841	21	1,136	4,105	34,525
India	11,033	29,431	296	39,967	392	11,6403	357	210,653	10,653	396,454

SOURCE: Tea Board of India; *Tea Statistics 1993-94*.

NOTE: The number and area for estates below 100 ha in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are understated (see text).

## Plantation System

The Plantation Labour Act defines a plantation as a piece of land of five hectares or more which is used for growing tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona or cardamom and on which fifteen or more persons are employed for a minimum of one day during the preceding year. According to the Tea Board of India any plantation having less than ten hectares of land under tea is a small grower.

TABLE 2

Production of Tea in 1993 (000 kg.)

State	Production
Assam	402,947
West Bengal	168,022
Tamil Nadu	108,652
Kerala	66,591
India	753,063

SOURCE: Ibid.

The plantation as an economic system has a distinct form of

production organisation which gives rise to certain specific social relations. Historically, plantations all over the world were a product of colonialism and their products were mainly for export to the more developed areas. In some cases, such as rubber and cinchona plantations, they were established to provide raw material for industry in the West — especially the colonising country. In others, such as tea, coffee, sugar, etc. their markets lay in the developed colonising countries. The rapid growth of tea plantations in India during the nineteenth century was due to the rising popularity of Indian tea over China tea in Britain. Indian tea had a thicker brew than Chinese tea and it became popular with the working class in Britain. Hence plantations in the colonies were basically international in character.

The development of plantations necessitated two basic requirements. First, large areas of land and secondly, a large labour force. However, the areas most suited for plantations were initially sparsely populated and during the formative years the plantations faced the problem of labour shortage. They had to depend on migrant labour whose migration had to be induced by the planters through fair or foul methods. The cotton plantations in the southern states of the USA, sugar plantations in Guyana, the Caribbean, rubber plantations in Malaysia, tobacco plantations in Indonesia and tea plantations in India and Sri Lanka depended on migrant labour. The early plantations in the USA, Caribbean Islands and Guyana were run on slave labour. Slavery was abolished by Britain in 1848 and by France in 1856 and after that plantations started recruiting indentured labour. Therefore it is found that the plantation came to be associated not only with a resident labour force but more often than not with migrant labour.

Non-availability of labour, however, was not the main reason for the employment of immigrant workers. The plantation is a labour intensive industry and wages amount to a large proportion of its costs. Hence a reduction in the wage bill would increase the profits substantially. Employment of indentured or slave labour assured the planters of a low cost captive labour force. The planters, therefore, obstructed the growth of a labour market where the wage would be a result of the demand for and the supply of labour. Consequently, though plantations in the early stages faced labour shortages, wages remained very low. For example, the wages of tea plantation workers in Assam and West

Bengal at the early stages of the industry were lower than the wages of agricultural labour in the vicinity.

Hence coercion, low wages and immigrant labour were the three inseparable components of the plantation system. The fourth component was political support. The colonial governments invariably supported the planters' methods of procuring labour. In fact, the colonial government passed laws to maintain the system. The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 was enforced in Assam which maintained that once a worker entered into employment in a plantation in Assam he could not leave before a period of five years. The Inland Emigration Act of 1863 replaced the earlier Act and it reduced the period of contract to four years but it also gave the right to planters to arrest erring workers. Both Acts did not grant any protection to the workers. In other parts of the country where these Acts were not enforced plantation workers found it difficult to leave a plantation, as the planters used force to prevent them and the government did not provide workers means of redressal. Hence the workers were at the mercy of the planters. Moreover, besides government support the planters were united and financially powerful. This is clearly admitted in the Report of the Rege Commission (1944) set up by the colonial government to look into the living conditions of plantation labour in India. This Commission noted that the employers were highly organised and powerful whereas the workers were "all unorganised and helpless".

Though plantations are historically linked with colonialism they are not structurally, or inevitably, linked with it. As the colonies freed themselves and became independent countries, a new set of production relations developed. Political pressure forced the government to provide protection and security of employment to plantation workers. Coercion relaxed and trade unions began to function among the workers enabling them to fight for their rights. In India, after independence, the government extended most of the laws protecting industrial workers (such as the Industrial Disputes Act, Minimum Wages Act, etc.) to the plantations and even passed a separate Act known as the Plantation Labour Act. However, the main problem before the workers is of ensuring that these Acts are enforced properly. In fact this volume mainly deals with this problem and its consequences on the lives of the workers and their families.

## **Plantation Labour in India**

Almost the entire labour force in the tea plantations consists of immigrants and their descendents. The workers in Assam and in Jalpaiguri district and the plains of Darjeeling district are mainly from the tribal belt of Central India, namely, Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana regions of Bihar and the contiguous tribal areas in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. In Darjeeling hills, almost the entire labour force are descendents of migrants from Nepal. In Tamil Nadu too the workers are not original residents of the two tea growing districts but are descendents of immigrant workers. They mainly belong to the Scheduled Castes. All these workers are now permanently settled in their respective regions with little or no contact with their places of origin.

The permanent settlement of workers in and around the plantations is mainly because recruitment of workers in the initial stages was family based. Workers were encouraged to migrate to the plantations with their families. This served two purposes. First, the planters wanted cheap labour who would be permanently settled in the plantations and this could be achieved by encouraging families to migrate rather than individuals. The entire family—males, females and children—worked on the plantation at wages determined by the planters. Secondly, family migration ensured that labour could be reproduced which would ease the problem of further recruitment in the future.

Tea plantations thus have four categories of workers: male, female, adolescent and children. Male and female workers are those above the age of 18 years and they are paid the statutory minimum wage. At present there are no wage differences between male and female workers. Till December 1975, when the Equal Remuneration Act came into force, women workers were paid lower wages. While plantations in West Bengal and the two southern States started paying equal wages from early 1976, the plantations in Assam, where half of the total tea workers are engaged, continued to pay lower wages to women workers till as late as 1990. In that year a new wage agreement was signed by the employers and the trade unions where the wage difference between the sexes was removed.

Workers who are more than 14 years old but below 18 years are adolescents. In West Bengal these workers are paid the same wages as the adults but in Assam and the southern States they are paid less than the adults. The fourth category comprises the children. These are workers below the age of 14 years. The employment of children is another distinct feature of the tea industry. We shall elaborate on this later in the section on family-based employment.

## **Organization of Work**

The plantation system has a distinct hierarchy which maintains the class structure of workers and the management. There are managers and their assistants at one end and masses of workers at the other end. There are broadly four categories of employees in the plantation system, namely, the management, staff, sub-staff and workers. The management comprises the manager, assistant managers and the factory manager. The staff is mainly the white-collar personnel and the sub-staff comprises the lower level supervisors. The workers who work in the field and the factory comprise the bulk of the population in the plantation.

Work in a plantation is basically manual in nature. The factory processes the green tea leaves into the finished product and employs less than 10 per cent of the workforce. Field workers are engaged in plucking of green tea leaves and activities related to the maintenance of the plantation and its bushes. These include hoeing, weeding, pruning, drainage, etc. Women are mainly engaged in plucking and light maintenance work. The men also pluck leaves but in addition they are given more strenuous agricultural activities. Male adolescents do more or less the same work as the men but they are frequently engaged in spraying of pesticides and weedicides. These are hazardous activities as the chemical fumes can affect their health. Usually no protection is given to workers engaged in spraying of chemicals and the Plantation Labour Act has overlooked this aspect even though the Act does provide for protective clothing for workers in the field (canvas aprons, warm clothes during winter and umbrellas for the monsoon). There is an amendment to the Act which includes protection from



chemicals but this has been gathering dust in Parliament for over three years. Lastly, children are supposed to be given lighter work such as removing weeds and undergrowth but this is not always done. Children are often found to be engaged in more strenuous work which is performed by males. Hence even though there are gender specific and age specific categories in the workforce the nature of work is similar.

The hierarchy in the work organisation is fairly elaborate. There are several intermediaries between the manager and the workers, a large section of which belong to the sub-staff. In fact, many of these strata exist only to relay orders from the top and widen the social distance between the management and the workers. The management of plantations is mainly based on fear and maintenance of social distance by the management. In this sense, there is an inherent contradiction in the plantation system. Though plantations constitute an industry, the relations which exist between the management and workers have remnants which are pre-industrial. There is a stark difference between the opulent life style of the management and the frugal living conditions of the workers and the sub-staff. The intermediary layers in the hierarchy thus, in a way, bridge the gulf between the worker and the manager.

### Implications of Family-based Employment WOMEN AND CHILD WORKERS

The most notable feature of employment in plantations is the large scale employment of women and the existence of child labour. Women constitute more than half the labour force. (See Table 3) This is quite contrary to the trend in other industries in the organised sector where employment of women has declined drastically. Work on the plantation is to a large extent gender specific. Women are more efficient in plucking leaves and their employment is thus ensured. Despite this women almost always remain as ordinary workers and are seldom promoted to the supervisory categories (namely, sub-staff).

TABLE 3  
Permanent Workers in Tea Plantations (1992)

State	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Assam	256,249	249,848	11,041	43,537	560,675
West Bengal	110,150	116,387	5,389	10,956	242,882
Tamil Nadu	40,278	57,086	195	79	97,638
Kerala	31,804	38,337	1,314	67	71,522
India	447,085	470,835	18,230	55,554	991,704

In reality the more important reason for the employment of women is because of family based employment in plantations in the earlier stages. As noted earlier, families migrated to the plantations and all members were engaged in work. This tradition has since continued. In fact the planters have now used the widespread employment of women as a means of depressing the wage rates. The Fifteenth Indian Labour Conference held in 1957 decided on the concept of a need-based minimum wage which took into account three units of consumption while determining the wage of a worker. The employers organisations in the tea industry protested against this formula by arguing that since employment was family based (that is, every family had atleast two workers) only 1.5 units of consumption should be considered for determining the minimum wages of tea workers. The Central Wage Board for the Tea Plantation Industry (1966) found this argument baseless and commented:

The family system of employment cannot be considered as unique to the tea plantation industry and even if it had been so it is a matter of consideration whether it is justified for employers to claim benefit of it by way of low wages for male wage earners.

The planters, however, obstinately stuck to their own concept of wage determination. As a result, tea plantation workers are the lowest paid in the organised sector. We shall deal with this aspect in the section on wages. However, the fact remains that the planters have used the existence of the high employment of women workers to keep wages low. The other aspect is the existence of child labour which is again a result of the earlier practice of family-based employment. For example,

if the planter was able to induce a family comprising husband, wife and two children to work on the plantation he could save considerably on recruitment costs than if he employed four workers of four families. In the latter case the planter would have to bear the recruiting costs of these workers and also provide separate houses for each of them. As a result, employment of child labour continued even after labour shortage was overcome by the 1950s. In fact the Plantation Labour Act which was passed in 1951 and came into effect in 1954 clearly allows employment of child labour in plantations. Section 2(c) of the Act defines a child worker as one who is either male or female and is less than 14 years of age. Interestingly, the Act does not mention the minimum age. At the same time, the Child Labour (Amendment) Act of 1985 which regulates the employment of children in the unorganised sector has stipulated 14 years as the minimum age of employment. This Act is not applicable to the tea industry.

Most of the child workers are employed in the two States of Assam and West Bengal. (See Table 3) Xaxa's study of Assam shows that according to the State's Labour Department there are over 80,000 child workers in the State. Xaxa has argued that this may be an overestimation because a large section of child workers may not be children but adolescents or adults who are kept in the category of children in order to pay them lower wages. This may be true to some extent because the wages of children in both the States are half those of adults and employers may continue to keep workers who are over 14 years of age as children. With the low, almost non-existent, employment opportunities in the plantation regions these workers could not protest too strongly lest they lose their jobs. However, the fact remains that the category of child worker is an exploitative category because it encourages parents to force their children to work rather than send them to school and offers the planters a leverage to reduce the wages of workers.

On looking at the data on wages (Table 4) we can clearly see that there is a connection between low wages and child labour. In the South Indian States the wages are substantially higher and the wages of children are two-thirds that of adults. In North India, on the other hand, wages are low and children are paid half the wages of adults. In fact the wages of children in South India are at par with the wages of

adults in North India. Therefore it is not 'economical' for planters to employ children in the southern States while it is in Assam and West Bengal. The low rate of wages in the latter States in fact force parents to send their children to work in order to increase the family income. Besides this, educational opportunities (especially post-primary) are better in Tamil Nadu than the two northern States and parents prefer to send their children to school. In Assam and West Bengal, on the contrary, there is little scope for post-primary education for children of plantation workers. Hence availability of schooling facilities is a vital factor for reduction of child labour.

### Wages

As mentioned earlier, wages of tea plantation workers are the lowest in the organised production sector. Our studies show that the average monthly wage of workers in Assam and West Bengal is less than Rs. 600 per month while in Tamil Nadu it is around Rs. 850 per month. Though workers in Tamil Nadu are paid more in comparison, their wages are much lower than those of mine workers. The workers in the two northern States get rations of food grains at subsidised rates whereas workers in Tamil Nadu get rations at fixed prices which are lower than market prices. However this does not compensate for the low wages in North India.

TABLE 4  
Daily Wages (Cash)

State	Daily Wage (Rs.)		Incentive (Paise)	Minimum Quota (Kg)
	Adult	Child		
Assam (average for all zones)	23.60	11.80	27	21
West Bengal	24.30	12.15	32	21 - 30
Tamil Nadu	40.00	25.00	24 - 40	14 - 16

At the time these studies were conducted the average daily wage of an adult worker in Assam was Rs. 23.60, in West Bengal it was Rs. 24.30 and in Tamil Nadu it was Rs. 40. Children were paid half the wages of adults in Assam and West Bengal but in Tamil Nadu they got Rs. 25. The workers are paid wages for time as well as piece work. The

wages mentioned above relate to their time rate. In addition, workers engaged in plucking are given an incentive wage for plucking above the fixed daily quota. This enhances the total wage. The incentive wage in West Bengal was Re 0.32 per kg. and in Assam it was Re 0.27 paise per kg. In Tamil Nadu the incentive wage varied with the amount of leaves plucked. The minimum quota was fixed at 14 kg. for plantations producing less than 1600 kg. of tea per annum and 16 kg. for those producing more than that amount of tea. The incentive rate is in slabs, according to the leaves plucked. For example, a worker plucking between 17 and 35 kg. when the minimum quota was 16 kg. would be paid an incentive rate of Re 0.27 per kg. If he plucked above 35 kg. the incentive was increased to Re 0.35 per kg. In West Bengal and Assam the minimum load is not uniform as it is fixed by the management of each plantation. Moreover, the quota increases during the peak season (June to September) and decreases from November onwards when the quantity of leaves decline. The minimum load is never below 21 kg. and could be as high as 30 kg. in some plantations.

The incentive wage does increase the total income of the plantation worker to some extent. This is more so in the case of Tamil Nadu as there is more or less stable production throughout the year. In Assam and West Bengal the scope for incentive wages increases during the peak season but declines thereafter. Besides, the plantations in these two States do not have any production during three months in winter as bushes are pruned then. Hence taking into account these factors the incentive wage does not add much to the existing low wages. Moreover, all workers are not engaged in plucking of tea leaves. At an average only half the workers are engaged in this activity and the others are given other agricultural tasks. It is only during the peak season that a majority of workers are engaged in plucking. For around five months of the nine-month plucking period the yield is average and there is little scope for the worker to earn the incentive wage.

### Trade Unions

The Report of the Rege Commission mentions that during the colonial rule the workers were unorganised and helpless. It also noted that formation of trade unions could help ease the workers' problems but such an eventuality seemed unlikely because of the stiff resistance from the planters. In fact though the tea industry started in Assam in its

reorganised form in the 1850s, in Darjeeling and Tamil Nadu in the 1860s and in Jalpaiguri in the 1870s, the trade unions appeared much later. At the time of independence in 1947 there were no unions to speak of. As the plantations were isolated and the planters had complete control over their workers, it was difficult for union organisers to enter these areas. It was only after independence that trade unions could enter the plantations. In other words, for seventy or eighty years of its existence this industry, employing over a million workers, was unfamiliar with the methods of collective bargaining.

After independence, especially since the 1950s, trade unions started organising workers and got an overwhelming response from them. An earlier study conducted by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in 1992 on unionisation and employment showed that almost all tea plantation workers in West Bengal were members of unions. In Assam too trade unions are widespread. The main difference between the two States is that West Bengal has a large number of unions while the INTUC affiliated unions dominate among the workers in Assam. In West Bengal, half the workers in Jalpaiguri and the plains of Darjeeling are members of the CITU while the INTUC comes next with approximately 30 per cent membership followed by the UTUC. The rest of the workers are members of a wide assortment of trade unions. In Tamil Nadu the independent unions are more popular though the HMS too has a good following. The workers by and large are aware of the benefits of unionisation and that is why one will rarely come across a plantation where workers are not unionised. We have found that even when a particular union does not fully serve the interests of its members, the workers are reluctant to let go because they realise that a bad union is still better than no union.

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## CHAPTER 2

# Condition of Tea Estate Labourers in Assam

*Virginus Xaxa*

Assam plays a leading role in the production of tea. According to the Tea Board statistics, the State had 848 tea estates in 1991-92. This did not include the small tea growers numbering more than 100, registered with the Tea Board but had planted tea bushes recently. The area under tea in this State is more than the tea-growing area in the other three tea-growing States put together. In 1991-92, the area stood at 233,284 hectares and production at 396,604 thousand kgs. of tea. Unlike the other States, where tea growing is confined to a few districts, tea producing in Assam is scattered over the whole of the State. (See Table 1) The spread is of course not even. There is a far greater number of tea estates in the Assam Valley than the Surma Valley. Silchar is the only zone that falls in the Surma Valley, the number of gardens there being only 100. The remaining 630 gardens were concentrated in the Assam Valley. Within this Valley most of the tea gardens are located in the upper part of the valley namely, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Golaghat, Tezpur, and Naogaon, than the lower portion (Gauhati, Dhubri). In fact as many as 611 out of 630 gardens were situated in the upper valley. Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Tezpur have more number of tea gardens as compared to the Naogaon and Golaghat districts.

It is not surprising then that the tea estates of Assam employ more workforce than those in the other States put together. Indeed of the total labour employed in tea estates, Assam accounts for as much as 53

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*The author was assisted by M.C. Goswami and Anthony Xaxa in the collection of field data for the present work.*

per cent. In 1991 the strength of the tea garden working force stood at 698,185 of which 677,685 were workers 6626 artisans and 13,874 clerical staff members. Of the workers 578,885 were adults, 9202 adolescents and 89,598 children. Within Assam, for reasons stated above, there is a far greater concentration of labour in the upper Assam districts. These districts cover nearly 85 per cent of the total workers engaged in the State's tea industry.

TABLE 1

## District-wise Distribution of Tea Gardens

Zone	No. of Gardens	No of Gardens Filed Returns	Total Workforce
Dibrugarh	133	123	115,638
Tinsukia	116	90	137,474
Jorhat	168	167	122,075
Golaghat	77	67	45,315
Naogaon	23	21	21,787
Guwahati	10	10	7,406
Tezpur	94	92	159,732
Dhubri	9	9	11,828
Silchar	100	75	70,171
Total	730	654	691,426

SOURCE: Govt. of Assam, *Annual Administration Report*, p. 27.

The features that characterise the tea garden labour force have their social roots in history. Tea plantations in Assam, as elsewhere, were faced from the very outset with an acute shortage of labour. Not only was local labour scanty it was also disinclined to work in the plantations. At the same time, planters were on the lookout for a labour force that was easy to control and exploit. The result was that labour was recruited from provinces far away from the plantation sites. They were also recruited from various cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Broadly, however, the labour came from three different linguistic groups. They were: (a) the Kolarian speaking group (Santal, Munda, Kharia, Ho, Bhumij, etc.); (b) the Dravidian speaking group (Oraon, Khond, Gond, Mal Paharia, etc.), and (c) the Aryan speaking group (Oriya, Bengalee and Hindi speaking caste groups). Over the years

these groups have preserved their distinct lifestyles. Tribal groups stand in sharp contrast to castes but are themselves considerably differentiated. The other important aspect of tea garden labour force in Assam was that a major segment of it was essentially unfree.

It is important to note here that the foundation of plantation economy was envisaged on cheap exploitation of labour. In fact, it was stated in 1834 that the low price of labour in India would facilitate this enterprise and at the same time would be able to provide occupation for many thousands of Indian weavers who had been ruined by the import of clothes and muslin from Manchester. Paradoxically enough, however, it was not the displaced artisans of the villages of India but the tribal population of the Chotanagpur plateau that turned out to be the main source of labour supply to plantation estates in northeast India. But their recruitment and transportation came to constitute a major bottleneck. The Imperial Government was, of course, concerned with this problem and it was on its suggestion that the Tea Planters Association was formed with the objective of undertaking an organized system of recruitment. Nevertheless, the actual recruitment and transportation were left to the private contractors from Calcutta who, working for the agency houses, began deporting group after group of labourers to the plantation estates in Assam. The general practice to procure labour by them was abduction, enticement and other similar practices and their transportation was so inhuman that it brought to mind the slave traffic in the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, the mortality on the journey and at arrival was so high that the Government had to appoint a commission to enquire into the problem as early as 1861.

The enquiry led to the enactment of an Act in 1863 which ensured that mortality rate of labourers was reduced and that labourers understood their undertaking. To this end, contractors, recruiters, steamers, boats, etc. were licensed and labourers were produced and a contract signed before the judicial or civil authorities. Yet, in the absence of any effective measure for its implementation, the Act was a failure. Moreover, the Act did not provide any safety, after their arrival on the estate; they were faced with inadequate housing, unhygienic living condition, food shortage, hard work, etc., all of which, told heavily on

their weak physique. The result was the staggering mortality, which is evident from the fact that out of 84,915 labourers who landed between 1863 to 1866, over 33,000 died within a span of less than three years.

As if this misery and hardship was not enough, the labourers had to abide by the Act XIII of 1859, that is, the Workman's Breach of Contract Act, which clearly protected the interests of the planters and rendered the labourer liable to prosecution for any breach of contract which was entered into by him either knowingly or in ignorance.

