

TRIBALS ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE CLOSED TEA GARDEN OF DOOARS: A CASE STUDY OF DHEKLAPARA TEA GARDEN

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Abstract: *The livelihood of the tribal communities of Dooars, have been dependent on tea gardens since centuries. They have are the backbone of the tea industry. Their hard work and effort have provided acceleration to the industry, but on their part they have been remained stagnant with respect to development. The paper examines the impact of the closure of tea garden on the livelihood issues of the tribal of the Dooars, on the basis of primary and secondary data, and discusses the findings of the work.*

Key words: Communities, Dooars, Livelihood, Tribal, Tea Industry

Introduction

Chamber and Conway (1991) defines livelihood as “a livelihood comprises of people, their capabilities, and their means of living, including food, income and asset. Tangible assets are resources and stores, and intangible assets are claims and assets. A livelihood is socially sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, and provide for future generation.”(Chambers, R and Conway, G 1991) .The introduction of the tea plantation brought about changes in the workforce structure, affecting livelihood of the tribal's and Nepalese both positively and negatively too. By 1854 tea plantation was established in and around Darjeeling and Kurseong region, started as a small nursery for experiment, but by 1891 the number of tea gardens that grew was around 113. (Sharma, K and Das T 2008). The tribal people initially came to the Dooars from their homeland outside Bengal as tea garden workers, but later on the migrant tribal people settled permanently in the Dooars (Basu 2012). Dooars also saw a growth in the tea plantation industries, with introduction of tea just as a venture project. The plantation which was started as a commercial venture in 1856 brought a remarkable impact within a short period of time. The rapid commercialization of tea garden brought about a change in demographic profile, with sudden influx of labour migrants. Today there are almost 235 tea gardens in Dooars covering an area of 81,338 acres under cultivation.

Objectives

- To analyze major shifts in livelihood practices and the associated consequences of such shifts.
- To examine the impact of alternative livelihood strategies on the living conditions
- To understand the interventions of the community, government and civil society in the transformation of livelihoods.

Methodology:

The methodology has been based on studies done through the help of both primary and secondary data using appropriate statistical techniques.

Findings and Discussions

Certain tea gardens of Dooars are incurring huge losses and are in the verge of getting close. On the other hand there are tea gardens that have remained closed for last twelve-thirteen years which have greatly affected the tribal workers who were dependent in tea gardens for livelihood and support their family.

Table 1: The operational status of Tea Gardens in different states of India

State	No of garden closed between 2000-04	No of workers involved	No of gardens re-opened	No of workers involved	No of garden that still remain closed	No of workers closed involved
Assam	17	10134	14	6313	3	3821
West Bengal	53	43590	47	39245	6	4345
Tripura	7	466	6	394	1	72
Kerala	38	11829	24	4412	14	7417
Tamil Nadu	3	2423	3	2423	0	0
Total	118	68442	94	52787	24*	15655

Source: 51st Annual Report 2004- 2005 (*Tea Board of India*)

The above data shows the number of tea gardens that have been closed between the periods of 2000-04 in different tea growing states of India. In West Bengal alone there were 53 tea gardens closed during that period affecting a huge working population.

Impact on Livelihood

The livelihood of 600 workers both casual and permanent has been swinging since the closure of tea garden. They have to be dependent on different sources of livelihood as an alternative for their living. One prominent feature of their livelihood is they have been shifting from one source of livelihood to other source from time to time, but the majority of the workers have been dependent on quarrying to earn their living which provides a healthy income than other source of livelihood.

The number of workers engaged in quarrying is very high, as such the competition among them have been a major problem among the workers. The amount received from quarrying depends on the amount of crushed stone but the wage received from quarrying is too less to support the household.

Table 2: Different Livelihood sources adopted by the affected workers

Occupation Structure of the Affected Worker	Percentage of Workers
Quarrying	42.74
Forest Dependence	15.32
Daily Wage Labour	20.16
Agricultural Labour	7.25
Shops	4
Private Sector	1.61
Migrated labour	6.45
Dairy Farming	1.61

Source: Field Survey March-April 2014

Impact on Health

The phase of 2004 had seen a severe impact on the health issues of the workers in tea garden. The phase saw a number of deaths of the workers during that phase. A government report conducted to study the impact on health status of the workers during that phase came up with the finding that there had been an increase in the average number of deaths in the study area after the closure of tea garden.