The Act III of 1863, having met with failure, was amended in 1865. In its new form, it prescribed minimum wages, limited the hours of work to nine per day and six days per week and also reduced the duration of contract from four to three years. The Act was, however, again a failure, with the result that another commission of enquiry was set up in 1868 which reported quite unfavourably on the condition of labour in northeast India and recommended an alternative method of recruitment in view of the still unsatisfactory nature of the present recruiting system. The new system was known as the *sardari* recruiting system and it had already been in vogue in Cachar district of Assam. Yet the system was given legal sanction only in 1870 and was governed by the Acts of 1863 and 1865. The two systems of recruitment thus existed side by side till 1915 when the old system that had sustained the industry for over seven decades, was abolished. By this time, however, local labour—in view of considerable labour force settling in the neighbouring unclaimed land after the expiry of contract—had begun to be accessible. Further, labour from outside filtered in through the new system. In this situation, the abolition of the system was hardly damaging to the planters. Even so, the abolition did not prevent them from using the Act of 1859, which they amply used to put pressure on labourers whose contract had expired as well as on labourers who had settled in the neighbouring non-tea areas.<sup>19</sup> The mechanism used for this purpose was usually a loan, or an advance bonus. The extension of the Act to these batches of labourers was finally abolished in 1926 after there was violent protest against it in the wake of the spread of national movement in the region. It is interesting to note that there were 270,000 labourers working under this Act in Assam till 1921.

While the tea industry has steadily prospered and made huge profits,

there has been little improvement in the condition of work, employment, wage, basic amenities, etc. until after independence. The post-independence saw some changes in the social structure of the plantation. To start with, there was change in the character of the government which was relatively more concerned to protect the interests of the workers. Hence, it made legislations from time to time with a view to safeguard and protect the interest of the workers. Some of these legislations were also applicable to the plantation. These were the Industrial Disputes Act 1947, the Factories Act 1948, the Minimum Wage Act 1948, the Plantation Labour Act 1951, the Employee's Provident Fund Act 1952, the Industrial Employment Act 1958, the Maternity Benefit Act 1961, the Payment of Bonus Act 1961, etc. Among the Acts affecting the garden workers, the most important was the Plantations Labour Act 1951. The Act made various provisions for the welfare of the plantation workers especially those concerning housing, sanitation and water supply in labour lines. The State Governments also set up Labour Bureaus which appointed a Labour Commissioner and Labour Officers to see to the implementation of the provisions laid down in the Act. Labour tribunals were also set up to arbitrate on the cases of disputes. The Plantation Labour Act (PLA) enacted in 1951 was meant to overcome these problems. Yet till today it has not been fully enforced. Even the basic requirement like housing remains neglected. The present study focuses on the conditions of tea garden labour in the backdrop of the above legislation.

### Labour Force: A Profile

The State of Assam is marked by considerable diversity—geographical, economic, social, political, etc. The same is reflected in the tea estates and its workforce situated therein. The economic conditions of tea gardens in different parts are far from uniform. Accordingly, the conditions of work, wage facilities, living conditions, and other amenities vary from estate to estate. It becomes difficult, therefore, to project a clear picture on the basis of studies carried out in a few tea estates. However, a general picture of the position of tea garden labourers in the State of Assam is presented here for the benefit of researchers.

In the tea estates of Assam, as elsewhere, three types of workers are usually employed. These are adult, adolescent and child. (See Table 2)

**TABLE 2**  
**Nature of Labour Force in Tea Gardens**

Habitation	Year 1991			Year 1993		
	Adult	Adolesc.	Child	Adult	Adolesc.	Child
Resident:	443,276	6,157	52,143	452,331	10,007	40,634
Non-Res.:	135,689	3,045	37,185	131,534	3,908	30,484
Total	578,885	9,202	89,598	583,865	13,915	71,118

**SOURCE:** (1) Government of Assam, Annual Administration Report 1991-92, p. 17,  
(2) Office of the Labour Commissioner, Guwahati.

In 1991 the total labour force employed in tea industry of Assam stood at 677,685. The corresponding figure was 668,898 in 1993. Of 668,898 workers, 583,865 were adults and the remaining were adolescents (13,915) and children (71,118). A comparison of the position of labour force in 1991 and 1993, shows an increase in the size of adult labour force as well as adolescent labour. But whereas the adult labour force showed an increase of mere 1213, with respect to adolescents the increase was by 4713.

Employment of children in tea plantation estates of northeast India is as old as the tea industry itself. Acute labour shortage faced by the industry in the initial stages gave rise to this practice. Since the last few decades, however, there has been a growing trend of increase in the surplus labour force within the tea estates as well as in the adjoining areas. Mainly due to mechanisation of farm cultivation and factory processing. In the most recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in the employment of child labour and a corresponding increase in the employment of adolescent labour force. This is very intriguing. The reason for this lies mainly in the fact that tea gardens in general have come under severe attack from fair trade groups and organisations for employing child labour. This could mean that either child labour is still employed but put into the category of adolescent labour force for administrative purposes or that earlier adolescents had been employed but put into the category of child labour. Such an arrangement was advantageous to the employers and managers of tea gardens as it helped

to reduce the cost of production by paying the lower children's wages to the adolescent labour force.

The bulk of labour working in tea plantations lives within the garden and is described as a resident labour. Besides this, a substantial size of labour force comes to work from outside the garden. This is known as non-resident labour and in local parlance as a *basti* labour. In 1991, 175,919 out of 501,576 labourers came from outside the garden. In 1993, however, there was some decline in the labour force coming from outside the garden, the number coming down to 165,926.

More and more land is being used for tea-growing in Assam. There has also been an increase in production as well as productivity. The average yield per hectare in the Assam Valley was 1656 kgs. in 1989. This went up to 1685 kgs. in 1990 and 1700 kgs. in 1991. In the Surma Valley, the average yield was 1117 kgs. in 1989 and 1150 kgs. in 1991. Interestingly enough, belying these statistics is the steady decline in the employment of permanent labour force in the tea industry. In 1960, there were 507,111 permanently employed workers in the tea gardens of Assam which steadily dwindled to 454,412 in 1970, 432,980 in 1980 and 427,375 in 1990. There was a slight improvement in 1991. (See Table 3) This may be due to the initiatives taken by the trade unions.

**TABLE 3**  
**Permanent Employment in Tea Gardens**

Year	No. of estates	Area in hectares	Production in '000 kgs.	Permanent workers
1960	799	161,940	182,311	507,111
1965	747	169,659	181,355	494,892
1970	751	182,325	212,027	454,412
1975	756	188,794	263,655	440,127
1980	769	196,459	283,876	432,980
1990	848	230,363	388,181	427,375
1991	848	233,284	396,604	487,678

**SOURCES:** (1) A.K. Nag, "The Condition of Tea Garden Labourers in North-East India and Its Background", in S. Karotemprel and B. Datta Ray (ed.), *Tea Garden Labourers of North-East India*, Shillong: 1190, p. 55.  
(2) Tea Board, *Tea Statistics 1989, 1990 and 1991*.

The trade unions have been showing concern over this aspect and have been demanding an improvement on this matter through bilateral agreements. The employment of more labour on the basis of land-labour or crop-labour ratio has been objected to by the employers' organisation. However, they have agreed to offer permanent employment to a certain number on an *ad hoc* basis.

Curiously, while there has been a steady decline in the employment of permanent labour force, there has been an increase in the number of those temporarily employed in the tea gardens of Assam. This labour force is recruited from within the gardens as well as from outside. In 1984, there were in all 170,495 non-permanent workers in Assam. By 1986, the figure had gone up to 189,750. By the year 1991, the figure of non-permanent workers stood at 268,450 of which 130,544 were from within the garden and 137,906 from outside. The employment of non-permanent labour force from within the garden has always been large and it has gone on increasing but the employment of such labour force from outside the garden has shown an unprecedented increase during the year 1991. (See Table 4)

TABLE 4

## Increase in Employment of Temporary Labour Force

Year	Non-Permanent		Total
	Resident	Non-Resident	
1984	102,674	67,821	170,495
1985	105,816	72,818	178,644
1986	111,838	78,912	—
1989	—	81,421	—
1990	—	86,227	—
1991	130,544	137,906	268,450

SOURCE: Tea Board, *Tea Statistics 1980, 1981 and 1992*.

It is fairly obvious then that there does exist a vast surplus labour within the tea estates which does not find employment all through the year. The plantation activity requires additional labour force only during

the plucking season which lasts for about six to eight months. Those employed as temporary labour force thus find work only during the plucking season. Their employment is mainly seasonal. A large proportion of the temporarily employed labour force are usually women. Whereas in 1991-92, the figure of male labourers temporarily employed was 80,791, the number of women workers was 110,701. (See Table 5)

TABLE 5

## Gender Ratio of Employed Labour Force

	Male		Female	
	Resident	Non-Resident	Resident	Non-Resident
Permanent	158,340	15,576	163,869	18,133
Temporary	40,660	40,131	48,932	61,769

SOURCE: Government of Assam, *Annual Administration Report, 1991-92*.

## Wage Structure

In comparison to other tea producing States of India, the wage structure in the tea estates of Assam remains low. The last fixation of minimum wages for tea garden workers was made in February 1990 which was to come into effect from 1 November 1989. This fixation was made after a lapse of 28 years. Prior to the fixation, the daily wage of an adult male worker was Rs. 13.10, of female worker Rs. 12.92 and of children Rs. 6.55 in Zone A. In Zone B, the corresponding figure was Rs. 13.03 for a male worker, Rs. 12.86 for a female worker and Rs. 6.51 for children. In Zone C, the wage of an adult worker—both male and female—was Rs. 10.84 and of non-adult worker Rs. 5.48. Immediately after the wage fixation, an adult worker earned a daily wage of Rs. 15.30 in Zone A, Rs. 15.23 in Zone B, and Rs. 15.20 in Zone C and so on. In Zone E, the wage rate during the period was Rs. 13.04. In Assam, variation exists in the wage rate of different tea growing zones. The variation is greater between the regions than within the region. For example, the wage rate was in the range of Rs. 15.70 to Rs. 15.20 in the upper Assam, Rs. 15.13 in lower Assam and Rs. 13.04 in the Surma Valley in the year after the wage fixation. (See Table 6)



TABLE 6

## Increase in Wage Rate after Minimum Wage Fixation

Zones	1989		1990		1991	
	Adult	Non-Adult	Adult	Non-Adult	Adult	Non-Adult
A	15.30	7.65	16.45	8.23	17.60	8.81
B	15.23	7.61	16.38	8.19	17.53	8.77
C	18.20	7.61	16.35	8.18	17.50	8.76
D	15.13	7.60	16.28	8.15	17.43	8.76
D1	15.13	7.57	16.28	8.15	17.43	8.73
E	13.04	6.58	14.19	7.16	15.34	7.24

SOURCE: Memorandum of Settlement, 10 January 1993.

Whereas equal wages for male and female had been in practice in West Bengal since 1976, in Assam the disparity continued until the fixation of the minimum wages in 1990. A bilateral agreement between the union and employers' association (after a number of deliberations) was reached in January 1992 for revising the wages of daily rated workers. The increase agreed was Rs. 2.50 for an adult and Rs. 1.25 for a non-adult for the period between 1992 to 31 March 1994 with a proviso of further increase of Rs. 1.75 for an adult worker and Rs. 0.88 for a non-adult for the period 1 April 1994 to 31 March 1995 and an additional increase of Rs. 1.75 for an adult and Rs. 0.88 for a non-adult for the period 1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996.

An adult worker thus receives a wage of Rs. 23.60 in Zone A, Rs. 23.53 in Zone B, Rs. 23.50 in Zone C, Rs. 23.43 in Zone D and D1. In Zone E, this bilateral agreement was not applicable. The fixation of wage during the plucking operation was slightly different. Since the plucking season of 1993, the minimum plucking task was 21 kgs. and the plucking rate per kilogramme above the minimum plucking task was Re 0.27. The daily allowance for adult worker during the *ticca* plucking season since 1993 has been Rs. 14.43 in Zone A, Rs. 14.36 in Zones B and C and Rs. 14.26 in Zones D and D1.

### Housing

At the inception of the tea plantation, almost the entire labour force was recruited from outside the region. Hence, the planters provided

the labourers with houses. The houses were made of mud-covered bamboo walls and thatched roofs. What the PLA did was to promote houses of the permanent nature. This meant higher expenditure but the planters were expected to do it in a phased manner. Accordingly, appropriate rules were framed which came into force in 1956. As per the provision of the rules, a minimum of 8 per cent was required to be constructed annually. The compliance of this statutory regulation would have led to the construction of houses for all the permanent residential workers by 1970. The position is, however, far from satisfactory. A study conducted in 1984 revealed persistent large shortfalls. Of the 576 tea estates out of a total of 770 for which information was available, the total shortfall stood at 65,555 as against a total requirement of 210,307. It is obvious that the percentage of shortfall would be much larger if all the 770 tea estates were taken into consideration.<sup>1</sup>

The shortfall persists even today. From the returns available for 666 gardens out of 730 for the year 1991-92, we find the total number of houses to be constructed at 258,335. The number of houses of approved specifications provided were, however, only 196,429. There was thus a shortfall of 61,912 houses. The number is likely to rise if the total number of tea estates are kept in mind. As against this, the total number of houses required during 1990-91 stood at 2,67,006. The houses, of approved specifications provided were 1,86,483 which meant that there was an overall shortfall of 81,403 houses in 1990-91.<sup>2</sup>

### Sanitation

We do not have systematic data on aspects of welfare regarding their dwelling place. The annual report of the government provides no data on this aspect. From field observation, however, we find the situation deplorable. Water points have been inadequate, most of the latrines provided are in a broken state, streetlights are non-existent and the roads and the lanes in labour settlements especially in the rainy season are pathetic. We can merely illustrate this phenomenon from the data that we have from 26 gardens in Tinsukia. There were in all 19,657 households in these gardens. The number of water taps available were only 625, tubewell 4777, ring wells 21. Pucca latrines available were 15,845 and kuccha 3386. Similarly, of 11 tea gardens in Dibrugarh for which we have data, there were only 15 taps, 1866 tubewells, 6616 pucca houses, 308 kuccha houses, 5931 pucca latrines and 131

kuccha latrines. The total number of households in these gardens were 2117.<sup>3</sup>

### Medical Facilities

The provision made for the welfare of the labourers in the PLA, is far from satisfactory on the aspect of health and health facilities. The facilities such as dispensaries, hospitals, group hospitals as well as qualified medical personnels such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, etc. are far below what is required by the statutory regulations. (See Table 7) This is amply clear if one examines the data on this aspect filed by 666 gardens carefully.

TABLE 7  
Status of Medical Facilities

Facilities	1990-91	1991-92
Hospitals	502	482
Dispensaries	662	668
Qualified doctors	423	416
Visiting doctors	393	398
Pharmacists	645	691
Nurses	351	423
Midwives	330	440
Nurses cum midwives	290	298]
Dhai/attendants	600	690
Health assistant	436	463
Beds in hospitals	—	32,811
Beds at dispensaries	—	1,403
Inspections made	350	1,359
Complaints investigated	490	135
Cases fielded	—	47
Conviction obtained	—	02

SOURCE: Government of Assam, Annual Administration Report, pp. 17-19 and 31.

### Creches

From 666 gardens on which returns are available, we find 1917 creches for children below two years with an average daily attendance of 8094

children and 1461 creches for children above two years with an average daily attendance of 5051 children. The number of hammocks and beds made available at creche for the use of children were 3043 and 1124 respectively. The number of *ayahs* engaged were 608.

### Education

Scope of occupation and social mobility among tea garden workers is generally limited. The key to such mobility lies in the spread of education. But it is precisely here that we find the situation most depressing despite the fact that the PLA makes provision for educational advancement of the tea garden labourers. A study of lower primary (LP) schools in the tea gardens of Sibsagar and Jorhat show the dropout rate as high as 98 per cent within five years. The situation is not much different in other districts. General apathy to education by the management as well as the Union is the principal factor. In the tea gardens of Assam, primary schools are run by two agencies—the tea estate management and the government. In the districts of Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj near about 200 tea garden schools have been taken over by the government. Many of the schools, however, are yet to be taken over by the government. The tea estate authorities have begun to show no concern on this aspect. In other districts of the State, the tea garden schools are still managed by the garden authorities. There were about 370 schools under such management in 1990. (See Table 8) It appears that there are still gardens where school facilities do not exist. This can be inferred from the fact that in Dibrugarh 128 gardens had filed returns but the number of schools shown was only 122. On the whole, facilities provided and teachers maintained seem to meet the requirement of the PLA.

Despite the facilities provided by the government and the management, the enrolment level is very low as can be seen from the table. The literacy level in tea gardens is extremely deplorable. A study in the tea gardens in Jorhat, estimated the percentage of literacy at 11.65. If one goes by the level of literacy then we find 8.30 per cent at LP level, 0.47 per cent LP passed, 2.33 per cent Matric and only 0.47 per cent at higher education.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 8

## Status of Education and Educational Facilities

Zone	No. of Gardens (with returns)	No. of Children (6-12 year)	No. of Schools	Children attending schools	No. of teachers
Dibrugarh	128	25,674	122	8,392	187
Tinsukia	93	32,269	101	10,229	206
Naogaon	22	9233	26	2252	49
Tezpur	94	36,185	108	11,477	188
Gauhati	9	1900	7	589	5
Dhubri	9	1535	10	1461	10

NOTE: In Jorhat, Golaghat and Silchar, schools have been taken over by the government.

SOURCE: Government of Assam, *Annual Administration Report 1991-92*, p. 32.

## Labour Welfare Officers

Section 18 of the PLA makes provision for employment of Welfare Officers for every garden with 300 or more workers. Accordingly, the management of tea plantation is required to employ labour welfare officers in their garden to look after the welfare of the workers. In Assam, the total number of welfare officers required to be appointed is 452. In 1991, there were 311 Welfare Officers and in 1992, there were 372. Ten gardens with more than 12,000 workers are expected to have a second Welfare Officer who has to be a woman. Any problem pertaining to labour is looked after by the Welfare Officers.

## Other Welfare Schemes

The major objectives of the PLA was to promote and safeguard the welfare of the plantation labourers. The provision made in the Act, however, mainly pertained to the condition of work and living in the plantation estates. The Act did not provide help to the labourers to move out from the tea estates and take up jobs outside the estates. Indeed, the plantation labourers have continued to live and work in the same situation, generation after generation. Social mobility among them, however, is possible only if plantation workers acquire higher education and new kinds of skills. Facilities and environment for acquiring such skills are far from favourable. In Assam, the government

has initiated some steps in this direction. Various schemes have been evolved and looked after by the government. The Assam Tea Employees Welfare Board has been set up with this objective in mind. Schemes run by the Board are many and varied—ranging from providing rest house facilities at medical college hospitals to opening up of training centres to reservation of seats in medical, engineering, polytechnic and other institutions.

Thus, two permanent rest houses for tea garden patients have been attached to Silchar and Dibrugarh medical colleges. Medical aid to tuberculosis and cancer patients of tea gardens at the rate of Rs. 100 per month per patient for six months, eye relief camps, ex-gratia payments in acute and unforeseen distresses are some other welfare facilities extended by the Board. The other schemes concern 10 months training course held every year for female plantation workers at Mezenga in health hygiene, family welfare care and vocational subjects like weaving, tailoring, knitting and embroidery. They are also provided with a stipend at the rate of Rs. 150 per month.

At the Rowriah Welfare Centre, training for electrician and mason trades is given to the plantation labourers. In addition, the Board runs 18 community centres which are scattered all over the State. These centres provide training in carpentry and tailoring, knitting and embroidery and vulcanizing and cycle repairing. The number of persons who received training in these centres is as follows: carpentry—142; cutting and tailoring—207; knitting; embroidery and weaving—54; vulcanising—62; and cycle-repairing—57. The most important schemes, however, concern students from the gardens. Not only are they provided with seat reservation at medical, engineering, pharmacy, technical, polytechnic, nursing and other institutions, but are also extended such facilities as free hostel accommodation, book grant, stipends, etc. for students in colleges and other technical institutions.

## Major Tea Producing Districts: A Profile

To understand the existing conditions of labour in the tea gardens of Assam, fieldwork was carried out in two districts, namely, Dibrugarh and Jorhat. Till recently, Jorhat was a part of much larger districts of Sibsagar. Similarly, Dibrugarh included parts which today form

separate districts. There are today 133 tea gardens in Dibrugarh with a total working force of 115,638 persons including, of course, the clerical staff and artisans. Of these, 111,846 are labourers—62,698 permanent and 49,148 temporary. In Jorhat there are 167 gardens (as per 1991 figures) where the PLA is applicable. It has a total of 122,075 workers of which 117,707 are labourers. Of the latter, 81,511 are permanent and 36,196 temporary labourers. If one looks into the resident and non-resident character of the labour force, one finds that Dibrugarh has 79,105 resident labourers as against 41,454 non-resident. In contrast, Jorhat has a resident labour force as large as 94,350 whereas non-resident labour force was just 24,065. Of the total labourers employed in Dibrugarh, 102,069 were adults, 763 adolescents and 17,707 children in 1991. In Jorhat, the corresponding figure was 100,890, 4013, and 12,449 labourers respectively.

Both Dibrugarh and Jorhat fall in the same tea growing zone. Hence, tea gardens in both the districts have the same wage structure. The number of houses required to be constructed under the PLA was 34,277 in Dibrugarh and 52,915 in Jorhat at the beginning of 1991. During the year 1991, 13,702 and 14,836 houses of latest specifications were constructed in Dibrugarh and Jorhat respectively. There was thus a shortfall of 20,570 specified houses in Dibrugarh and 38,079 in Jorhat by the end of 1991.

The two districts provide a striking contrast with regard to the number of hospitals, medical doctors, schools, creches, etc. For example, in Dibrugarh, which has 128 gardens, the number of hospitals is 97, with 22,163 beds 104 dispensaries with 197 detention beds. With respect to medical staff, the Dibrugarh district has 80 qualified medical practitioners, 115 pharmacists, 62 qualified nurses, 91 qualified midwives, 85 health assistants and 142 nursing attendants. (At the time of study there were 94 visiting doctors also.) In contrast, Jorhat has 87 hospitals with 2475 beds, 150 dispensaries with 395 detention beds. These are manned by 75 qualified medical practitioners, 138 pharmacists, 132 qualified nurses, 124 qualified midwives, 95 health assistants and 178 nursing attendants. Needless to say that on many of these aspects, the two districts have failed to approximate the PLA requirements.

In all, there are 550 creches in Dibrugarh of which 366 are meant for children below two years and 184 for children above two years. A total of 122 *ayahs* were employed to look after the children. The number of hammocks, cots made available on each day are 130 and 215 respectively. In Jorhat, the total number of creches are 401 of which 164 are for children below two years and 237 for those above two years. The number of *ayahs* employed were 107 and the number of hammocks and cots available on each day are 137 and 85 respectively.

### Tea Gardens: A Profile

The survey was conducted among the labourers of two gardens each selected from two districts. A small sample of 200 households—50 from each of the gardens in Jorhat and Dibrugarh—was studied.

The four gardens are company owned. In both the districts, the two gardens selected are adjacent to each other. In Jorhat, the gardens are situated at a distance ranging from 26-27 kms. from the nearest town of Jorhat. In Dibrugarh, the distance of the two gardens from Dibrugarh town is in the range of 14-16 kms. Of the two gardens in the Dibrugarh district, one is at a distance of one kilometre from the main road and the other two kilometres. In Jorhat, the distance of the two gardens from the main road is 2.5 and 7.3 kms respectively.

### Population and Labour

The total population in the four gardens is 14,838. The distribution of the population is however not even. The two estates in Jorhat, have a population of 5306 (35.75 per cent) of the total population, while the gardens in Dibrugarh have a population of 9532 which constitutes 64.25 per cent of the total population. Of the total population of 14,838, 56.26 per cent are males and 43.73 per cent females. (See Table 9)

The pattern of gender distribution of three out of four gardens is similar. In the two gardens of Jorhat males comprise over 52 per cent of the total population and females over 47 per cent. In Dibrugarh, the sex ratio distribution is, however, not similar. Whereas in one garden the proportion of males and females is almost similar to those in Jorhat, in another, males account for 61 per cent of the total population.

TABLE 9

## Population Distribution on the Basis of Gender in the Four Gardens

Garden	Male	Female	Total
Jorhat A	585 (52.18)	536 (47.81)	1121 (100)
Jorhat B	2200 (52.75)	1977 (47.24)	4185 (100)
Dibru. C	2097 (53.82)	1799 (46.17)	3896 (100)
Dibru. D	3458 (61.26)	2178 (38.64)	5636 (100)
Total	8348 (56.26)	6490 (43.73)	14,838 (100)

The total labourers employed in the four gardens were 4608. In two gardens—one each in Dibrugarh and Jorhat—the total number of labourers employed was in the range of 500 to 700. The other two gardens showed employment of labourers in the range of 1300 to 2100. Of the total labourers employed, 2642 were permanent and 1966 were temporary. (See Table 10)

TABLE 10

## Employment Status of Labour in the Four Gardens

Garden	Permanent	Temporary	Total
Jorhat A	284	218	502
Jorhat B	1415	646	2061
Dibru. C	527	822	1349
Dibru. D	416	280	696
Total	2642	1966	4608

## Condition of Labour Lines

In each garden, labourers live in lines spread over different parts of the garden. (See Table 11)

From the table one finds that roads and lanes in use in the lines are invariably kuccha. During the monsoons these roads become slippery and waterlogged. Except for one garden in Dibrugarh where lines near the factory had streetlight facilities, no other garden has these facilities.

TABLE 11

## Condition of Labour Lines and Other Facilities

Garden	Division	Lines	Road	Electricity	Play Gr.	Club	Rec. Item
A	1	4	kuccha	No	1	1	Football, Carrom
B	3	13	kuccha	No	1	3	TV, Carrom, F.B.
C	2	3	kuccha	Yes	1	2	Nil
D	Nil	4	kuccha	No	1	2	TV, Carrom

All the gardens have a playground each but this was far from adequate for meeting the needs of the workers. Generally, all gardens except one in Dibrugarh provided some recreational facilities such as football, carrom, badminton, etc. Two gardens—one in Dibrugarh and the other in Jorhat—also provided TV sets for its labourers.

## Housing Facilities

The PLA stipulates that the management has to provide houses of certain specifications for its labour. Yet till today most gardens have failed to meet this requirement. (See Table 12)

TABLE 12

## Housing Condition in the Four Gardens

Housing Condition	Jorhat		Dibrugarh	
	A	B	C	D
No. of labour quarters	191	748	527	283
Pucca quarters	28	261	413	283
Kuccha quarters	163	487	114	Nil
Materials used	mainly thatch	tin, asbestos, thatch	same	tin
Walls	pucca, kuccha;	pucca, kuccha;	pucca	pucca
Floor	kuccha	kuccha	kuccha	kuccha
No. of rooms	2 pucca and 3 kuccha	2 pucca and 3 kuccha	2 rooms and kitchen	2 rooms and kitchen
Size of rooms	12' x 14'	12' x 14'	10' x 8'	10' x 8'

The two gardens in Jorhat have in all 939 labour quarters of which only 289 (30.77 per cent) are pucca. The remaining 650 (69.22 per cent) were kuccha quarters. As against this, the number of pucca quarters stood at 696 (85.92 per cent) out of 810 labour quarters in Dibrugarh. This meant only 114 quarters were still kuccha. The floor of all labour quarters in both the districts is kuccha. The roofs used in two of the gardens were tin, asbestos and thatch.

In Jorhat, 72 heads of households were of the view that accommodation was very inadequate. The other 28 thought it to be adequate maybe due to the fact that Jorhat tea gardens have a very large number of kuccha houses which require regular repairing. In Dibrugarh the feeling was somewhat different. Whereas 54 heads of households thought it to be adequate, 47 heads of households thought otherwise. It is to be noted that the tea garden population has grown considerably and that accommodation of specifications made decades ago is found inadequate in a changed situation. Also aspirations of the people in view of exposure with the outside world has brought about much change in their outlook and style of life. It is not surprising then that many find the accommodation inadequate. In fact of the 40 respondents, 20 respondents complained of space shortage. It is on this count that a large number of households tend to enlarge the space by making their own constructions. There have also been many complaints about leakage, broken doors and windows, lack of verandah, uncleanness of labour lines, etc. With regard to sanitation it may be noted that toilet facilities are almost nil in Jorhat. As many as 89 households have no toilet; and of the 11 households with toilets, 10 were (at the time of survey) not usable. In Dibrugarh almost all households are provided with toilets, though 65 of these were, at the time, not usable.

### Water and Sanitation

Even with regard to civic amenities, Dibrugarh district is better placed than Jorhat. In one of the gardens of Jorhat, supply of water is meagre. In another, the major sources are taps but the existing facilities seemed inadequate. In Dibrugarh, the major source of water are tubewells. On an average, 8-9 households use one tubewell. Toilet facilities too are better in Dibrugarh than in Jorhat. In both the districts there is,

however, no provision for urinals. As for enclosures to be used for bath by women, Dibrugarh had 114 as against none in Jorhat. (See Table 13)

TABLE 13  
Civic Amenities in the Four Gardens

Civic facilities	Jorhat		Dibrugarh	
	A	B	C	D
Taps	Nil	127	Nil	Nil
Tubewells	2	Nil	80	72
Ring wells	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Houses using tubewell	—	—	8-9	7-8
Toilets	Nil	128	336	213
Urinals	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Enclosures	Nil	Nil	50	64

### Medical Facilities

In medical facilities, the gardens surveyed are more or less uniform, except in one where conditions are deplorable. There is no hospital in this garden and a part time doctor visits the garden thrice in a week. The garden does not have even midwives and health assistants. The facilities in the other gardens are broadly satisfactory. (See Table 14)

TABLE 14

Medical facilities	Jorhat		Dibrugarh	
	A	B	C	D
Hospital	Nil	1	1	1
Dispensary	1	2	Nil	1
Doctors	1 (part time)	1	1	1
Pharmacist	1	3	1	1
Nurse	1	3	1	1
Midwife	Nil	2	Nil	Nil
Health assistant	Nil	1	1	1
Beds in hospitals	2	30	5	7

### Status of Education

Provision of schools for tea garden children is government responsibility in Jorhat whereas it is the responsibility of the management in Dibrugarh. As to the status of education in the two districts, refer Table 15.

**TABLE 15**  
Condition of Schools in the Four Gardens

Facilities	Jorhat		Dibrugarh	
	A	B	C	D
Type of building	pucca	pucca	pucca	1 pucca, 1 pucca
Condition of building	good	good	good	good
No. of schools in the garden	1 (L.P.)	3 (L.P.)	1 (L.P.)	2 (L.P.)
No. of rooms	1 hall	1 hall	1 room	4 rooms, 1 hall
No. of teachers	3	9	3	4
No. of students	118	376	600	408
Game facilities	Nil	Nil	football	football
Distance of Middle and High School from garden	2 km	2 km	1 km	1.5 km
No. of schools from garden	22	86	511	166

The school buildings available in the four gardens are far from uniform. The schools comprise either of an open hall or a couple of rooms. Considering the number of students attending school, the space available is inadequate. As for the teacher-student ratio, it is more favourable in Jorhat than in Dibrugarh. The former had 12 teachers for 494 students, while the latter had 7 teachers for 1008 students. The government-managed schools (Jorhat) have a larger number of teachers than the estate managed schools (Dibrugarh). At the time of survey, there were only 108 students studying in Middle Education (M.E.) or in High Schools in Jorhat whereas the figure was as high as 677 in Dibrugarh. This has nothing to do with the quality of education imparted by the management. The Dibrugarh gardens are situated near urban growth centres and hence the workers have greater access to educational facilities in these areas.

Of the total 200 households from Jorhat and Dibrugarh districts that were studied, 187 heads of households were males and 13 females. Interestingly, as many as 12 out of the 13 female heads of households were from Jorhat.

Labourers living in plantation estates generally represent a complex ethnic mixture. This is so because labourers were recruited from different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds when plantations were being opened up in Assam. Tea gardens studied in two districts were no exception to this ethnic complexity. The break-up among different ethnic groups is given in Table 16.

**TABLE 16**  
Ethnic Composition of Labourers in the Four Gardens of Jorhat and Dibrugarh

Ethnic Groups	Jorhat	Dibrugarh	Total
Oraon	Nil	39	39
Tanti	18	9	27
Lohar	17	5	22
Karamkar	4	9	13
Mura	9	1	10
Munda	2	8	10
Bhuyan	3	4	7
Bhumij	11	Nil	11
Savar	7	Nil	7
Kumar	6	Nil	6
Bauri	Nil	5	5
Patra	4	Nil	4
Others	19	20	39
Total	100	100	200

**NOTE:** Gwala, Parja, Korwa, Bhai were two households each and Kharia, Teli, Brahmin, Ghatwal, Nayak, Rajput, Gorik, Ganja, etc. were one household each in the Jorhat district. In Dibrugarh district, Majhi, Ghasi, Ganda, Santals were three households each and Behra and Mahato two each and the remaining five groups were one household each.

From the table one finds that Tantis, Lohars, Karamkars, Muras, Mundas, Bhumijis are found in tea gardens of both Jorhat and Dibrugarh districts. This shows that their spread is much wider than the other groups. Oraons are numerically the single largest group in our sample. But they are mainly confined to an estate in Dibrugarh. In fact, 31 out of 39 Oraon households came from just one of the gardens. The ethnic composition shows that the labourers come not only from groups which in the place of their origin were identified as tribes but also from caste groups. Tantis, Lohars, Karamkars, Kumars, Patras, Gwalas, Nayaks, etc. are the major caste groups in tea gardens and form a substantial segment of the tea garden population. In our sample, they represent 40 to 50 per cent of the total households. Tribal groups do enjoy a slight numerical advantage vis-a-vis the caste groups but they represent a much larger variety of social groups in terms of their ethnicity.

We have looked into the age and sex compositions of the workers in the four gardens. The data on this aspect is given in Table 17. Out of 452 workers employed in four tea gardens in the districts, 250 (55.3 per cent) were males and 202 (44.7 per cent) females. Of all the workers employed, over 38 per cent each were in the age group of 15 to 24 years and over 28 per cent in the age group of 25 to 34 years. The number of workers employed below 14 years was only five. In view of the fact that data on child labour is still substantial at the State level, this figure seems quite intriguing.

TABLE 17  
Age Structure of Labour Force Surveyed

Age	Jorhat		Dibrugarh		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Below 14	1	2	1	1	5
15-24	32	25	5	10	72
25-34	27	35	42	24	128
35-44	32	25	65	53	175
45-54	17	16	20	7	60
55-64	8	4	Nil	Nil	12
Total	117	107	133	95	452

The level of education among the plantation labourers has been generally very low. Table 18 shows that out of 452 workers employed, 81.85 per cent had no formal schooling whatsoever. Nearly 6 per cent had schooling upto primary level and over 13 per cent had secondary and higher secondary level of education. Out of 87 educated workers 61 were from Dibrugarh district. This shows that the educational status is somewhat better in Dibrugarh than in Jorhat of the six workers who passed higher secondary, one was from Jorhat and the others from Dibrugarh and that too from just one garden. It is interesting to note that at the time of survey there were larger number of workers with secondary and higher secondary educational levels than primary level, the number of educated at the latter level being 27. It also needs to be noted that out of 87 workers, with different levels of education, 60 were the heads of various households.

TABLE 18  
Status of Education of Labourers

Education Status	Jorhat		Dibrugarh		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Illiterate	93	105	88	84	370
Primary	12	3	8	4	27
Secondary	9	1	32	7	49
Higher Secondary	1	Nil	5	Nil	6
Total	115	109	133	95	452

A very large proportion of labourers' children do not go to school. (See Table 19) The situation is far more deplorable in Jorhat. In fact in one of its gardens the enrolment is as low as 15. The position seems slightly better in Dibrugarh but even here one finds some discrepancy between the official data and the data of our survey with regard to Garden C. On official record Garden C has shown a very favourable trend as far as children's education is concerned. Our survey does not support such claim. In Garden D of Dibrugarh the picture is slightly better. This may be due to the fact that there was higher level of education among the workers themselves in comparison to the workers in other gardens.



**TABLE 19**  
**Status of Education of Labourers' Children**

District	No. of Children in the estate	School-going Children
Jorhat		
A	82	15
B	119	47
Dibrugarh		
C	93	30
D	96	83

### Household Earnings and Standard of Living

The standard of living is usually very low in the tea gardens. The data regarding the earning, expenditure, savings and assets owned by the tea plantation labourers are presented below:

	Jorhat	Dibrugarh
Average monthly earnings per household	1091.84	1436.27
Average monthly expenditure per household	1053.89	928.66
Average monthly saving per household	57.89	394.90

The balance of savings is more favourable in Dibrugarh than in Jorhat. The average savings varies among households depending on the number of working members. For example, in one of the gardens of Dibrugarh, savings stood at Rs. 230, 592 and 765 among households with working members of 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Similarly, in another garden of Jorhat, out of 11 households with some savings, 8 had two or three working members each. There were no households with four or more working members in Dibrugarh. In Jorhat, there were a few households in this category. The balance of savings among them was, however, negligible perhaps due to the large size of households and/or lack of regular employment among the able-bodied members of the households.

The reason as to why Dibrugarh projects a better picture with regard to the volume of savings as well as the number of households with balance of savings lies in the fact that the average monthly wage earned by an adult worker in Jorhat is quite low in comparison with Dibrugarh.

The average monthly wage in the two gardens of Dibrugarh is Rs. 646 and Rs. 635 respectively, whereas in Jorhat the average came to just about Rs. 500 per month. Given this wage structure, an average household income is considerably lower in Jorhat and, consequently, the average monthly savings is also smaller.

As for the number of households with balance of savings, the figure was 19 out of 100 households in Jorhat. The corresponding figure in Dibrugarh was 53. Out of this 30 households came from Garden D of which seven had savings account too. In Jorhat, out of 19 households which made some savings, seven had life insurance policies.

Paradoxically, there is lesser level of indebtedness among tea garden labourers in Jorhat than those of Dibrugarh. In Jorhat, no household was indebted. In Dibrugarh, the number of households indebted were 10, the average amount taken on debt being Rs. 20,065. The average indebtedness per household was Rs. 2006. The number of households indebted in one of the gardens was two. Both these households had only one working member in the family whereas the family size ranged between 4 to 5 members from the other garden in Dibrugarh, eight households were indebted of which six were indebted to shopkeepers and the other two to moneylenders. The amount indebted per household was Rs. 2295 on an average. The reason why labourers in Jorhat are not indebted despite the fact that they had a lower wage structure is due to the fact that a substantial segment of them own land. In one of the gardens 22 out of 50 owned land. The size of land ranged between 1 to 6 *bigha*. In another estate of Jorhat 24 households had land. In contrast, the number of those with land were merely 17 in Dibrugarh.

The assets generally owned and possessed by the garden labourers comprised such things as land, cattle (cow, ox, bullock), cycle, radio, tape-recorder, TV set, etc. Land is one of the assets tea garden labourers aspire to have. Savings are often used in purchase of land. Normally, savings are generally used in purchase of such items as cycle, cow, ox, radio, TV etc. Indeed in the two gardens of Jorhat there were 17 TV sets, radios, 60 cycles, 134 cows, 32 oxen and 29 bullocks, etc. (We have not been able to collate data on this aspect in Dibrugarh. Given the fact that the size of savings was large in Dibrugarh, the picture may have been better there.)

Notwithstanding the fact that living conditions are inadequate, labourers in both the gardens were not well organised. There were of course units of trade unions especially those affiliated to the INTUC at work but the extent of awareness among labourers about their rights was very poor. They know that they get some facilities such as medical, maternity, house, etc. but they do not know that these are part of their legal entitlements. In short, they are not aware of various provisions that are their due.

#### References

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3. Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association, *Vital Statistics and Comprehensive Family Welfare Files*.
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5. Indian Tea Association Report, 1993.

#### CHAPTER 3

## Tea Plantation Workers in West Bengal

*Sharit K. Bhowmik*

West Bengal is the second largest tea producing State in the country. Its two major tea growing districts, namely, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, employ around 240,000 permanent workers. In this chapter the living condition of the workers in the tea plantations in these two districts is assessed. The data presented here is based mainly on two sources. For the State-level data we have relied on the figures provided by the State Government's Labour Department which is published in the annual publication, *Labour in West Bengal*. The annual reports of the Tea Board in Tea Statistics was another source of information. We also interviewed some of the officials in the State's Labour Department and some of the trade union leaders in the two districts.

The garden-level data is based on the survey which was carried out in July-August 1995 in the selected gardens. These gardens were chosen so as to give a cross-sectional analysis of the living conditions of the workers. A total of one hundred and eighty-two workers and their households were identified for the study. These workers were chosen from three tea gardens in Jalpaiguri and five tea gardens in the Darjeeling district. The plantations are from different parts of each of the districts and represent different types of ownership (small companies and large companies) and thus shown up a comparative perspective between living conditions and class of ownership. The information collected is common to the three States where this study was conducted.

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*The author was assisted in his research by Kanchan Sarkar and Sushma Gurung.*

Information is elicited on the individual and household income, size of the household, activity of each member in the household, household savings and indebtedness, source of loans and nature of savings, etc. Secondly, information was collected from the garden level on the implementation of the various provisions of the Plantation Labour Act and if implemented the state of affairs. Information was collected on housing, water supply, sanitation, health facilities, canteens, creches and education from each garden. Apart from this, information on certain aspects of the workers' lives and industrial relations was collected from the district and State levels.

### Tea Industry

West Bengal produces around one-fifth of India's total output of tea. The two traditional tea growing districts in this State are Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. The two neighbouring districts of Cooch Behar and West Dinajpur had one tea plantation each but of late tea cultivation has been extended to these districts as well. The tea growing region in the State is divided into three regions which in planting parlance are called tea districts. These are Dooars, comprising the tea growing area of Jalpaiguri district and Cooch Behar; Terai, comprising the tea growing area in the plains of Darjeeling district and West Dinajpur, and Darjeeling, comprising the tea growing area in the hills of Darjeeling district.

TABLE 1  
Production of Tea in West Bengal (000 kg.)

Year	Darjeeling*	Terai*	Dooars*	West Bengal**
1988	12,049 (8.0)	23,919 (16.0)	114,066 (76.0)	150,034 (21.4)
1989	12,162 (8.5)	19,626 (13.7)	111,380 (77.8)	143,168 (20.8)
1990	14,499 (9.7)	21,130 (14.1)	114,124 (76.2)	149,753 (21.0)
1991	13,932 (9.0)	23,391 (15.0)	117,893 (76.0)	155,216 (20.6)
1992	12,355 (8.2)	20,460 (13.6)	117,875 (78.2)	150,690 (20.6)
1993	NA	NA	NA	168,022 (22.2)

\* Figures in brackets indicate percentage of total production in West Bengal.

\*\* Figures in brackets indicate percentage of total production in India.

SOURCE: Tea Board, *Tea Statistics 1992-93*, Calcutta, 1994, p 11.

TABLE 2  
Yield Per Hectare in West Bengal (kg/ha)

Year	Darjeeling	Terai	Dooars	West Bengal
1988	601	1801	1695	1491
1989	606	1473	1647	1418
1990	723	1583	1684	1480
1991	694	1697	1732	1523
1992	640	1484	1737	1492

SOURCE: Ibid., p. 15.

Tea plantations in the three tea districts vary in size, production and quality of tea. Dooars has the largest area under tea, the largest average size of holdings and the highest yield. (See Tables 1, 2 and 3) Darjeeling comes next in area under tea. While Dooars has 153 plantations covering 65,812 hectares of land, Darjeeling has 89 plantations covering 18,508 hectares. Terai has 62 plantations and 12,654 hectares under tea.

Apart from the area under tea, Dooars has the highest production as well as yield per hectare. Its yield per hectare has been around 1700 kgs. while Terai has around 1500 kgs. and Darjeeling's record is around 650 kgs. Dooars produces more than 76 per cent of West Bengal's tea while Terai's output contributes around 14 per cent and Darjeeling around 8 per cent. Terai and Dooars have the same topography which is also similar to that of Assam. The tea bushes are of the Assam variety which has high yield. This tea produces a strong liquor which is popularly consumed. Darjeeling, on the other hand, has China bushes which have low yield but produce quality tea which is known the world over for its flavour. The price this tea fetches is substantially higher than the tea produced in the other districts. This compensates to some extent for the low yield. On the other hand, the yield per hectare of Terai being lower than that of Dooars indicates that the general condition of the tea plantations in this district is not very good. The yield per hectare in Dooars is similar to that of the better tea growing districts of Assam.

TABLE 3

## Number of Tea Plantation according to Size and Area

Region	100ha		100-200 ha		200-400 ha		400+ ha		Total	
	No.	Area	No.	Area	No.	Area	No.	Area	No.	Area
Darjeeling	16	1029	33	4917	33	9180	7	3442	89	18,508
Teri	19	316	15	2206	18	5090	10	4990	62	12,654
Dooars	15	388	11	1715	45	14,040	82	49,569	153	65,812
West Bengal	50	1885	59	8838	96	28,310	99	58,001	304	97,034

SOURCE: Ibid., p. 19.

The larger tea plantations dominate in West Bengal. Of the total 97,000 ha under tea, half (58,000 ha) is occupied by plantations which are over 400 ha in size. (See Table 3) In Assam, one-third of the area under tea is occupied by plantations above 400 ha whereas in Tamil Nadu estates over 400 ha occupy only one-fifth of the area under tea. The high average for West Bengal is mainly due to the size of the plantations in Dooars where 50,000 ha of the 66,000 ha under tea are occupied by the large estates. Comparatively, the estates in Darjeeling and Terai are smaller in size. The larger plantations (400+ ha) in Terai constitute one-fourth of the area under tea while in Darjeeling these estates constitute only one-sixth of the area. At the same time, the proportion of the medium-size estates (200-400 ha) are more in Darjeeling than in Terai. Half of Darjeeling's area under tea (9000 ha) comprises estates in the size group 200-400 ha whereas in Terai the proportion is approximately 40 per cent.

TABLE 4

## Labour and Production Per Hectare (1992)

<i>Region</i>	<i>Labour %</i>	<i>Production (kg.)</i>	<i>Production Per Labour (kg.)</i>
Darjeeling	2.36	640	271
Teri	2.66	1484	558
Dooars	2.37	1736	734
West Bengal	2.40	1492	620

SOURCE: Ibid., p. 148.

From the economic point of view, the larger estates are more viable than the smaller ones. We can observe this while comparing the production per ha for Dooars and Terai (see Table 4) since these two areas are similar. Though Terai has more labour per ha than Dooars (2.66 and 2.36), its production per ha is 1484 kg. while in Dooars it is 1736 kg. One reason for this is that the ownership of plantations in Dooars is mainly with the larger companies such as Duncan Agro, Williamson Magor, Andrew Yule, Goodricke, etc. These companies are financially sound and can invest more in maintaining their plantations. In Terai, on the other hand, most of the plantations are owned by smaller companies and many of them were started by local Bengalee businessmen. These companies have not invested much in the development of the estates.

## The Labour Force

There are two types of workers in the plantations, namely, permanent and temporary. Tea plantation workers are a part of the organised sector as most of the industrial legislations relating to workers are applicable to them. The permanent workers, who number a little less than 250,000 have security of employment and they have other benefits such as free housing, medical facilities, primary education for their children, etc. These facilities are granted by the Plantation Labour Act. In fact, our research relates to examining whether these facilities have helped in improving the living and working conditions of the workers.

Tea plantations in West Bengal also employ a sizable number of temporary labour. These people are engaged whenever additional hands are needed and they are known as *bigha* workers. There are no official statistics relating to the actual number of *bigha* workers employed in the plantations. The Tea Board of India gives figures for temporary workers who do not reside within the plantation. According to its report, there were around 24,000 such workers in 1992. (Tea Board, 1994: 138) This does not reflect the actual number of temporary workers because most of them reside within the gardens and in most cases are members of the permanent workers' households. A study conducted by FES in 1991 (Davalala, 1995:11-44) tried to estimate the extent of temporary workers in the tea plantations in the State. The study was

based on data collected from 149 tea estates and it showed that the ratio of casual workers to permanent workers was 50.6 for every 100. In other words, the *bigha* workers formed around one-third of the total number of workers employed. Moreover, the bulk of these workers were drawn from the dependents of the permanent workers. The plantations tend to employ their *bigha* workers from the existing pool of the unemployed within the plantation. This is advantageous to them as costs for transporting outside workers is saved. Moreover, the employment of people from within the plantation as *bigha*, increased the household income of the workers. At the same time the management could diffuse the demand of workers for increase in wages by threatening to cut down the employment of *bigha* if they were pressurised to increase wages. In this case the total household income would decrease. The workers, therefore, forebore to demand large increases in wages.

Most of the work on the plantation is manual in nature. The tea gardens have their own factories for processing the green tea leaves but these factories employ a small amount of the labour force. Of the total number of plantation workers only around 24,000 of them are factory workers. (Ibid: 43) The field workers are engaged in plucking of tea leaves and activities relating to maintenance of the plantation and its tea bushes.

### Categories of Workers

All tea plantations have four categories of workers: male, female, adolescent and children. Male and female workers are those above the age of 18 years. Adolescents are workers who have completed the age of 14 years. These three categories are paid the statutory minimum wages. Children are workers below the age of 14 years. Section 2(c) of the Plantation Labour Act specifies the category of children as less than 14 years of age but does not specify what the lower age should be. However, conventionally plantations do not employ children below 12 years of age. These workers are paid half the wages of adults.

The employment of child labour is a unique feature in the tea industry, especially because it is legally permitted. Moreover, the Abolition of Child Labour Act of 1986 bans the employment of children below 15 years in any industry whereas in the tea plantations (where

this Act is not enforced) children can work at much lower ages. The number of children employed is around 11,000, while the number of adolescents are half this figure. (See Table 5)

TABLE 5

Labour in West Bengal in 1992 (according to categories)

Region	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
Darjeeling	17,147	27,669	150	672	45,638
Terai	16,150	17,350	861	2285	36,646
Dooars	78,853	71,368	4378	7999	160,598
Total	110,150	116,387	5389	10,956	242,882

SOURCE: Ibid., p. 144.

Another unique feature of this industry is the large scale employment of female workers. The total number of female workers in the State is slightly higher than the numbers of males. (See Table 5) In comparing the three tea districts we find that Darjeeling has a much higher proportion of women workers (approximately 28,000 females and 17,000 males). Terai too has a slightly higher number of female workers whereas Dooars has more males.

Adolescent workers are those between the ages 15 to 18 years. They number less than the children. There are around 5000 adolescent workers in West Bengal which is roughly less than half the number of child workers. One of the reasons for the low number is that these workers are now paid as much as adult workers. The nature of work performed by this category is different from that of the adult workers. Hence the employers are not inclined to employ workers in this category. There is also a possibility that a proportion of child workers are actually adolescents as in this way the employers do not have to pay them full wages. This may also be a reason for the swelling of the rank of child workers. The employers do not face much resistance from the workers when they lower the category (that is, from adolescent to child) because in the prevailing situation of high unemployment in the plantations these workers would be only too glad to get a permanent job even if it means lower wages.

Adolescent workers are mainly engaged for spraying pesticides and other chemicals on the tea bushes. This work is comparatively lighter than the regular work of the adults but it is hazardous to health. Since the Plantation Labour Act in its present form does not have any provisions relating to occupational health, most tea gardens do not provide any preventive measures, such as masks or even a piece of cloth to cover their nose and mouth. These workers thus breathe in the poisonous fumes while spraying the chemicals. The trade unions rarely take up the issue of occupational health with the management.

### Wages

The wages of tea workers are a combination of time and piece rates. All workers, whether temporary or permanent, are paid the minimum wages. In addition, the workers are paid an incentive price, known as 'extra leaf pice' in planting parlance and as 'doubly' among the workers. Workers engaged in plucking of tea leaves are eligible for this. Each garden fixes its minimum quota of leaves to be plucked. This is known as *thika* and it varies between 25 and 30 kilogramme per worker. It can be increased or decreased according to the availability of tea leaves. During the peak season (June to September) the base can be increased and during other times it can be lowered. The *thika* of female workers is usually lower by three kilogrammes than that of the males. Each worker engaged in plucking is expected to pluck the *thika*. The extra leaf pice is paid for every kilogramme plucked above the *thika*. The worker can increase his or her income by plucking above the *thika*. However, it should be noted that the extra leaf pice is available only for those workers engaged in plucking. Usually between sixty to eighty per cent of the total workers are engaged in this activity. Hence the others do not get the incentive price. Moreover, the workers can get extra leaf pice only when there are sufficient leaves. Usually this is for only half of the year. It must be recalled that children are paid half the wages of adults.

The workers are entitled to rations of foodgrains at subsidised rates. Each worker in Dooars and Terai and his or her bonafide dependents (those between the 12 and 18 age-group) are entitled to two kilogrammes of rice and one and a quarter kilogramme of wheat weekly at Re 0.37 per kg. The rate for Darjeeling is a few paise higher. These rates are

much lower than the market prices for these foodgrains. The subsidy forms a part of the worker's wage. In case a worker is absent from work the quota of foodgrains is deducted proportionately. The total number of bonafide dependents was 343,097 in 1992. (Tea Board 1994:138) The foodgrain subsidy would add at an average Rs. 5 to the worker's daily wage.

The wage rates at present (w.e.f. 31 March 1995) are Rs. 24.30 per day for males and females and Rs. 12.27 for children. (See Table 6) The wages of workers employed in gardens which are less than 200 ha are four rupees less for adults and two rupees less for children. The extra leaf pice is Re 0.32 per kg. The average monthly wage by the present rate should be Rs. 632 (24.30 x 26 days). This amount, even if one takes into account the seasonal increase in earnings due to extra leaf pice, is still well below the wages of other workers in the organised sector.

TABLE 6

Daily Wages System in West Bengal and South India

State	Cash Wage (Rs) Rate/kg (p)	Incentive	Base (kg)
Kerala	42.00	—	—
Tamil Nadu	40.00	24-40	14
West Bengal	24.30	32	24-30

### Wages in West Bengal and South India A COMPARISON

The above discussion shows that the wages of tea workers in West Bengal are low. This becomes more evident when we compare wages of workers in this State with those of the two main tea producing States in South India. The total production of tea in Tamil Nadu and Kerala amounts to a little over the tea produced in West Bengal and their productivity per hectare is lower whereas the wages of the workers are substantially higher. The minimum wage in Kerala is Rs. 40 and in Tamil Nadu it is around Rs. 38. Moreover, the incentive rates (extra leaf pice) in both these States are higher. In Kerala a worker has a guaranteed minimum rate of Rs. 6.05 per day. In Tamil Nadu the

incentive price increase in slabs (unlike in West Bengal where the price is the same irrespective of the number of excess kilogrammes of leaves plucked). The minimum base (*thika*) is also lower which enables the worker to increase his or her income through the incentive price. The minimum base varies between 12 and 16 kg. depending on the yield per ha. If the yield per hectare is low, the *thika* is low. A plantation producing 1601 kg. of tea per ha (which is the average yield in Dooars) has a *thika* of 16 kg. In Dooars the *thika* would be at least 25 kg. The worker is paid an incentive price of Re 0.27 per kg. for plucking 17 to 35 kg. and Re 0.35 per kg. above 35 kg. The total income of a worker is thus higher. Moreover, plucking of tea leaves in Tamil Nadu is done throughout the year (as the rains come twice in a year) whereas in West Bengal it is done for only nine months in a year.

The only additional benefit the workers in West Bengal get is the foodgrain subsidy. This when valued in terms of money falls to around Rs. 5 per day. Hence even after adding this amount the total daily wage will increase to Rs. 29.30. Even this is lower than the cash wages of workers in both the States.

Another significant feature is that the wages of child workers in both the States equal to two-thirds of the wages of adults and not half as in West Bengal. This, along with the relatively higher wages are mainly responsible for the negligible number of child workers in these States. Employers do not find it profitable to engage children as they have to be paid wages which are slightly less than those of adults though they work for only five hours a day. The relatively higher daily wage means that the total household wage is high and hence children need not be made to work. On the other hand, workers in West Bengal find it difficult to make both ends meet with their current wage levels hence children have to work in order to increase the household income. The high rate of child labour then must be attributed to other factors.

## Profile of the Plantations

### Dooars

The three plantations studied in Dooars had three different types of ownership and size. Garden 1 (G1)—the largest of the three—has 529 ha under tea cultivation. There are 1241 permanent workers and 1150

temporary workers. Thus the number of temporary workers almost equalled that of permanent workers. The total population within the plantation at the time of survey was 8126. This plantation was owned by the subsidiary of a very large industrial house which is one of the larger plantation owners in the State. It is one of the better run plantations in terms of production and profitability. The tea it produces fetches a high price. The large number of temporary workers points to the fact that the output is pushed up largely through employment of this type of workers.

The second plantation is Garden 2 (G2) which is owned by a Calcutta based company. This is the only tea plantation owned by the company. Its area under tea is 426 ha and there are 1083 permanent workers employed. The number of temporary workers figures around 500. The total population residing within the plantation at the time was 4453. In terms of output and profitability, this garden is well below G1. In fact till a decade ago it was running at a loss because the tea bushes were in a shambles. However, during the past few years it has recovered considerably, mainly due to the rise in tea prices which in turn encouraged the management to invest in improving the condition of the tea bushes.

The third plantation is Garden 3 (G3) which like G1 is owned by a small company. It is much smaller in size than the other two plantations having 188 ha under tea. Its permanent labour force numbered 625 and there were at the time only 15 temporary workers. The total population residing within the plantation was 2497. G3 has, over the last few years, improved considerably in production and profitability. The general condition of the tea bushes as well as the living conditions of the workers too has improved. Fifteen years ago, the bushes bore an unkempt look and the living condition of the workers were the worst in the district. Most of the houses had mud walls and thatched roofs, there was no water supply in the labour lines and sanitary facilities were non-existent. This garden has changed in several ways since then though the ownership is the same.

Garden 2 has an average proportion of permanent and temporary workers, G1 has an unusually high number of temporary workers while G3 has a very low proportion. G3's low figure is because its number of

permanent workers is high compared to its size. Hence it does not need too many temporary workers. G1's high rate of temporary workers can be explained only in terms of the garden's high productivity. Moreover, if we take into account the average land-labour ratio in Dooars, which is 2.5 workers for every hectare we find that, G1 has fewer permanent workers, G2 has more or less the right proportion and G3 has around two hundred more permanent workers than the average proportion. This indicates that the large, financially sound companies are not necessarily inclined to increase employment. There were similar discrepancies in the living conditions, defying the directives of the Plantation Labour Act in these gardens.

### **Housing Conditions**

Garden 1 has 750 labour quarters, 500 of which are pucca and the rest kuchcha. Both types of quarters have two rooms, a kitchen and a verandah. The kuchcha quarters have mud and bamboo walls and thatch or tin roofs. Some of the households living in these quarters have built extra rooms to meet their requirements. G2 has 707 quarters which are mainly of three types. There are 225 pucca quarters and 232 semi-pucca quarters. In addition there are 242 kuchcha quarters and eight houses made of wood. The latter were built by the workers through their own resources and they are double-storeyed structures. Some of these houses are built on the lands of the Forest Department. Here too some of the kuchcha quarters have additional rooms built by the workers themselves. G3 has 425 quarters of which 385 are pucca and 40 are kuchcha. The plantation has improved its labour housing remarkably over the years. Though it is the smallest of the three and has a larger proportion of permanent workers the management has constructed pucca quarters for almost all the workers. This is in contrast to the record of the financially sounder G1 where 33 per cent of the quarters are kuchcha.

Garden 1 has 17 labour lines but only one of them has a metalled approach road; the others have cart roads. Electricity has been provided in four of the lines where each house has four electric points. The other lines do not have electricity. The kuchcha houses cannot get electric lines as it is unsafe. The houses do not have separate water connections. A shallow tubewell has been built for a group of ten houses which was expected to take care of the needs of the households.

Garden 2 has only cart roads in the labour lines. There was no electricity in the lines at the time of survey but the management had started work on electrification. The water supply in the labour lines is provided through taps which are situated at common points in the lines. Water is supplied twice a day for two hours at a time. The lines in G3 too have similar features. Electrification work has started and water is supplied through taps located at specific points. Here too water is supplied twice a day for two hours each time. The roads are non-metal.

### **Sanitation**

The Plantation Labour Act states that the labour lines must have toilets which must be properly maintained. There must be separate toilet facilities for women in case every quarter does not have its own toilet. There must also be proper drainage in the labour lines. The toilet facilities in the labour lines of G1 were non-existent till a few years ago. The management started building toilets for workers only two years ago. At first toilets were constructed in the quarters of the sub-staff (supervisory staff). There were, at the time of this study, 140 toilets in the lines and the management had decided to build 70 more the following year. The toilets are common for all workers and separate facilities for women do not exist. G2 had 148 toilets in its labour lines. Though there are no separate toilets for women, the garden had separate bathrooms for women in eight of the ten lines. G3 has attached toilets in 90 of its quarters and it plans to build in ten more quarters every year till each quarter has a toilet of its own.

The drainage in the three gardens was very poor. There were no permanent drains in the labour lines. In some of the lines shallow canals have been dug to let out the dirty water. In others, water collects outside the houses and gradually evaporates or soaks into the soil. There are no bathrooms for workers except in G2 where these are built only for women. The workers and their household members bathe in public at the water points in the lines. This again cause water to collect around these places and the area becomes muddy and unclean. Stones or bricks are strewn around the place so that people could step on them to avoid stepping on the muck.



### Health Facilities

All workers are entitled to free medical facilities for themselves and their families. The West Bengal Plantation Labour Rules state that any plantation employing 1000 or more workers must have a hospital with a ratio of 15 beds per 1000 workers. In addition every plantation, irrespective of the size of its labour force, must have a dispensary. Each hospital must have at least one qualified doctor, a trained nurse, a trained midwife and a qualified compounder. Dispensaries must have a qualified compounder, a trained nurse and a medical assistant.

All the three gardens which were studied have hospitals with a qualified doctor in each. G1 has a 24-bed hospital and an X-ray machine. But though the garden had a doctor it has no nurses. There are two midwives, one health assistant, one compounder, a technician for the X-ray machine. Despite all these facilities the workers complain that the supply of medicines was poor and even common medicines are not readily available. This is mainly because the garden has cut down its expenditure on medicines even as prices rose. G2 has a 25-bed hospital with a senior qualified nurse and a junior nurse with no qualifications. In addition there is one compounder, a health assistant, a dresser (who does the bandaging) and a midwife. The supply of medicines is better than in G1 as the garden's medical budget is higher. It spends around Rs. 40,000 every month on medicines compared to half the amount spent by G1. G3 has an eight-bed hospital with one compounder, one nurse, a dresser and a health assistant. The workers feel that the supply of medicines is fairly adequate.

### Creches

The Plantation Labour Act lays down that any plantation having 50 women workers or 20 children below six years of age needs to provide a creche with trained attendants. The State's Plantation Labour Rules state that the creches must be situated in pucca houses with plinth. There must be suitable furniture and cradles and a washroom for washing the children's clothes. Each child must be given 175 ml of milk and refreshments.

G1 has two creches one of which is located in a pucca house while the other is a makeshift (mobile) one, comprising a tent which can be

moved near the worksite. There is provision for two permanent creche attendants. Only milk is given to the children and its supply is not regular. In most cases mothers have to leave their work to feed their children which hampers their productivity at work.

G2 has two creches which are housed in permanent rooms. There are four creche attendants. The children are given a mixture of milk and sago to drink and some biscuits to eat. The supply of food and drink is regular.

The creche facilities in G3 appear the worst. The plantation has one creche with two attendants. It does not have a permanent structure and the children are kept under a tree or in a shed in the factory. However, milk and puffed rice are regularly given to the children.

### Education

*Primary Schools:* Any plantation having 25 or more children in the age-group of 6-12 has to provide for primary education to these children. The plantation must provide the school house but the teachers are employed by the State's education department. Earlier, the plantations had to employ their own teachers but the government found that many of these were not qualified and hence it decided to appoint its own teachers. The State Government levies an education cess to cover a part of the cost.

G1 has a pucca school house with four classrooms. There are four teachers and the students have a choice of opting for Bengalee or Hindi as the medium of instruction. The school has around 150 students on its rolls; however, the teachers do not come regularly which has made the students indifferent to studies. The school at G2 has a less impressive building. The school house comprises one long room with two blackboards on either side. It has two teachers one of whom has been given quarters within the garden. He has an assistant to take care of other functions in the school. The teacher who comes from outside the plantation is often irregular. The school had between 150 to 200 students. G3 has a school with four rooms and four teachers. There were 125 students studying there. The garden also provides some snacks for the children.

*Post-primary studies:* While facilities for primary education are compulsory under the Plantation Labour Act, further education for the children of workers is not guaranteed. The Act makes provision for education of children till they are 12 years old because the plantations are isolated and access to education would be difficult, if not impossible, for most children residing in the plantations if facilities are not provided. The same problem exists for children above 12 years of age who wish to pursue further studies but there are no provisions for schools at that level. This is perhaps because since the Act permits children above 12 years to work on the plantation, no need is felt to educate them further. There is, therefore, a perceptible link between educational facilities and child labour.

Nonetheless, judging from the number of children going to post-primary schools in the three gardens it is evident that there is a desire among the parents to educate their children rather than make them work at a young age. G1 is the only garden among the three which has a post-primary school. This is situated in a park and receives some financial support from the management. The parents pay fees which covers the remaining costs. Around 50 to 60 children attend this school. More than 100 children go outside the garden to attend day school. There are a number of middle and secondary schools in the township in the vicinity. The management provides a truck to transport these children to the schools. Most of the parents prefer to send their children to Hindi medium schools run by Christian missionaries as they felt that the quality of education is better there.

In G2 around 300 children go out of their garden to attend school. Here too the workers prefer to send their children to Hindi medium missionary schools. The management provides trucks to transport the children to and from school.

Garden 3 has around 60 children attending post-primary schools. These children have to walk or use their own transport (bicycles, etc.) to do so as the management does not provide them any transport. The schools preferred by these workers are those run by private bodies having Hindi as the medium of instruction.

### Canteen and Recreational Facilities

The Plantation Labour Act states that any plantation employing more than 150 workers must have one or more canteens where workers can buy tea and snacks at reasonable rates. The rules of the State clarify that the eatables must be sold on a non-profit basis. A canteen committee comprising representatives of workers and management is to supervise the functioning of the canteens.

The Act also makes provisions for recreational facilities for the workers and their children. The State's rules lay down the guidelines for these facilities. It says that employers have to provide and maintain recreational centres which will have provisions for outdoor and indoor games suitable for adults and children. The employers must maintain a playground for workers and their children with necessary sports equipment, provided adequate space is available. If such space was not available in a plantation it could share a common ground with another plantation provided this was accessible to the lines of all workers covered.

G1 does not have any canteen for workers. It has a sports club for its workers with a room and a playground. Workers can play carrom or watch television inside. There are two playgrounds where workers play football, volleyball and, at times, cricket. The cost of the equipment for all these games and the TV are met through contributions from the workers themselves. Besides constructing the clubhouse and levelling the playgrounds, the management does not fulfill any other commitment towards recreation.

G2 has a canteen which functions reasonably well. Tea, biscuits and other snacks are available at subsidised rates and even meals are served provided these are ordered in advance. The garden, however, does not have a clubhouse for workers but has a playground where football and volleyball are played. The equipment is provided by the management.

G3 does not have a canteen but it has a clubhouse where workers can play carrom or perform on musical instruments which are provided by the management. There was a playground where football, volleyball and cricket are played. The cost of all the equipment are borne by the management.

### **Terai**

Two plantations have been studied in Terai. We shall call them G4 and G5. G4 has 62 hectares under tea and the permanent workers number 176. There were, at the time, 65 temporary workers. The total population residing in the plantation was 749. This plantation is owned by a partnership company based in Siliguri. This is the only garden owned by the company.

G5 is larger in size. It has 122 ha under tea and 302 permanent workers. There are in addition 35 temporary workers. The plantation is owned by a private limited company based in Siliguri. The company does not own any other plantation.

#### **Housing**

The general condition of both the plantations is bad. Kamalpur has 117 houses of which 86 are kuchcha. Of the 31 pucca houses 12 are semi-pucca. The pucca quarters has two rooms and a kitchen and most of the kuchcha houses has only one room. Repairs of the houses are not done by the management and the workers have to bank on their own resources. In general the houses are badly maintained. There was no electricity in the lines. The workers draw their water supplies from 12 wells situated in different parts of the three labour lines. These wells have cemented walls.

G5 has 135 quarters of which 69 are kuchcha and 66 pucca. The pucca houses have two rooms, a kitchen and a verandah. The kuchcha quarters have only one room and a kitchen and most of these houses do not have windows hence the rooms are not properly ventilated. The roads in the lines are mostly cart roads but some sections are brick-lined. There was at the time no electricity in the lines and the water to the lines was provided through 26 wells.

#### **Sanitation**

A common feature of both plantations is that there are no toilets or urinals in the labour lines. The drainage in the labour lines is not adequate and it is a common sight to see dirty water collected in pools. In fact the labour lines in both gardens present a picture of squalor reflecting the subhuman conditions in which the workers are made to live.

### **Creches**

G4, the smaller of the two gardens, does not have any creche. The mothers have to take their infants to the workplace where they divide their time between their work and care for their babies. This not only lowers their productivity but is also unhygienic for the children. Mothers of newly born or very young children often strap their children to their backs with a piece of cloth and continue plucking the leaves.

G5 has one creche with one attendant. This creche is housed in a covered space. The children are given something to eat but this is not regular. The mothers have to leave their work or go to their children during the break to feed them.

#### **Health Facilities**

G5 has a dispensary with six detention beds (these are meant for temporary confinement of patients). There is no full time doctor. A doctor from outside visits the plantation thrice a week. There is a full time nurse and two health assistants. Medicines are not available regularly.

G4 has a dispensary with five detention beds. A part-time doctor visits the garden twice a week. There is a full-time compounder but no nurse. Medicines are not supplied to the workers but they get reimbursement for the medicines they by.

#### **Educational Facilities**

Another common feature in both the gardens is that there are no primary schools. The managements have not cared to put up a case with the district school board for starting schools in the gardens (perhaps because this would involve the costs of building the school houses) and the government too has not bothered to appoint teachers. Hence the workers' children in both places are denied elementary education. Some of the children in both gardens go to primary schools in the nearby villages run by the government but these schools cannot cope with all the children in a plantation. Around 30 children in G4 go out of the garden for primary and post-primary education and around 60 children of G5 are enrolled in schools outside the garden. The workers in both gardens prefer to send their children to Hindi medium schools run by missionaries.

The managements in both plantations do not provide transport or any other facility for these school-going children. Consequently, the number of children going to school in both the gardens is very low.

### **Canteen and Recreational Facilities**

Of the two gardens, G5 does not have any canteen. G4 has a canteen where only tea is served, when available. The management has provided the canteen with electricity, fuel and contributes one kilogramme tea every month. Hence though the canteen has electricity, it has little else to offer.

G4 has a playground for its workers but nothing else has been provided to them. There is a clubhouse which had been built through contributions from the workers. The management of G5 has provided a clubhouse with no other facilities. There is a playground where workers play football. The management has been generous enough, however, to provide the football.

### ***Darjeeling***

Three plantations were selected for study in Darjeeling which we shall call G6, G7 and G8. G6 is situated near Darjeeling town. The garden is very well known for its long tradition of producing good quality tea. In fact the tea produced here is marketed under its own name. It is also very popular in the tourist circuit because every guided tour of Darjeeling includes this plantation in its itinerary. Tourists are brought to the outskirts of the garden and they are photographed so that they can carry home memories of a tea garden growing the famous Darjeeling tea. However condition of the workers is far from pleasant. This garden has 110 ha under tea and a labour force of around 250. The plantation is owned by a private company based in Calcutta.

The second plantation, G7 has 166 ha under tea and a workforce of 600. This plantation is owned by a large corporation which controls a number of industries besides tea plantations in West Bengal and Assam. The third plantation—G8—has an area of 260 ha under tea and a workforce of 850. It is owned by a Calcutta based company which owns three more plantations in the district.

### **Housing**

The Plantation Labour Act recommends houses of brick and cement with roofs of asbestos or corrugated iron for all plantation workers. This uniformity is not found in the case of kuchcha houses. In the plains (Dooars and Terai), kuchcha houses have mud walls and roofs of thatch. In Darjeeling kuchcha houses have wooden walls and tiled roofs as the mud houses are not suitable here.

The living conditions of workers in G6 presents a stark contrast to the external beauty of the garden. The houses are in dilapidated condition and badly maintained. The garden has 108 quarters and all of them are kuchcha. The walls are made of wood and the roofs are tiled. In most cases the tiles are missing or the wood has rotted. No attempt has been made by the management to repair the houses. When the condition of the roofs worsened, the management provided tarpaulin (canvas sheets) as cover. The plantation does not provide electric connections but workers take private connections if they can afford it. Water is supplied through pipes and is available for a few hours every day. The lines have cart roads which are in bad condition. These have to be maintained by the workers themselves as the management refuses to maintain them.

The housing conditions in G7 is better. The garden has 430 labour quarters of which 375 are pucca and 55 kuchcha. The repair of the quarters is done regularly. The kuchcha quarters are repaired once in five years. About half the pucca quarters have electric connections. Water is supplied through taps situated at various points in the labour lines and is available throughout the day. Most of the roads in the labour lines as well as in other parts of the garden are semi-pucca (brick-lined) and motorable.

G8 has 650 labour quarters of which 510 are pucca and 140 kuchcha. New workers are given kuchcha quarters which they themselves have to build. The management gives the worker Rs. 1860 to cover the expenses (namely, raw materials and labour). Repair of quarters is not done regularly. (The workers told us that no repair work had been undertaken during the past five years.) The management does not provide electricity to the labour lines but some of the workers have taken electric connections on their own. Water is supplied to the lines

from two sources. Half the lines get water from the public taps installed by the Department of Public Health Engineering (PHE) of the State Government. The management provides water through cemented tanks which are situated in the lines where PHE water supply is not available. The roads in the labour lines are motorable.

### Sanitation

Darjeeling hills face the problem of water shortage. The sanitary system in the plantations is affected due to this. Hence it is not possible to have pucca latrines with flush system in the plantations. The common type of latrine is the bore-hole latrine. A deep hole is dug in the latrine area and after use some mud is thrown to cover it up. This is locally known as the 'Gaddha' (hole) system. This type of latrine is common in the plantations.

The management of G6 did not think it necessary to construct latrines. The workers had made Gaddha latrines on their own. They constructed the type they could afford. The Gaddha toilets need walls for privacy. This could be of tin or jute cloth. A roof is also needed. If workers do not have sufficient resources the walls are made of cloth with no roof. The drainage system in the lines is almost non-existent.

The sanitary facilities in G7 is comparatively better. Here too there are Gaddha latrines but these have been provided by the management. Each quarter, whether pucca or kuchcha, has a toilet. The management provides the raw materials and wages of two workers every year for maintenance of the toilets. The drainage system is good as most lines had cemented drains. G8, on the other hand, is similar to G6 in this aspect. Though the management has built the latrines there has been no maintenance since the past six years. The drainage system is better than that of G6 as there are some kuchcha drains in the lines.

### Creche

G6 had a creche with three attendants. The children are given some refreshments during the day. G7 had three creches which had two attendants in each of them. Each child is given 250 ml milk every day. The creches have kitchenettes for heating the milk. G8 has two creches which have two attendants in each. The creche does not provide any

refreshments and the mothers have to provide these. The management gives a paltry sum of Rs. 10 per month to each mother to procure milk for the child.

### Health Facilities

G6 has neither a hospital nor a dispensary. The workers are expected to consult doctors and procure medicines at their own expense. The garden has a compounder and a nurse on its rolls, but the workers said that they were untrained and had no work experience. In cases of emergency when hospitalisation is needed, the management provides a jeep to take the sick or injured to a public hospital in Darjeeling.

G8 has a hospital with six beds. It also has a qualified full-time doctor who is assisted by five health assistants, three females and two males. The garden does not have a nurse or a compounder. The health assistants perform these duties.

The medical facilities in G7 appear better from outside. The garden has a hospital with two separate wards for males and females, each having six beds. There is also a delivery room. Bathroom and toilet facilities exist separately for both sexes. (G8's hospital has common facilities.) Despite this impressive exterior, the garden does not have the most crucial element—a full-time doctor. Doctors from the Doars-Darjeeling Medical Association visit the garden once a week. There is also no nurse. There are three health assistants (female) who look after the hospital and provide first aid. Medicines for simple illness are available in the garden hospital. Those requiring intensive treatment are sent to Darjeeling and the expenses are borne by the management. In case of hospitalisation, the management pays half the expenses and the rest are collected from the worker in instalments (this is against the rules, as the PLA and the State rules make it mandatory for the management to provide for all medical expenses).

### Education

G6 has a primary school with four rooms. At the time of survey, there were six teachers, four females and two males. The school is well maintained and the teachers are regular. For post-primary education, the children have to go to schools in Darjeeling. The management does

not provide any facilities such as transport to the children. The medium of instruction in the primary school is Nepali/Gorkhali and the children are also taught English.

G8 has two primary schools with four teachers in each. Both schools have separate classrooms for each class. One of the schools, known as Model Primary School, was in a dilapidated state and was being repaired with assistance from the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council. Both schools together have around a hundred students on their rolls.

In addition there is a private school within the garden. The students are required to pay fees for attending it. It has seven teachers, four lady and three male teachers. Though more expensive than the other two schools, workers preferred to send their children to this school as the teaching standards are better. The school had 85 students on its rolls. The medium of instruction in all the schools is Nepali/Gorkhali and English is taught as a subject.

Facilities for post-primary education are very limited. In this garden too the management did not provide any transport for children going to schools outside the garden. There are two schools near the garden where some students go. The distance is quite far for the children (about 5 kms from most of the lines) and the children to walk to school. About fifty children attend these schools.

The primary school at G7 is newly built. It has two teachers and around a hundred students. It is a regular school and medium of instruction is Nepali/Gorkhali and English is also taught. The garden also has a junior school which is private but it is not recognised by the School Board. The school is managed through contributions from the workers and fees from the students. It is a regular school and has six teachers. About fifty students attend this school. Most of the students attend schools outside the garden for post-primary education. There are a few schools in the vicinity (4-9 kms away). The most popular is the government run school at Sukhia Pokhri which is 9 kms away. The management does not provide any transport for these students. They have to walk, go by bicycle or use public transport for going to school.

### **Canteen and Recreational Facilities**

Canteens do not exist in two of the plantations (G6 and G8). G7 has a room for this purpose but the canteen was closed down a few years ago.

G6 has a clubhouse and a playground. The former has been constructed by the workers and both, the club and the playground, are run by them with their own resources. G8 had three playgrounds which have been constructed with assistance from the Hill Council. Football and volley ball are popular outdoor games. The management bears the cost for these games. There is also a club where indoor games are played and cultural functions (mainly musical events) are held. G7 does not have a club. There are two playgrounds where various games were organised from time to time. The management bore the costs.

### **Comparison of the Three Districts**

In the above sections we have tried to assess the living conditions of workers in the three tea districts of West Bengal. In this section we shall compare the status of the various statutory benefits which the workers are entitled to.

#### **Living Conditions**

In general we can state that none of the plantations in the three districts have fulfilled the housing requirements as stipulated in the PLA. All the gardens still have a number of kuchcha quarters. Construction of pucca quarters would naturally strain the financial resources of the garden but this is a commitment the employer cannot forsake. However, especially in the case of Dooars, a smaller garden like G3 with less resources has a better record of pucca houses than G1 which is financially much sounder.

The living conditions in Terai are pathetic. The gardens here are financially weaker than those in the other districts but they could surely meet the basic requirements of their workers. In Darjeeling, a famous garden like G6 has very poor housing conditions. Therefore it is not lack of resources of the management which causes poor housing, it is merely their negative attitude towards improving the living standards of the workers which is responsible for these sorry state of affairs.

What is more surprising is that neither the labour department of the government nor the trade unions have taken up these issues seriously. The normal tendency of trade unions in this area is to blame the management for its callousness towards the workers' needs. However this is not enough. The local trade unions, and their federations could have taken up this issue at the industry level and organised some movements to focus on the problem. Instead the unions it appears are more interested in passing the buck to others—the government for its ineffectiveness or the employers for their indifference.

Apart from housing the sanitary and drainage conditions are equally bad. It is only during the recent years that the plantations have started constructing toilets in the labour lines. Earlier these did not exist and men and women had to use open spaces for these purposes. This is despite the fact that the PLA and the State rules elaborated on these issues. In Darjeeling it is understandable that the water problem makes construction of flush system latrines difficult to operate. However, even the modified (bore-hole) ones which are less expensive have not been provided. In G6 the workers have to fend for themselves. In G8, the management does not repair them.

Plantations in Dooars in comparison provide better living conditions. However when compared with the plantations in Tamil Nadu the Dooars tea plantations definitely project an inferior picture. The Tamil Nadu plantations not only give higher wages to their workers, they also ensure that they get a better deal in their living conditions. This is despite the fact that the plantations there are less productive than those in Dooars. Therefore, it is not the resources but the attitudes of the employers towards their workers which is crucial in labour welfare. The employers in North India seem to regard plantation workers as liabilities rather than resources.

### **Education**

The educational opportunities for children of plantation workers is very important for the future of this community. The employers have to provide for primary education because plantations are isolated and it is difficult for children of the workers to have access to education on their own. However, though the gardens in Dooars has schools these

are hardly functional. In Terai the functionality of schools is not a factor since schools do not exist at all.

In Dooars the schools provided by the plantations are not adequate. Primary education is for the first four standards, comprising four years in school. Hence one would expect schools to have atleast four classrooms. Since none of the gardens have separate classrooms it is likely that all students are taught collectively in one classroom. In all probability the children are taught the same course for four or five years. Secondly, the number of students is fairly large but the teachers are few. G3 has a better ratio of students and teachers as each teacher has 31 students. On the other hand, in Ramjhora there were two teachers for 200 students which would make it difficult for students to learn anything.

We also found in Dooars that teachers did not attend to their duties regularly. The teachers were employees of the government (School Board) and there is a general laxity among government employees in their duties. At the same time the management was equally responsible for this state of affairs. The teachers were responsible to the chairman of the school committee who in most cases was the manager of the plantation. Most of them were indifferent and did not make attempts to check whether the teachers came to school regularly. The poor condition of education was due to a number of reasons; such as, large number of students, inadequate space, low number of teachers who are indifferent to their duties, lack of interest of the management, etc. The net loser is the worker as his children have to suffer due to lack of education.

The situation in Darjeeling was much better. We found that the schools were better run, schools had enough rooms and the teachers attended to their duties regularly. However, Darjeeling's weakness is that the managements do not provide any facilities for post-primary education. In Dooars transport is provided for those children who attend school outside the garden. The students in Darjeeling are put to a lot of hardship as they have to travel long distances to reach their schools.

### **Health Facilities**

While examining health facilities we found that in this sphere too Dooars

was superior. Plantations there employed qualified doctors and other medical staff. In Darjeeling though hospitals existed the people to man them (doctors and nurses) were lacking. However, when compared to Tamil Nadu the health services provided in too Dooars were below average. Except for one or two cases medicines were not available. The Medical Advisory Committee formed under the State's plantation labour rules gives clear directions on the kind of medicines, equipment and medical staff which each garden should have. Yet these guidelines have not been adhered to. The only thing positive in the three tea districts is the water supply. This is the only clause of the PLA which has been implemented by all the employers.

### Creches

One of the major failings of the plantations is regarding childcare. Creches for working mothers are either not provided or they are inadequate. In some of the gardens where creches exist they are not well organised and the children are not given refreshments. The neglect of creches reflects the manner in which the managements look at the problems of women workers. Absence of creches in some gardens puts additional burden on the working mother. Her efficiency is reduced considerably because she has to tend to her work and her child at the same time. Since the children are not given food in the creches the mothers have to leave their work to feed their children. In only one of the plantations (G7) the creches are run properly. In other cases the creches were there only to fulfill the requirements of the PLA or because there was pressure from the women for starting them. In most cases setting up of creches was done in a half-hearted manner by the managements.

### Recreational Facilities

Recreational facilities are necessary in the plantations as the workers do not have avenues for seeking these elsewhere. These facilities are the least expensive commitment for the employers. However, even here the plantations do not take interest. Since most plantations have vacant land the cost for converting a flat piece of land into a playground would be negligible. The additional expenditure of providing some sports goods would again be very marginal. However, even these are denied to the workers. Clubhouses are important aspects of the workers' cultural development as they can meet there regularly and engage in indoor

games or cultural activities. These are necessary for older workers or those who are not interested in outdoor sport. Meetings of the union committee could be held in the clubhouse. The last mentioned is perhaps the main reason why some of the gardens did not build clubhouses. A few managers even maintained that clubhouses were dens of evil where workers collected to conspire against the management.

### Household Data

The selection of households to be surveyed was based on random sampling and care was taken to cover a representative sample. The data collected is given in Tables 7 to 12. The total number of households covered was 182 out of which 74 were in Dooars, 46 in Terai and 62 in Darjeeling. The total population in these households was 1022 giving an average of 5.6 members per household. Of these, Dooars had 392 members in the 74 households with an average of 5.3 per household. The total household members interviewed in Terai was 282 and the average household size was 6.1 while Darjeeling had a total of 348 household members with an average of 5.6 members per household.

TABLE 7  
Features of Sampled Households (HH)

	No. of HH	Total Population	Average HH size
Dooars	74	392	5.3
Terai	46	282	6.1
Darjeeling	62	348	5.6
Total	182	1022	

A majority of the households in the three tea districts (75.3 per cent) had between four and seven members and a little less than half of them (47 per cent) had between 4 and 5 members. The proportion of households having between 4 and 7 members is higher in Dooars and Terai as compared to Darjeeling. Dooars has 77 per cent and Terai 76 per cent households in this category. The comparatively smaller proportion of households in Darjeeling is mainly because one or more member of the household (in most cases, the husband) is employed in



places outside the garden, such as the military, police, etc.

**TABLE 8**  
**Frequency Distribution of Households (HH)**  
**Household Size (including Head of HH)**

	1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10+
Dooars	2	5	35	22	7	3
Terai	0	8	23	12	3	0
Darjeeling	2	9	28	17	5	1
Total	4	22	86	51	15	4

The household sizes in general are quite large. This was mainly because the workers live in joint families comprising at least three generations. The job of the parent is normally given to the sibling after the parent retires. This also enables parents to live with their grown up or married children in the same house since they have provided jobs to their children. The availability of employment outside the plantations for children of plantation workers is very limited, especially in Dooars and Terai. The children of plantation workers therefore tended to stay within the plantation and hope for work there.

**TABLE 9**  
**Age Distribution of Household Heads (in years)**

	Below 30	31-40	41-50	50+
Dooars	27	26	13	8
Terai	12	16	8	10
Darjeeling	9	23	12	18
Total	48	65	33	36

That the households of the plantation workers are primarily joint families is further borne out by the age distribution of the heads of households. These heads were those on whose name the house had been provided by the management of the plantation. This is normally the male permanent worker or the female permanent worker (in case

there is no male permanent worker in the household). Table 9 gives the age distribution of the heads of households. Around 62 per cent of the household heads (113 out of 182) were 40 years old or less while a little less than 20 per cent (36 out of 182) were over 50 years old. There are differences in the proportions of heads in different age-groups in the three tea districts. In Dooars around 72 per cent of the household heads were found to be of 40 years or less whereas in Darjeeling the number of such household heads comprised only 52 per cent and in Terai they constituted around 60 per cent. Nearly 30 per cent of the heads in Darjeeling were above 50 years of age whereas in Dooars the proportion was a mere 11 per cent and in Terai the percentage was 21.

### Literacy and Educational Levels

The data on education is given in Table 10. Those who could not read or write are categorised as illiterate. There were others who had one or two years of schooling and they could read with difficulty and could sign their names. These people are categorised as functionally literate. The other three categories are those who had completed four years of primary education, those who had completed middle school (eighth standard) and those who had passed secondary school. What is striking is the high rate of illiteracy among the household heads. Nearly half the heads of households (49 per cent) are illiterate, 12 per cent functionally literate, 22.5 per cent had received primary education, 14 per cent had reached middle school and only one head in the 182 households had passed secondary school. This low level of literacy shows another failure of the PLA. One of the provisions of the PLA is that the employers must provide primary schools for the children of plantation workers. Yet it is evident that most of these people did not get the benefit of free education.

**TABLE 10**  
**Educational Levels of Household Heads**

	I	FL	Pr.	Mid.	Sec.
Dooars	28	12	16	18	0
Terai	34	5	5	2	0
Darjeeling	27	5	20	9	1

I- illiterate; FL- functionally literate; Pr- Primary education; Mid- Middle school; Sec- Secondary school.

On the three tea districts, Dooars has the lowest rate of illiterates, at 38 per cent followed by Darjeeling at 43 per cent and Terai has the highest number of illiterates who formed 74 per cent of the sampled household heads. While Terai's rate of illiteracy is high due to total neglect of education by the managements what is also surprising is that Darjeeling's rate of illiteracy is also quite high. However, one positive aspect of the situation in Darjeeling is that the present school-going rate is fairly high which means that the future generations will be better off. The illiteracy rate in Dooars is the lowest but that is not saying much because given the fact that all plantations must have primary schools to cater to all the children in the garden one would expect that many more workers in the below 40 age-group would have completed primary school but this is not so.

The most distressing aspect of education in the plantations is that there are very few workers with post-primary education. Only 24 per cent of the household heads in Dooars were educated beyond primary school and up to middle school. In Terai there were only two workers (that is, 4 per cent) who were in this category while in Darjeeling 16 per cent of the heads had studied beyond primary school. The lone worker who had completed Higher Secondary was from Darjeeling.

Though the educational level of the present generation of workers is low, the educational levels are likely to be better in the future, especially in Darjeeling. The total number of students in the 74 households in Dooars was 97 giving an average of 1.3 students per household. Though this is not very high, as one expects greater enrolment, it is still higher than the present rate of illiteracy, given the fact that 38 per cent of the heads are illiterate and 12 of them (16 per cent) are functionally literate. Darjeeling has the highest number of students. There were 115 students, almost two per household. The worst record was of Terai with only 29 students (0.6 per household). This is not surprising considering that none of the gardens covered had primary schools.

The enrolment rate of students, especially for post-primary education is related to the employment opportunities available for the future generations. In Dooars and Terai regions people in the plantations have very little scope of employment outside their gardens. Most of those seeking employment have to rely on temporary jobs within the garden.

Hence there is little impetus for parents to educate their children beyond primary school because it is taxing for the children to travel long distances and most gardens do not provide them transport. This also makes travel to schools expensive, even if education is free. The gains from this education may be negligible because even after passing school suitable employment may not be available and the student may have to join as a manual labourer in the plantation.

The situation is better in Darjeeling as the children of plantation workers are able to find jobs in the nearby towns or in the armed services, police, etc. Though Darjeeling is not a developed district, it is more developed than the other two tea districts because of its booming tourist industry. The children of plantation workers are able to find some jobs in tourism or in shops, hotels, etc. in the townships.

### Employment

If one goes by the number of people who are employed and the number who are unemployed, one will come to the conclusion that the employment situation in the plantations is very good. Apart from the 182 household heads we found that there were 227 more who were employed. This gives an average of 2.4 job-holders per household. The households in Dooars had 91 people who were employed besides the 74 household heads which gives an average of 2.2 employed members per household. Terai had 76 members besides the heads who were employed, that is, 2.6 per household while in Darjeeling the number employed was 60 giving an average of around two per household.

Most of the employed in Dooars had jobs within the plantations they resided in. Out of the 91 who held jobs, 83 were employed in their gardens and 8 were employed outside their gardens. In Terai all 76 employed were working in their respective gardens. The proportion of those working outside the gardens was higher in Darjeeling. There were 35 working outside their gardens and 25 working within their gardens.

The number of employed in the plantations appears to be fairly impressive. However, if one looks at the nature of employment the picture will change. An overwhelming majority of those employed in Dooars and Terai were engaged as temporary workers in the

plantations. In fact in Dooars there were only 15 households which had more than one permanent worker. In Terai only eight households had more than one permanent worker. The situation was the same in Darjeeling as far as permanent workers were concerned. A temporary worker is employed for less than 180 days in a year and hence the income of such workers, if calculated annually, is half that of a permanent worker. The eight workers in Dooars who were working outside their plantations held low paid jobs which were in fact less paying than jobs on the plantations. In general the total household income is not very high, except in some cases in Darjeeling, as we will see when we analyse income levels later.

The situation in Darjeeling is somewhat different from Dooars and Terai as the proportion of job-holders outside the gardens is higher. In fact those working outside the gardens are better paid than those working within the garden (as temporary workers). There were 11 households where the husband was in the army, police or a paramilitary organisation or was getting pension from these organisations. The pay in these organisations (and the pension) is considerably higher than the wages of plantation workers. In one of the gardens situated near Darjeeling town some of the household members found employment in the town after completing their education.

### Income

Table 11 gives the income of the household heads and the households. The average monthly income of a worker in the three tea districts is around Rs. 550. Most of the household heads fall in this income group. Those with income higher than this are in the supervisory staff or in other occupations such as driver, electrician, etc. Our data shows that the income of 85 per cent of the household heads is below Rs. 600 per month. There were only two heads—one in Darjeeling and the other in Dooars—whose income was above Rs. 1500 per month. Both were drivers.

The household income is substantially higher than the income of the heads. Only 15 per cent of the households have income below Rs. 600 per month while 65 per cent have income of over Rs. 1000 per month. However, the picture changes slightly if we look at the three districts separately. Of the 55 households (30 per cent of the sample)

TABLE 11

Monthly Income of Head (H) and of Household (HH) (in Rs.)

	Below 600		601-800		801-1000		1001-1500		1501-2000		2000+	
	H	HH	H	HH	H	HH	H	HH	H	HH	H	HH
Dooars	59	13	6	8	6	13	2	27	1	7	0	6
Terai	41	5	2	9	3	5	0	17	0	9	0	1
Darjeeling	55	10	1	0	2	1	3	19	1	15	0	17
Total	155	28	9	17	11	19	5	63	2	31	0	24

which have an income of over Rs. 1500 per month, 33 (18 per cent) are in Darjeeling. The comparatively higher income of these households is mainly due to remittances from male members in service outside (army, etc.) or because of extra income from selling milk. Some households breed cows and supply milk to the local cooperative society. Though over half the households in this district have an income of over Rs. 1500 per month, 16 per cent of the households have an income of less than Rs. 600 per month.

Most of the households in Dooars (54 per cent) have income which fall between Rs. 800 and Rs. 1500 per month and in Terai 48 per cent are in this category. Hence the household income in the plantations of Dooars and Terai are at an average substantially lower than that of Darjeeling where 52 per cent of the households have an income of over Rs. 1500 per month.

When one takes into account that there are 2.4 jobs per household, the average household income appears to be very low. Considering the large size of the average household, the current household income seems inadequate to meet anything above the minimum needs of the household.

### Savings

The main form of savings for plantation workers is the Provident Fund. This is a compulsory form of saving which has legal backing. The Provident Fund comprises of monthly deduction of seven per cent of the worker's wages and the employer contributes a similar amount.

This amount is deposited on the worker's name and is returned at the time of retirement or resignation. The worker can take advances from his or her fund for certain purposes, such as illness, daughter's marriage, construction of own house, etc. The nature of savings other than the Provident Fund has been summarised in Table 12.

TABLE 12  
Nature of Savings

	Nil	Bank	PO	LIC	Pvt.	SG
Dooars	42	19	4	14	8	0
Terai	29	7	2	8	0	0
Darjeeling	17	9	0	2	0	35
Total	88	35	6	24	8	35

PO: Post Office

LIC: Life Insurance

Pvt.: mainly Peerless

SG: Savings Group (see explanation in text).

NOTE: The total number of households comes to more than the actual number of households covered because some of the households have more than one form of saving and these have been recorded separately each time.

Of the 182 households covered, 88 of them (48 per cent) had no savings. This is a fairly high proportion and it perhaps indicates the level of living of the workers. It would be incorrect to assume that these workers live in isolated areas and hence do not have access to the different types of saving schemes. The workers are aware that banks and the post offices offer them interests for their money. The nationalised banks have branches in the townships near the plantations and post offices—or sub-post offices—are quite accessible. Agents of the Life Insurance Corporation also visit the labour lines and try and convince workers to buy policies. In Dooars, some private savings organisations such as Peerless Corporation have their agents who persuade workers to save with them. These organisations offer higher rates of interests than the banks and post office. Therefore if the savings rate is low among these workers it indicates that they have little surplus for such purposes.

In Darjeeling, where the household income is higher than that of the other two districts, savings too is higher. The workers have developed their own method of saving. This is called the Savings Group and it is popular among the women. A group of women get together to form a Savings Group. They decide on what would be the monthly or weekly contribution of each member. This forms the 'kitty' and the entire amount is given to one member. In the next round another member gets the amount collected and so on till the chain of members is completed. For example, if there are ten members contributing Rs. 10 every week the total collected is Rs. 100. This is given to one member. In the following week another member gets the amount collected and so on. Hence after 10 weeks each member gets Rs. 100. The main advantage the members have in this scheme is that they get lump sums of money which they can invest elsewhere or use for themselves. We found that 35 of the households in Darjeeling (56 per cent) were involved in this type of savings.

An analysis of the district-wise break-up of savings shows that around 57 per cent of the households in Dooars and 63 per cent of the households in Terai did not have any savings. It is only after taking into account Darjeeling that the proportion of households with no savings come down to 48 per cent. The workers in Dooars and Terai preferred to deposit their savings in banks. Around 42 per cent of the households having savings in Dooars and 41 per cent in Terai saved in banks. This was followed by the Life Insurance Corporation (31 per cent in Dooars and 47 per cent in Terai). Six of the households in the two districts had savings in the post office and eight households in Dooars saved with Peerless.

## Conclusion

In general the living conditions of plantation workers in the State was poor and there was a need to improve them. As compared to the living standards of agricultural workers the plantation workers certainly have a higher level. However it must be kept in mind that the plantation is at present a profitable industry and in this respect very little of the affluence that one sees in the lifestyles of the managers and other executives connected with the tea industry is visible where the workers are concerned. There is an extremely wide gulf between these lifestyles

which cannot be justified. The main problem with this industry is that the relations between employers and workers are feudal in nature and under these circumstances the employers by and large refuse to recognise workers as assets. This is perhaps why these people are denied their basic needs, such as proper wages, housing, education and recreational facilities. The trade unions too have not been able to put forth these basic needs to the management. This is seriously impairing the cultural development of this isolated section of the working class. There is also a need to develop the areas around the plantations so that the employment opportunities can improve and the future generations are not totally dependent on the plantation for employment.

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#### CHAPTER 4

## Tea Plantation Labour in Tamil Nadu

M.A. Kalam

This study was conducted in the Nilgiris and Coimbatore districts of Tamil Nadu during May-June 1995. In the Nilgiris 120 households, comprising a population of 555 (284 men and 271 women), of tea plantation workers were covered in all the four taluks, namely, Kottagiri, Ootacamund, Coonoor and Gudalur. In Coimbatore district, tea is grown only in Annamalai hills in Valparai taluk. In Valparai 110 households (250 men and 255 women, that is, a total population of 505) were covered. Thus a total of 230 households comprising 1060 individuals were studied. (Table 1) The average household size is 4.61 for the entire sample; it is 4.63 for Nilgiris district and 4.59 for Coimbatore district.

TABLE 1

Number of Households (Hhs.) and Population

District	Hhs.	Men	Women	Total Pop.	Av. Hh size
Nilgiris	120	284	271	555	4.63
Coimbatore	110	250	255	505	4.59
Total	230	534	526	1060	4.61

In Nilgiris the survey was conducted on 25 workers, drawn from 11 households in Coonoor Taluk, who do not work on plantation but in the tea gardens of small growers (less than 15 acres). Of these 10 are men and 15 are women, 24 are temporary and only one male worker is

The author was assisted in his research by P. Thamizoli and B. Selvaraj.

permanent. On the other hand, all those covered in Valparai taluk work on plantations.

The average annual household income for the entire sample is Rs 5325.68; in Nilgiris it is Rs. 5561.73 and in Valparai it is Rs. 5066.26. The average annual income of a plantation worker is Rs 10,085.64, and that of an individual having a non-plantation job is Rs. 6737.76. But as the dependent population is quite large, that is, 486 (45.8 per cent), the overall average annual income of a household gets reduced to Rs. 5325.68. The monthly average income for a household in Nilgiris is Rs. 463.48 and in Valparai it is Rs. 422.19. The monthly income of an individual working on a plantation is Rs. 840.47, and that of an individual working elsewhere is Rs. 561.48. But taking into consideration the dependents, the monthly average income of an individual reduces to Rs. 443.81. (Table 2)

**TABLE 2**  
**Average Income of Plantation and**  
**Non-plantation Workers**

<i>Category of Workers</i>	<i>No. of Workers</i>	<i>Monthly Rs.</i>	<i>Annual Rs.</i>
Plantation	531	840.47	10,085.64
Non-plantation	43	561.48	6,737.76
Unemployed	486	0.00	0.00

In the entire sample, 531 (50.1 per cent) people (all adults) are employed as plantation workers (including the 25 (2.4 per cent) in Coonoor taluk who work on the gardens of small growers). Of these, 257 (48.4 per cent) are men and 274 (51.6 per cent) are women; 200 (37.67 per cent) are temporary workers and 331 (62.33 per cent) are permanent workers. Of the 200 temporary workers 107 (50.45 per cent) are women and 164 (49.55 per cent) are men. Women outnumber men both in the permanent as well as in the temporary category.

A small section comprising 43 (4.1 per cent) people has jobs outside the plantation context. They are drawn from 35 households (27 persons, including one woman from 20 households from the Nilgiris and 16

persons, including three women, from 15 households from Valparai). The overall average size of these 35 households is 5.51 (5.2 for the Nilgiris and 5.93 for Valparai); much higher than that of our general sample. Twenty-three (53.48 per cent) of these 43 are in the age-group of 17 to 21 years, eleven (25.58 per cent) between 23 and 26 years, eight (18.6 per cent) between 28 and 40 years, and only one person is over 50 years old. Of this 39 are men and four are women. Two women and 37 men are temporary workers, and only two men and two women have permanent jobs outside the plantations. All the four women (one from the Nilgiris and three from Valparai) have passed Senior Secondary School. Two work as tailors (one each from Nilgiris and Valparai), and one as a midwife in a Primary Health Centre, and the fourth one is a Balwadi teacher. The latter two are permanent employees but their salaries are just Rs. 75, and Rs. 120 per month respectively. Of the two permanent men, one, an M.A., is a clerk in the Bharatiyar Transport Corporation (BTC) and the other is a salesman in Khadi Bhavan; the latter earns about Rs. 600 per month. As can be seen, just one of the four permanent employees, that is, the one working with the BTC has a decent income, Rs. 3000 per month.

Out of this sample of 43, five men are illiterate (three from Nilgiris and two from Valparai). All the three from Nilgiris work as daily wage labourers whenever they get to do so. The two from Valparai work in tea shops. In the case of two men from Nilgiris their wives work on the plantations, one as a temporary worker and the other one is permanent. In the third case the parents of the twenty-year old unmarried person are permanent workers on a plantation. In the case of the men from Valparai, one's wife is a permanent worker on a plantation; in the other case, the person's mother is a permanent and the brother a temporary worker.

Of the remaining 34 from the sample, 11 are from Valparai and 28 from the Nilgiris. These men have between four to thirteen years of education; but they are all employed as masons, mechanics, cleaners (in trucks), tailors; some work for daily wages in tea shops, provision stores, etc. Income from jobs outside the plantation, is low; yet due to the saturation where jobs are concerned on the plantations people are forced to go out. Some amount of schooling, it appears, enables people to go out of the plantations and find jobs; but there are hardly any jobs

that are available in the vicinity of the plantations. Even if jobs are available these are in the nature of daily wage, besides being low income fetching. There is no doubt a possibility of absorbing the educated sections from the plantations if the areas around the plantations are developed in some way. In the absence of any such development most would like to work on the plantations if they could get jobs there, even if these happen to be temporary ones. Moreover, it is quite clear from the responses of the people who have jobs outside the plantations that they would prefer to go back and work on the plantations.

The survey shows that out of 1060 people, 486 (45.8 per cent) are not gainfully employed; of these 393 (80.87 per cent) are in the age-group of 0 to 18 years; 58 (11.93 per cent) are between the ages 19 to 59 years, and the rest 35 (7.2 per cent) are 60 years and above. As we can consider those up to the age of 18 years and those above 60 years as dependents, the figure of the actual unemployed would just be 45 (9.3 per cent). For the entire sample of 1060, the percentage of the unemployed is just 4.2.

Of the total population of 1060, 339 (32 per cent) are illiterate; 282 (26.6 per cent) have had primary education, 190 (17.9 per cent) have secondary, 192 (18.1 per cent) have high school and 40 (3.8 per cent) have higher secondary education. Four persons (0.4 per cent) are graduates, six (0.6 per cent) are professional graduates, five (0.5 per cent) have had diplomas from polytechnics, two (0.2 per cent) have diplomas from ITIs and one is a post-graduate. (See Table 3) Except in the category of high school qualified persons, the Nilgiris scores over Coimbatore district in the rest of the categories, including the category of illiterates.

While the 177 (16.7 per cent) who work on the plantations are illiterate, the respective figures for those who are unemployed, for those who work on small gardens and for those who work outside the plantation context are, 146 (13.8 per cent), 11 (one per cent) and 5 (0.5 per cent). The last category—of those who do not work either on the plantations or in small gardens—is evidence that without education a person is confined to the plantation, whereas being educated helps in finding jobs outside the plantation. The remaining 38 have a minimum of four years schooling; 13 of these have ten years of schooling. The person with the highest qualification, an M.A., is also from this category.

**TABLE 3**  
**Levels of Education (Nilgiris and Coimbatore)**

<i>Education</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Illiterate	339	32.0
Functionally Literate <sup>1</sup>	58	5.5
Primary <sup>2</sup>	224	21.1
Middle <sup>3</sup>	227	26.1
Secondary and above <sup>4</sup>	212	15.3
Total	1060	100.0

1) One or two years of schooling; 2) Upto five years of schooling; 3) Upto nine years of schooling; 4) Ten years or more of schooling.

Of the 486 unemployed, 146 (30.04 per cent) are illiterate; rest of the 340 (69.96 per cent) have (including those who are currently studying) one to 15 years of education. Those who have more than five years of schooling are 243 (50 per cent).

### *Nilgiris District*

In Tamil Nadu, the Nilgiris District ranks first as regards both the area under plantations and as also the total number of plantations. All the four taluks in the district have tea plantations of all categories, namely, company gardens, proprietary gardens and gardens of small growers. The initial phase of the tea industry in South India was restricted to the Nilgiris. It was in 1834 that Dr. Christi of the Madras Establishment experimented with growing tea and gave some tea saplings to various individuals in the Nilgiris. The area covered under tea plantations increased from 20,840 hectares in 1961 to 26,524 hectares in 1990. (*Tea Statistics, 1990-91*)

Among the four taluks of the Nilgiris, except Ooty the rest of the taluks have a substantial number of plantations. Ten sample plantations were selected in all the taluks, which includes four from Coonoor (including TANTEA), three from Kottagiri, two from Godalur, and one from Ooty. Out of the ten plantations 109 households were selected for household census and 11 more households who are working in the gardens of small growers were also included.

## Housing

Generally the labour colonies in plantations are scattered in many places due to the topography of the place. Two or three labour lines are found in one place and form a colony. Each labour line normally consists of five or six houses and the lines are constructed parallel to each other. The houses are brick-walled and have either tiled or asbestos roofs except in one plantation located in the interior part of Gudalur taluk where the houses have thatched roofs. Timber—both for the construction of the houses and for repair—is obtained from the trees grown for shade in the plantations, mostly silver oak. Leaking roofs and damaged chimneys are rare occurrences, except in Gudalur taluk, where it is a common occurrence. Each house has a small kitchen, and a spacious middle multipurpose room, and an outer courtyard. Normally the floor is not cemented.

When a worker becomes permanent he/she is allotted a house and is allowed to live in the house till retirement. In some of the plantations if only one member in the family is a permanent employee, the management locks up the kitchen of the house, and the family is allowed to use the middle room and the outer courtyard. The same practice of locking up the kitchen is followed if either the husband or wife retires from service. In some cases another family which has a single permanent employee is accommodated in the kitchen portion, and two families share a single unit. The worker has to vacate the house the very next day after retirement. He will get the retirement benefits (Gratuity calculated for 15 days wage for every year to the total number of years completed in service) and Provident Fund only after he returns the key of the vacated house to the management. In Gudalur taluk housing is not provided to all the permanent employees; they are allotted one after six months, and in some cases after one year. But for the employees who do not get allotted a house and for the non-resident tribals (who do not like to live on the plantation), the management gives Rs. 25 per month as HRA and Rs. 150 per year as maintenance allowance.

## Water Supply

Water for drinking and household use is supplied through taps. These taps are located in front of the labour lines. Water supply is restricted to one or two hours in the morning and again for one or two hours in

the evening, and round-the-clock supply on Sundays. In a few plantations the management chlorinates the water supplied to the labour lines on some occasions. In two of the plantations water scarcity is a major problem; supply is not regular, the quantity is insufficient for a day's consumption, and it gets worse during the summer. Workers from these plantations go to nearby villages to fetch drinking water. The source of water is either an open well or a tubewell. If perennial streams traverse through the plantations (which is very common) the workers go there to wash their clothes and sometimes also to bathe.

## Sanitation

As per State rule, separate toilets are to be provided to all the households; yet it was found that in one plantation two families share one toilet, and in two other plantations the toilets are abandoned due to severe water scarcity. The toilets are constructed slightly away from the labour lines. The owners of the toilets lock them to prevent the others from using them. The toilets do not have taps; one has to carry water to the toilet. Inadequate water supply is the main cause for the latrines being dirty. In one plantation a small tank is constructed adjacent to each toilet, to store water.

All the houses are electrified. Previously no electricity charge was collected from the workers, but now since there is a change in the consumption pattern due to the use of radio, TV, and other electrical appliances like heater and iron, the managements collect electricity charges from all the houses. Meters are provided for each house and charges are collected according to the meter readings. The labour colonies do not have streetlighting.

Roads are laid in all colonies in the plantations; in only one plantation the workers reach their lines through a footpath. Drainage system exists in all labour colonies, but it is not properly maintained. Water stagnation in the drains is quite common. But in two plantations drains are extremely well maintained. The poor maintenance of the drainage system is mainly due to the insufficient number of sweepers, and in some cases due to the irresponsible behaviour of the sweepers.

A room is provided for the recreation of the workers, and facilities exist to play indoor games like chess and carrom. But the room is also



used to hold community and trade union meetings, and also to play cards. In one plantation there is a volleyball court. There are no canteens in the plantation enclaves but the managements rent out a house or room to outsiders to run a small tea shop. Normally after the workers go over to the tea shop to pass their time, involve in gossip and read Tamil newspapers.

### Creches

Creche facility is available in all plantations; one or two baby-sitters or *ayahs* look after children in the age-group of three months to five years. The creches are generally neat and clean. Children up to the age of three years are provided milk. Those above three years are given solid food, rice and curry. The *ayahs* oil and comb the hair of the children daily. Twice a year the children get ready-made shirts, shorts, and frocks from the management. The mothers bring their children in the morning to the creche on their way to work and pick them up in the evening on their way back.

### Education

Most plantations have elementary schools run by the management and sufficient number of teachers are appointed to the schools. The parents show enthusiasm in the childrens' education and willingness to send them to school.

For post-primary education the children go to high schools and higher secondary schools, both government and private ones, in nearby villages or towns. The distance to reach a high school or higher secondary school varies from one kilometre to over six kilometres. No financial assistance or transportation is provided by the management to the school-going children. This is a major cause for dropouts at the high school level. The medium of instruction in all government schools is Tamil, and both English and Tamil in private schools. Most parents would rather send them to Tamil medium schools, but opt for schools which are located close to the plantations.

### Health

Hospital facility is not available on all plantations, but doctors are appointed and clinical facilities are available on all plantations. The

frequency of visits by doctors varies from daily to twice a week. All permanent and temporary workers get medical aid free of cost. The dependents of these workers also get free treatment up to the age of 18 years. There is a provision for medical reimbursement, but the management does not reimburse all the amount spent, only a part of it, negotiated by the trade union leaders if there is a dispute.

### Other Facilities

**Annual Leave:** A permanent worker is permitted to take one day as earned leave for every twenty-two days of work. Apart from all the government holidays the workers are also allowed to take sick leave. In many of the plantations the workers face practical problems in utilising this provision. The managements insist that the workers get medical certificates from the doctors to take sick leave. But in a majority of the cases the frequency of the visits of the doctors is restricted to two or three days a week. If a worker is not well and in case the doctor is not available on that particular day the worker cannot get the certificate. The total number of days of sick leave allowed is 16 per year but the workers can get only two or three days a year. A pregnant women is allowed to take between 45 to 60 days leave.

Once a year workers are allowed to go to their native places, during the lean season, between November and February. The worker gets second class train fare or the actual amount spent on travel to reach the native place. In addition Rs. 8 per day is paid as travel *batta* (allowance) in the case of unskilled workers, and Rs. 10 per day for the skilled employees. But now in many plantations the management insists on a nativity certificate from the village administrative officers of the village the worker wants to visit, to be eligible for travel allowance. This creates a difficult situation for the younger workers who were born and brought up in the Nilgiris. As these workers cannot get the nativity certificate they are unable to utilize the privilege their parents did.

### Other Provisions

Each worker gets a rough woollen blanket (*Kattu kambili*) for each year of service and another woollen blanket of finer quality for every two years of service. To buy the second one the management allots only Rs. 80 per worker. If the price exceeds this amount the extra amount is collected from the worker's wages.

Workers who spray pesticide get an overcoat, and when it is worn out it is replaced. The pluckers get a synthetic sheet to cover the lower part of the body while plucking leaves. Each family of the permanent worker gets a quarter kilogramme of tea dust per month at the cost of production rate from the management.

Previously, in all plantations a small amount of land was allotted to each family to maintain a kitchen garden. Later, when the managements increased the extent of the plantations, these kitchen gardens were converted into tea gardens. But the plantation still makes a provision for this. According to the Plantation Labour Act, each family should be given two cents of land to maintain a kitchen garden.

When the plantations were owned by the British, in each plantation a small dairy was maintained to meet the requirements of milk for the creche. A permanent worker was employed to look after the cattle. But now each worker family is allowed to own a cow with the permission of the management. If the cow strays into the tea garden the management punishes the owner by levying a fine which ranges from Rs. 25 to Rs. 50 in different plantations. But rearing cattle in the plantation is a rare practice; in some of the plantations it is strictly prohibited.

### Recruitment

Normally the dropouts at high school and higher secondary level, and in some cases after the completion of the school, go to work in the plantations as temporary workers. These temporary workers become permanent workers after a period of time. The management collects the list of temporary workers to be made permanent from the trade unions. In some of the plantations the different trade unions get together and finalise the list; in other cases, each unit of a different trade union gives its own list. This list is prepared on the basis of seniority and work experience of the temporary workers. In rare cases no specific mode is followed to make a worker permanent. The management decides as to who is to be made a permanent employee.

The attendance register of the temporary workers is destroyed every weekend; no evidence exists to claim seniority and experience. The uniform complaint of workers in all plantations is the reduction of labour

strength. It has been roughly estimated by the workers that during the last decade the strength has been reduced by 50 per cent. According to *Tea Statistics (1990-91)*, the number of workers have been reduced from 68,259 in 1988 to 39,338 in 1990 (inclusive of all permanent and temporary employees, who are living in the labour lines of the plantations and who live outside but work in the plantations). Vacancies are not filled up according to the number of retirements.

The busy season begins in April and lasts for four to five months. So every year the management recruits permanent employees during the end of February or the beginning of March. But in almost all the plantations there is a tendency to delay recruitment for one or two months, manage with the available temporary workforce, increase the working hours, and make them work on Sundays. In some plantations no new recruitments have been made for the last two or three years. The existence of settlements of Sri Lankan repatriates near some of the plantations help the management to get temporary workers regularly. This enables the management to either postpone and reduce the number of new recruits or to skip it for a year or two. In some plantations in Gudalur taluk tea and coffee are grown side by side and the workers of these plantations are busy round the year. When the busy period of tea is over, the coffee plucking picks up momentum and once it is over the busy season for tea starts. This situation provides job guarantee to the workers for the whole year. Taking advantage of this the managements keep the workers temporary for long periods.

### Work Allotment and Hours of Work

Every day, after the day's job is over, the workers assemble at the muster room before going home, to find out the assignment for the next day, allotment of the work spot and the specific 'gang' (for plucking each 'gang' consists of 50 to 100 women, and in the case of men workers for specific group activity like pruning, 10 will form a 'gang') for the next day.

Both men and women go to the plantation and start work at 7.30 AM. There is a break between 12.30 to 1.30 PM for lunch and to weigh the leaves collected since morning. Again work starts at 1.30 PM and continues till 4.30 PM, after which the pluckers take the leaves for

weighing. There is a tea break in the afternoon; the tea supplier carries the container to the work spot. In some plantations there is a tea break in the forenoon too.

If the work spot is quite away from the colony the workers leave home 30 to 40 minutes early to reach the spot. Previously 30 minutes grace time was allowed to reach the work spot, but now in all plantations work begins at 7.30 AM.

### Division of Labour

On the plantations the labour force is divided into two groups: skilled and unskilled. The skilled category is again divided into A, B and C.

*Category A includes:* ward boys and girls, factory watchmen, peons, plumbers, pump operators, hospital cooks, tea chest maker, estate check room and table man.

*Category B includes:* medical orderlies, engine drivers, oil engine drivers, engine mechanics, carpenters, masons, blacksmiths and telephone operators.

*Category C includes:* lorry, car, tractor, jeep and ambulance drivers, mechanic-cum-blacksmiths, electricians and fitters.

The unskilled field and factory workers are called daily wage workers, because their wage is based upon the number of days of work in a month. Normally women workers are kept away from factory work.

Women workers are involved in plucking which they collect in baskets or bags strapped to their backs. Sometimes the women do weeding and water the gardens and nurseries.

Normally girls above the age of 16 years are appointed as temporary workers. They are usually the kin of those already working in the plantations; in rare cases outsiders are also taken as temporary labourers. After they gain experience, they are absorbed as permanent workers. Women are considered to be better pluckers than men. The finesse and coarseness of the plucking depends upon the number of leaves. Fine plucking, which tends to be the customary practice under

normal conditions, means taking only the bud and two tender leaves. A medium plucking involves taking in the soft portion of the third leaf, and coarse plucking means taking the bud and three or more leaves including the stalk. Very fine plucking reduces the amount of yield and therefore tends to raise the cost of production.

Tea gardens are classified as of two types on the basis of the duration of the growth. A garden of up to two years old is classified as tip field; here only hand plucking is practiced. In plantation which have bed fields, mechanized plucking or shear plucking is practiced in many plantations.

Men work both in the factory and field. In the field they plant the seedlings, prune the tea bushes, manure, dig, spray, trim the shadow trees, remove the old plants and also pluck tea leaves.

As in the case of girls, boys are also recruited after the age of 16 years as temporary employees in the gardens. They become permanent after a period of time. Factory workers are selected mostly from among the efficient permanent field workers.

Retirement age for both men and women workers is 60 years. Even after retirement many of them work as temporary employees, while living outside the plantation.

In the plantation context children are not employed for any specific task. Sometimes they help their fathers in lopping the branches or pruning the tea bushes, and the mothers in plucking the leaves. They carry food to their parents if the work spot is far from the residential lines. The main and regular activity of children is collecting dry sticks of pruned tea bushes for use as fuel.

### Wage Structure

The present wage structure is based on the negotiated settlement arrived at between the workmen and the management of tea and coffee plantations in Tamil Nadu, who are members of the Planters Association of Tamil Nadu (under Section 18 (1) of the Industrial Disputes Act 1947).

On the plantations the wages are fixed according to the wage settlement arrived, a very few (among the visited in one plantations still the wage is fixed according to the Minimum Wage Act of Rs. 26 per day). All unskilled workers in the field and factory are daily wagers. They get, inclusive of Dearness Allowance, Rs. 39.76 per day. Due to the job differential the factory workers get an extra Rs. 1.75 per day. The other categories which also get additional amount per day due to job differentials are:

Pruners	—	Rs. 1.60
Spraying worker	—	Rs. 1.50 Power
	—	Rs. 1.10 Knapsack
Creche cooks	—	Rs. 1.10
Ayahs	—	Rs. 1.30
Sweepers	—	Rs. 1.35
Field watchers	—	Rs. 1.20

The pluckers get incentives for the extra leaves they pluck every day. The base or minimum fixed amount of leaves a worker has to make varies according to the yield of green leaf per hectare for a month. The incentive structure also varies according to the yield of green leaf per hectare for a month. The following are the details of the quantities and the incentive structure.

Yield green leaf per hectare	base Kg.	1st Slab	2nd Slab	3rd Slab
1-400 kg.	12 kg.	13-15	16-30	31 & above
401-800 kg.	14 kg.	15-20	21-40	41 & above
801-1600 kg.	15 kg.	16-30	31-50	51 & above
1601 kg. & above	16 kg.	17-35	36-60	61 & above
<i>Incentive rate</i>				
1st Slab	-	Rs. 0.27 per kg.		
2nd Slab	-	Rs. 0.35 per kg.		
3rd Slab	-	Rs. 0.40 per kg.		

**SOURCE:** Memorandum of Settlement under Section 18(1) of the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947 arrived at in Coimbatore, on 29 June 1993.

This incentive structure is followed in most of the plantations but in some they create their own slabs and fix the incentives. In one plantation the incentive is uniformly Re 0.30 for each kg. above the fixed base

amount of 14 kgs. In the case of a temporary worker the daily wage varies from plantation to plantation; the range for a woman worker is from Rs. 20 per day, to Rs. 30 per day and for a man worker from Rs. 25 to Rs. 30 per day. Apart from the daily wage, the pluckers get the incentive for extra collection.

In the case of jobs assigned to the male unskilled workers sometime back the task assignment method was introduced in the plantation, according to which the target is fixed. For pruning, the number of plants, or area is fixed; for spraying (the pesticide) the number of litres or area is fixed; for lopping the number of trees is fixed. One is expected to finish the target during the eight working hours, otherwise work has to continue till the target is reached, sometimes worker extends till 6 or 6.30 PM. The target also varies from plantation to plantation. In some plantations the number of plants fixed for pruning by a 'gang' is 400, while in other plantations the 'gang' has to prune one hectare per day. Regarding spraying, a single worker has to spray 200 litres or one acre per day.

Field supervisors and workers who belong to category C get their salaries on a monthly basis, a pay of Rs. 1025 and Rs. 1064 respectively, plus Dearness Allowance. The other two categories A and B are daily wagers and get Rs. 39.76 per day inclusive of Dearness Allowance.

A service weightage is added to the wage and is Re 0.10 per day to a worker who has completed ten years of service and an additional Rs. 0.10 after the completion of twenty-five years of service.

The workers get 20 per cent bonus every year and this practice is followed in most plantations. In some they still get only 8 per cent or 10 per cent. In one plantation the bonus issue is now in the court, the workers demand a raise from 8 per cent to 20 per cent but the management is not willing to go beyond 9.5 per cent.

### Role of Trade Unions

The trade union movement really started in the Nilgiris district with the formation of Estates Staff Association of South India in 1929. It was registered as a society and was never technically a union. But about twenty years later the first trade union was registered in the

name of Nilgiris District Estate Workers Union. This union was supported by the then ruling Congress Party. Later the union merged with the INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) and is the dominant trade union in the Nilgiris district.

In course of time, other trade unions emerged. The other major trade unions are HMS (Hindu Mazdoor Sabha), LPF (Labour Progressive Front) trade union wing of DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and ATTS (Anna Thotta Thozhilalar Sangam) trade union wing of AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam). The other central trade unions are the CITU (Central Indian Trade Union) and AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) the trade union wings of the CPI-M [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] and the CPI (Communist Party of India). The last two unions are restricted to the Gudalur taluk; in the other three taluks these two trade unions are making efforts to organise the labourers working in the small gardens of individual planters.

According to the workers, the trade unions give security to their jobs. They also help the workers in solving their problems with the management. But still a section of the workers is not satisfied with the compromising attitude the trade union leaders follow in reaching a settlement with the management, an approach which differs from the one adopted by the earlier union leaders who fought for the rights of the workers. The relationship between the members of the same trade union and also between the members of different trade unions is normally smooth. There has been no major strike in the Nilgiris during the recent past except in one plantation (Nonesuch) at Coonoor taluk in the year 1989. The main demand was to raise bonus, but the management did not yield to the demand and the labourers eventually withdrew the strike.

### Labour Welfare

The State Government has appointed three Plantation Inspectors for the entire district of the Nilgiris. The taluks of Coonoor and Gudalur are looked after by two different Plantation Inspectors. Ootacamund and Kottagiri taluks are under the control of the third Plantation Inspector. The Inspectors visit the plantations periodically to check

whether the managements had provided amenities to the workers according to the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) and also to verify the records. The Inspector has to visit a plantation at least once in four months.

According to the Plantation Inspectors, the PLA needs a thorough revision. The punishment for breach of rules and failing to follow the PLA terms is very meagre. In many cases the managements, instead of correcting the fault, prefer to pay the fine if the case is taken to the courts. Workers in some of the plantations allege that the Plantation Inspectors do not visit the labour lines when they go to the plantations.

Another unwritten law which exists in the plantations is that if a worker wants to make a complaint to the Plantation Inspector he has first to inform the management and if the management fails to respond, then he can proceed and complain to the Plantation Inspector.

### Tea Board (Coonoor)

The Tea Board under its Labour Welfare Scheme (the current one was revised by the Labour Welfare Committee and Tea Board at its meeting held on 28 June 1994) sanctions capital grants to the managements mainly for construction work and to maintain buildings for schools and hospitals in the plantations. It also provides stipends to the children of the plantation workers to meet the school expenses, provide financial support to the disabled persons and also to encourage sports activities in the plantation precincts.

In the Nilgiris district during the recent past the Tea Board has provided financial support for constructing one hospital and three schools located in different plantations. The total number of students from South India who received stipends for the year 1991-92 are 2175, and for the year 1992-93 are 8253. (Office records, Tea Board, Coonoor). According to the Tea Board officials in Coonoor, the Nilgiris has got around 30 per cent of this allocation. The other assistance rendered by the Board is to the patients suffering from tuberculosis (in the Nilgiris prevalence of the tuberculosis cases is substantial). The Board helps patients at the T.B. Sanatorium located at Perundurai, Periyar district; it allocates Rs. 50 per day per patient. The total number of patient days

allotted by the Board during the year 1992-93 is 2756 and in 1993-94 it is 1650. This includes patients coming from the plantations of Kerala too but the number of cases from Kerala is minimal. Most patients are from the Nilgiris. (Office records, Tea Board)

The Tea Board sends circulars to the managements of all plantations about the provisions meant for the workers. The Tea Board officials in Coonoor feel that the managements show no interest in conveying the information to the workers, and the unawareness of the workers about the scheme deprives them from utilising the scheme properly.

### United Planters Association of South India (UPASI)

Since 1972 UPASI had been implementing a scheme called the Comprehensive Labour Welfare Programme. It is a voluntary scheme and is administered by a sub-committee appointed for the purpose. Initially, it had its own personnel as medical officers and public health workers. The core areas where the scheme was implemented were: public health, personal and environmental hygiene, preventive medicine, motivation, child and maternal care, improvement of creches, training of medical and health staff of the plantations. Gradually the programme became a part and parcel of the management's goals and now the implementation is largely carried out by the individual managements using their own infrastructure with the UPASI acting as an advisory body. (Sivaraman, 1991)

### Labourers in Small Gardens

In the Nilgiris district, apart from the company estates and proprietary gardens, a large number of small gardens are owned by individuals. These owners hire labourers to work in the gardens from the neighbouring villages. They are hired on daily wages. The men workers get Rs. 30 per day and the women workers get Rs. 20 per day. These people live on their own close to the gardens and do not get any other provisions which are available to workers in the company estates and proprietary gardens. Most of them are migrants from the plains, and have settled permanently at different periods, except a small population of landless Badagas, and tribals of the Nilgiris.

The three kinds of tea estates covered are:

Company garden	-	a plantation owned by a group of owners
Proprietary garden	-	a plantation owned by a single owner
Small garden	-	less than five hectares (i.e., less than 15 acres)

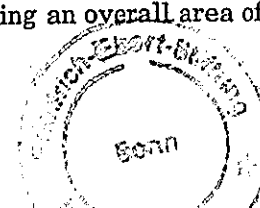
### Coimbatore District

Valparai is the only taluk in Coimbatore district which has both tea and coffee plantations. It is 64 kms south of Pollachi at an elevation of 1082 m above MSL. A total of 16,139.59 hectares are under plantation in this taluk; out of this 12,827.59 hectares are under tea and 3,312.00 hectares are under coffee plantation. Cardamom and cloves are very meagre since they are mixed with the coffee plantation and the coffee estates too are few in this district. There are 57 estates of which 39 are tea estates and 18 are coffee estates. The figures collected from the records of the Labour Department's office at Valparai shows that the tea estates employed nearly 22,000 workers of whom around 9100 were males and 12,900 were females. These tea estates are owned by Parry Agro, Tata, Kothari group of companies, Stanmore group (Tea India Ltd.), TANTEA (Public sector), B.B.T.C., Periya Karumalai (P.K.T.), NEPC, Jayasree, etc.

To draw a reasonable sample representative of the plantations with different wage patterns, six plantations were selected for study, namely, Stanmore, Parry Agro, TANTEA, Annaimudi, Savamalai and Karumalai. Four out of the above six plantations follow one type of wage structure, while Savamalai estate follows the Minimum Wages Act, and the TANTEA has entered into a separate wage agreement with the employees.

### Housing Conditions

The houses in the plantation lines in Valparai are permanent structures with tiled roofs, brick walls and mostly with cement flooring. However, some houses of the TANTEA group have mud flooring. The maintenance of the houses is undertaken by the company. All major repairs are also attended to by the company at the request of the worker. Almost all the permanent workers are allotted a house measuring an overall area of



approximately 250 to 300 sq. ft. The house is divided into a verandah, a living room and a kitchen; this is referred to as one unit. The temporary workers are also allotted a house depending on the availability of vacant houses. However, in a majority of cases at least one member of a household is a permanent worker. There are comparatively very few number of households wherein both husband and wife are temporary workers. In such cases the management has allotted half a unit, that is, a portion of the above defined full unit. Even in cases where such an allotment is not made by the management the family adjusts among the relatives and in due course gets a new allotment. House is given free of cost and no rent is collected.

### Water Supply

Water is supplied through pipelines in all the labour lines. Water is supplied from tanks which draw water from borewells. A tap is located in a common place in the front or the back of the house. On an average 1:5 ratio between taps and houses are maintained. There are some labour lines where the number of households using a tap is higher and it ranges from seven to ten. During winter water is supplied throughout the day, and in summer twice a day.

### Sanitation

The degree and kind of sanitation facilities depend on the company. The Stanmore group of companies, Tea India Ltd., and Tata, have provided flush out latrines in every house. But in some other plantations common latrines have been provided. There are only two latrines for the use of ten households. Moreover, as it becomes a common facility nobody takes the responsibility of maintaining it and hence in many of the labour lines the common latrines are not in usable condition.

### Condition of Labour Lines

Electricity is provided to most of the houses but only to a few houses in the TANTEA estate. Every household is fitted with a meter and the workers pay as per their consumption of electricity which is recovered from their pay every month.

Drainage facilities are provided in most of the labour lines in Valparai, and are well maintained by the workers.

Most labour lines have a playground located nearby. There is even a recreation room but it is only operative in some of the companies. The Stanmore group of companies has provided televisions in the recreation rooms. Earlier the company was supplying playing cards to workers in the recreation rooms but since playing of cards has led to quarrels resulting in brawls this practice has been discontinued. Playing of cards has in fact been banned in the recreation rooms. In two (Stanmore and Parry Agro) of the labour lines newspapers are being supplied to the recreation rooms by the company. In places where the company is not supplying newspapers, the workers themselves buy newspaper for the recreation rooms.

### School, Canteen and Medical Facilities

A primary school exists in all the labour lines. These schools are housed in tiled buildings and were originally managed by the companies. They have now been taken over by the Panchayat, and the workers feel that the standard of education has since gone down considerably. Almost all the children in the lines are sent to the primary school. Earlier there were several teachers to handle different classes but now many of the schools are run by only one teacher.

Every plantation line has a creche. Children upto the age of five are allowed to be left in the creche when the parents go to work. The child is taken care of by the woman attendant (*ayah*) in the creche. Every child is given 200 ml of milk twice a day, and children above the age of two are given an egg everyday. The workers complain that the creches do not have sufficient number of cradles and not enough space for the children to play.

Every company has its own hospital and free medical treatment is provided for the workers. In case of non-availability of a hospital at a plantation the worker is referred to the nearest hospital for treatment at the expense of the company. In case of serious ailments the patient is referred to the government hospital at Coimbatore and the travel cost of the worker is taken care of by the company. In the case of children, travel expense is paid for the attendant who accompanies the child.

Canteen facility is not provided to the field staff but they are provided two cups of tea—one in the morning and one in the evening—free of

cost. Canteen facility is available in the factory but is generally leased to some private caterer and the workers are not too happy with the quality and cost of the canteen food. Canteen food is not subsidised.

### Higher Education

High schools are located in Valparai, Mudis, and in Kallar. The employer does not provide any stipend or transport for the children going to the high schools. As a bulk of the workers belong to the Scheduled Castes, the workers avail of the scholarship facility. Since the commuting cost of the children is beyond the reach of the workers, this is the main reason for the high dropout rate from schools. The workers prefer to send their children to the high school at Valparai since it has a better reputation than the other schools.

### Wages

The workers are classified into A, B, and C categories. A and B categories are daily rated and the C category is monthly rated on a time-scale.

The category of Non-Staff (not directly attached to the field or factory) and the skilled workers are classified as A category. These include:

- (i) Drivers
- (ii) Ward-boy
- (iii) Ward-girl
- (iv) Pump operators
- (v) Tapal men
- (vi) Office peons
- (vii) Workshop workers
- (viii) Mechanics
- (ix) Fitters

The above category of workers are paid as per daily rates.

The workers in the field are classified as B category workers. Their major activities are:

- (i) Plucking
- (ii) Weeding

- (iii) Pesticide spraying
- (iv) Pruning
- (v) Clearing the garden for fresh plantation
- (vi) Making pits for planting new saplings.

Of the above-mentioned jobs plucking and weeding are generally carried out by women. The remaining works are entrusted to men. Men also do plucking and weeding when there is no other work. The field staff are monitored by the supervisors who are also considered as field staff and paid the daily rate wage.

The other category of workers classified as C category of workers are those paid on a time-scale (scale of pay). These include:

- (i) Assistant Field Officer
- (ii) Field Officer
- (iii) Compounder
- (iv) Nurses
- (v) Office clerks
- (vi) Factory Tea-makers.

There are three different wage patterns existing in this region. There is an association of the employers named the Annamalai Planters Association based in Valparai with its headquarters at Coonoor and the plantations which have an acreage of more than 100 acres are members of the association. This association entered into a wage settlement with the employees unions in 1992 which was valid till December 1995.

- (i) Those plantations which are members of the Annamalai Planters Association (APA) pay at the rate of Rs. 39.80 per day for the adult and Rs. 26.98 per day for the adolescent as per the wage settlement made with the employees for the period upto 31 December 1995. Any boy or girl above the age of 15 and upto the age of 18 is considered an adolescent.
- (ii) Those estates which are less than hundred acres are not members of the APA and hence they follow the minimum wages pattern



recommended by the government every year. They pay at the rate of Rs. 24.43 per day for an adult and Rs. 15.70 per day for an adolescent.

- (iii) A third type of wage pattern is followed by the TANTEA. Since Cinchona was taken over by the TANTEA and the estate was not well established for quite some time they had been following the minimum wages pattern. But vociferous protests from the workers forced the TANTEA to negotiate with the employees and a wage settlement was reached in August 1994 which is valid upto 30 September 1996. As per the agreement the TANTEA workers are now paid at the rate of Rs. 36.90 per day for an adult and Rs 23.50 per day for an adolescent. The tea plantations are covered under the APA agreement, but the coffee estates follow the Minimum Wages Act.

Apart from the cash wage the workers of all categories are entitled to the following benefits:

1. Every permanent as well as temporary worker is given 10 kg. of rice per week at the rate of Rs. 7.80 a kg. which the management contends to be at a subsidised rate but the workers feel they are charged the market rate. The cost of the rice is recovered from the workers wages at the end of the month. The benefit is only for the estates under the APA and the rice supplied is called the APA rice.
2. Every permanent worker is entitled to 250 gms. of tea dust every month at a subsidized cost of Rs. 40 per kilogramme. The worker is supplied with one kilogramme of tea dust once in four months. The cost is recovered from the wages. Such a benefit is not extended to the workers in the coffee estates.
3. The workers in the field both permanent and temporary are supplied with one woollen rug every year free of cost.
4. Apart from the rug, all the workers are given an allowance of Rs 120 once in two years for purchase of a rug. As against Rs. 120

in other estates TANTEA pays Rs. 110 as rug allowance. Earlier the company was supplying this rug also. But the workers were not satisfied with the quality of rug and hence requested the managements to pay them the amount so that they could buy better quality rug by bearing the additional cost involved.

5. Workers in the field are given one cup of tea in the morning and another in the evening free of cost.
6. Every factory provides a canteen to its workers. However, the canteens are said to be expensive as they are leased to private caterers.
7. Workers in the factory are supplied with an umbrella every year free of cost.
8. The uniformed category of workers like the sweepers, ward-boys, ward-girls, and office peons are supplied with two sets of uniform every year.
9. The workers employed in the spraying of pesticide (spraying workers) are paid an additional Rs. 1.60 per day. They are also permitted to leave the field once their task is over. The additional payment for the person is as compensation to the worker for exposing him to health hazard the pesticide may cause him.
10. The workers involved in the pruning of the plants (pruners) are also paid Rs. 1.75 (per day) more and they are also permitted to leave the field once the task is over. Pruning is considered to be a hard task and hence the additional wage and permission to leave on completion of the task is permitted. A worker is expected to prune 200 plants a day. This target varies from plantation to plantation. But the number ranges from 200 to 240.
11. A minimum target in plucking green leaf is fixed according to the probable base output per hectare.

**Incentive**

Probable base output (green leaf)	Minimum kg.	1st Slab kg.	2nd Slab kg.	3rd Slab kg.
Upto 400 kg.	12	13 to 15	16 to 30	31 and above
401-800 kg.	14	15 to 20	21 to 40	41 and above
801-1600 kg.	15	16 to 30	31 to 50	51 and above
1601 kg. and above	16	17 to 35	36 to 60	61 and above

Over and above the minimum fixed for plucking an incentive is given to the workers as per the following table:

**Incentive Rate**

1st Slab	Re 0. 27 per kg.
2nd Slab	Re 0. 35 per kg.
3rd Slab	Re 0. 40 per kg.

**SOURCE:** Memorandum of Settlement under section 12(3) of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 reached before the Joint Commissioner of Labour, Coimbatore (Re. No. D/7703/93/dated 16 August 1993).

12. The workers in the factory are eligible for overtime. If the overtime extends upto three hours, they are paid additional wage for the three hours by computing the one hour wage by dividing the normal wage by eight. If the work extends beyond three hours they are engaged for the next eight hours and are paid double wages.

**Recruitment**

The number of permanent workers are ascertained by the total acreage of the estate. The stipulation for tea estate is one permanent employee for one acre of land, whereas in the case of a coffee estate it is one permanent employee for 1.25 acres of land. Vacancies arising out of retirement, voluntary retirement, death of employees, etc. are filled up every year. While filling up the vacancies a pattern of priority is followed; priority is given to the spouses of the permanent workers, children of the workers, dependents of the deceased, etc. A convention and broad understanding operates in recruitment; trade unions abide by it: spouse 35 per cent; son and daughter 35 per cent; brothers and sisters 15 per cent; relatives 15 per cent. Recruitment is done with the above

understanding in mind. However, there are several complaints regarding recruitment from the workers. The workers contend that existing vacancies are not notified and the management at its own discretion appoints whoever it prefers.

Work allotment is done by a supervisor. The field workers start work at 8 AM and they work till 5 PM with a lunch break of one hour between 12 noon and 1 PM. The working hours for the workers in the factory are also the same. During peak seasons the field workers opt to go earlier to the field to collect more and thus get more incentive.

During the lean season temporary workers are not given work unless the situation warrants it. But permanent workers are given some job or the other and engaged all through the day.

**Other Amenities, Annual Leave, Travelling Allowance and Bonus**

All workers are entitled to avail four national holidays and five festival holidays. Permanent workers are entitled to 14 days of sick leave in a year. The worker is expected to take treatment in the company hospital or has to get treated elsewhere under reference from the company's medical officer. Earned leave is computed based on the number of days the worker has worked. For every 20 days one day earned leave is credited to the worker's account. The credit can be accrued upto 30 days beyond which it lapses.

Every permanent worker is entitled to leave travel concession once a year. He/she is paid actual fare (train/bus) to the native place. The dependents of the employee are not eligible for any leave travel concession. Annual leave travel *batta* is paid at the rate of Rs. 8 per day for the days one is availing of leave travel.

Bonus is paid at the rate of 20 per cent as per the agreement of the APA. This bonus is computed as 20 per cent of the total pay drawn by the worker in the preceding year. Apart from the bonus, a lumpsum ex-gratia is paid to the workers. In 1994, a sum of one thousand rupees was paid to each permanent worker as ex-gratia.

All permanent women workers are entitled to maternity benefits as

per the Plantation Act. A temporary women worker becomes eligible for maternity benefit if she has put in 80 days of service in the proceeding year as on the date of delivery. Workers complain that the management tries to evade this benefit by not giving continuous employment to a temporary women worker who is pregnant. However, the trade unions play a role in persuading the management to give employment to pregnant women.

### **Trade Unions**

There are 23 trade unions in this region with varied political affiliations. Trade unions play a major role in recruitment of workers, ensuring that workers are provided the basic amenities, taking care of the maternity benefits of the women workers, payment of Gratuity, etc. Whenever it becomes necessary to file a case against the management it is done by the trade union to which the worker is affiliated. Since most of the workers are illiterate, writing of representations to the managements is done by the trade union functionaries. They normally mediate between the management and the worker.

Subscriptions to trade unions are recovered by the management from the salary of the workers in the months of June and July and passed on to the respective trade unions. A trade union becomes eligible for such benefit if the trade union has a total membership of more than 2000 workers or 15 per cent of the workers in that particular estate. Otherwise it is left to the discretion of the employers to decide whether the subscription should be recovered from the salary of the worker or not.

### **Child Labour**

As far as Valparai is concerned, children are not employed in the plantations. There are adolescents who work in the estates and are paid as stipulated in the agreement. The employers insist on school certificates for proof of age or a doctor's certificate as an evidence of age. There are possibilities of manipulating this provision and employing children, but because of the active trade union movements and the strict implementation of the clause not to employ children by the labour department there seem to be no children employed in the plantations in Valparai. Adolescents are normally engaged only in plucking green leaves and in weeding.

### **Post-retirement Benefits**

Plantation workers retire at the age of sixty. A permanent worker on retirement is eligible for gratuity at the rate of 15 days for one full year of completed permanent service the employee has put in the company. The gratuity is paid within three months of retirement. The workers depend on the trade unions in submitting relevant papers for the grant of gratuity and also to expedite the process of settlement. Provident Fund is paid alongwith the payment of gratuity. In ascertaining the amount contributed by the employee and the matching contribution of the employer the worker seeks the help of the trade union.

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## CHAPTER 5

**Conclusion***Sharit K. Bhowmik*

The three studies presented in the preceding chapters show some differences but a great deal of similarities in the living conditions of tea plantation labour in India. In this concluding chapter the three States are compared and the main problems of tea plantation labour are addressed which need redressal.

**Wages**

The most striking feature of the three States is the difference in wages. While average monthly wage of the workers in Assam and West Bengal figured at around Rs. 600 per month, in Tamil Nadu they were around Rs. 850 per month. This means that the wages are about 40 per cent higher in Tamil Nadu. The only difference between Tamil Nadu and the two northern States is that workers in the latter are given a part of their wages in kind. They are given rations of 2.25 kg. of rice and wheat per week at a subsidised rate of around Re 0.40 a kilogramme. Workers in Tamil Nadu are given rations at rates which are slightly below market rates but the quantity is more. The subsidy worked out to around Rs. 5 per day. Even if one adds this to the cash wage the total wage is still less than that of the worker in the southern States (daily wages in Kerala are higher than those of Tamil Nadu).

The higher wages in the southern States is significant because they produce less than 20 per cent of the country's tea while the two northern States produce more than 75 per cent of the total production. The output per hectare is higher in most of the districts in Assam and Dooars than in the southern States and the price the tea fetches is also higher. Hence one really cannot explain why despite all these features the wages are so low. At the same time it must be noted that even though Tamil Nadu has higher wages these too are not high when compared to

the wages in the organised sector. In fact Rs. 850 per month would be subsistence wage in urban areas.

**Housing**

The Plantation Labour Act lays down the guidelines for housing, health and hygiene. The States have passed the plantation labour rules which enforce these guidelines. While comparing these conditions in the tea estates in Assam, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu we find that there are similarities between the two former States and differences with the latter State. As far as housing is concerned, Xaxa's study shows that around 70 per cent of the houses are permanent. In West Bengal 74 per cent of the houses are permanent or semi-permanent. If the employers had adhered to the Plantation Labour Act all houses would have been permanent by 1969. In the Tamil Nadu plantations, however, the houses meet the specifications of the Act.

**Sanitation and Water**

While the plantations in Tamil Nadu have adequate sanitary facilities where each house has a toilet or two houses are provided with a common toilet, the labour lines in Assam and Bengal do not have these facilities. There are hardly any latrines in the labour lines in Dooars and Terai (West Bengal). There are common bathrooms in some of the lines in Dooars. The Plantation Labour Act clearly states that there should be separate latrines and bathrooms for both sexes. These do not exist in any plantation. In Darjeeling each house had a separate latrine of the bore-hole type. Whereas flush latrines may be difficult to maintain because of the water shortage in the hills, one expects the managements to atleast provide latrines. This was not done in two of the gardens. The same is the situation in Assam. There are no toilets and women used enclosures in their houses to bathe.

The situation in Tamil Nadu is considerably better. Houses have separate toilets or a group of houses share common toilet facilities which are adequate. Water for flushing is also available. The workers in Assam and West Bengal use the open spaces to ease themselves and this causes filth to accumulate and become fertile breeding grounds for hookworms and other harmful parasites. In fact anaemia due to hookworms is a common ailment in the tea plantations in these regions.

The studies of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu show that water supply is adequate. Workers in the plantations of Dooars and Terai get their supply of water from shallow tubewells or (in some Dooars gardens) from reservoirs. In Darjeeling water was supplied from reservoirs through pipes. However we are not sure whether water from the tubewells is good for drinking. The ground water level in Dooars and Terai is high, which means that one does not have to dig deep for water. This also means that the water could be polluted as it is too close to the surface. However, in the absence of anything better, the workers in these plantations have no choice but to use this polluted water. The water supply in Darjeeling appears to be better although the area suffers from acute water shortage during summer (before the monsoons). In such a situation if tea gardens are able to supply water regularly in the lines it is creditable. This is perhaps the only thing worthwhile in the lives of the workers. In this regard too the situation in Tamil Nadu is much better, as Kalam's study shows. The situation in Assam is the worst as water is scarce and taps are few. The situation in the gardens in Dibrugarh is better than those in Jorhat but even these do not match up to Tamil Nadu.

### Medical Facilities and Creches

Access to health services in the gardens in the three States is not adequate, in the sense that not one of them has met the requirements of the Plantation Labour Act. The general problem in all regions, except Dooars, was the non-availability of doctors. Most of the plantations do not have resident doctors and depend on part-time doctors. Shortage of medicines and other trained staff are also added problems. The supply of medicines in all the gardens covered, except one in Dooars, is inadequate. In some cases the managements reimbursed the cost of medicines partly but in others they did not bother to do so. Nurses and health assistants are few. In general the conditions are far below the minimum stated in the Act.

Another weakness in the system is the lack of proper creches. The plantations in Tamil Nadu have a better record in maintaining creches. Adequate creches reduce the burden of childcare for working mothers. In West Bengal and Assam the situation is different. The gardens in Darjeeling and Dooars have creches but few were well maintained. In

some of the gardens refreshments are not provided for the children and mothers have to leave work to feed their children. In most of the gardens creches are few and unable to meet the requirements of all the mothers. Hence mothers carry their children to the workplace. The situation in Terai and Assam is worse.

The managements' apathy towards creches cannot be condoned. While they may be able to justify the poor medical facilities by arguing that trained doctors are not willing to work on plantations, they cannot do the same in the case of creches. The Act specifies that trained attendants should be employed in creches but the training required is simple and the local labour could easily be employed for this purpose. The other expenses incurred would be decent space to house the creches and some funds for providing milk and food to the children. The managements are not able to make even these basic provisions for the workers. This leads us to believe that they are totally indifferent to workers' welfare, especially those of women.

### Education

The employers' commitment to education is perhaps the least. Though the Act provides for adequate primary schools for the children of plantation workers, in Dooars and Assam the facilities are nominal. In Assam around half the children are not able to attend schools and in Dooars the facilities are very inadequate. In Darjeeling the situation is better mainly because the parents, in general, are more keen on educating their children. In Tamil Nadu there are enough schools but the teachers do not take their jobs seriously. The indifference of teachers is also common in Assam and Dooars. In Terai there are no schools.

Another problem regarding schooling is the prospect of post-primary education. We find that the children and their parents have to depend a great deal on the managements for transport to the schools. While this is provided in some gardens in Dooars, in Darjeeling the employers do not provide transport. However there are a large number of children attending school despite the problem. In Assam, where gardens are far-flung and generally more isolated than those in Dooars and Darjeeling, the enrolment of students in secondary schools is very low.

The lack of proper education of the children of plantation workers is bound to affect their occupational mobility in future. These children, like their parents, will be doomed to work as plantation workers with little or no possibilities of their moving to better or skilled occupations.

The survey on labour in tea estates therefore throws up that the overall situation is not very good. Despite several decades of progress and the steady increase in tea prices, plantation workers have remained less developed and isolated. Several factors are responsible for this state of affairs but the most important is the apathetic attitude of the employers towards labour welfare. Unfortunately, though managements all over the world are recognising the fact that labour can be an asset through development of human resources, the managements in tea estates are still living in a pre-industrial age. They are unable to comprehend that labour welfare is not a drain on their coffers, it could in fact lead to much higher productivity which the industry needs very badly if it wants to increase production to meet the growing demand for tea.

Though the government has passed protective legislation aimed at job security and cultural development, it has not ensured that these are effective. The trade unions too have not taken up issues relating to labour welfare very seriously. For instance, though there have been industry-wide movements in West Bengal over wages, there has never been any such movement for the implementation of the Plantation Labour Act. The sufferer is obviously the worker.

### Urgent Issues

The present problems of plantation labour and their families have their roots in the historic process of the plantation system. During the early years plantations faced the problems of shortage of labour but they did not allow a labour market to develop in order to keep wages low. The plantations preferred to employ forced labour who were bound to work on plantations at the low wages offered.

In order to perpetuate such a system the employers had to ensure that first local labour, even if available, was not employed. These people would have better bargaining power and if they felt that wages were not adequate, they could return to their earlier occupations. Migrant

labour was therefore seen as one of the means of having a captive labour force. Secondly, the regions surrounding the plantations had to remain backward so that the existing labour force had no other source of employment other than work on plantations. For example, in Dooars the Forest Department tried to lure plantation workers to cultivate forests by offering them cultivable land. This was strongly opposed by the planters' lobby and the government had to look for forest labour elsewhere. The growth of plantations and their large labour force would encourage local industries to meet the growing needs of the workers and the planters. However, this did not happen and instead the planters preferred to import most of the goods from elsewhere rather than have them produced in the region. These included the crude goods needed by the workers such as cloth, umbrellas and even foodgrains. In this way they ensured that the region outside the plantations remained undeveloped and the plantations emerged as enclaves within a backward area.

These methods may have served the objectives of the planters of having a captive labour force but when this system continued even after the problems of labour shortage were overcome it created new problems for the plantation workers and their families. The large numbers of unemployed within the families of the workers looked towards the plantations for gainful employment. The employers were again in an advantageous position because now they could continue to keep wages low by employing family members of the workers. Many of these people work as casual labour on the plantations. The employers used this as another means to keep wages low. They indicate to the permanent workers that if they demand higher wages the number of temporary workers will be reduced. Such a move will decrease the family income as fewer members will be employed. Hence even though there is a labour market, it is heavily tilted in favour of the employers.

This situation can be eased to some extent if the government takes up some measures. First, there is a need to create new avenues of employment for the family members of the workers. Education is an important means of achieving this. The population in the plantations need better schooling facilities. It is also necessary to establish centres where technical training will be given to the new generation so that they can take up other activities. It is significant that there are no

Industrial Training Institutes in the plantation regions though the younger generation need these the most. Therefore development of educational facilities, right from the primary level is an important issue which the trade unions could take up alongwith their other demands.

Secondly, a greater stress has to be laid on the development of the areas outside the plantations so that more employment opportunities are created near plantation sites. Here, too, trade unions and other development agencies could play an important role.

Finally, the cultural development of plantation workers is at a low ebb. The living conditions of the workers need to be improved. The government needs to show greater involvement in this process. Most of the plantation labour belong to the Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes. In Assam they are denied this status though the workers belong to these communities in their places of origin (namely, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh) and even in other States where they migrated, such as West Bengal and Tripura. However, in Assam these people are denied the status of tribals and only around fifteen years ago they were placed as More Other Backward Classes. Hence there were no special programmes for their development by the State. In Tamil Nadu a majority of the tea workers belong to communities which are Scheduled Castes or Backward Classes. The respective State Governments have failed to initiate special programmes for these people for reasons not known.

Perhaps the main problems of plantation labour, especially those in West Bengal and Assam, are rooted in the fact that they were originally migrants to the area and were ascribed a low status. Hence, though they have contributed to the State revenues through their labour they have been regarded as a marginalised group. This can be seen from the fact that though these communities are demographically large in their respective regions they have never been politically effective. For example, in Assam there was a strong regional movement in the 1980s but the plantation labour were never a part of this movement. The leaders did not consider them as local population even though these people may have contributed the most towards the development of the State.

In West Bengal, the situation is no different in Dooars and Terai. The large population of tea workers are kept in isolation and can hardly articulate their interests on their own. This is despite the fact that there are five reserved (tribal) constituencies for the Legislative Assembly and one for Parliament. These constituencies were formed because of the concentration of tribal population in and around the plantations. It is only in Darjeeling that the plantation and ex-plantation workers have been politically effective. They were the driving force behind the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling and they were successful to some extent in their demands. However, on looking at the picture of plantation labour in the country, the situation in Darjeeling is an exception because in most of the other places the tea workers and their communities have been made to remain outside the periphery of politics in their regions. This has largely contributed to their isolation and their sorry state of development. They have thus not been able to assert their demands for improvement of their living conditions and for development of the areas which they inhabit. The situation is likely to become worse if no immediate steps are taken to change the existing situation.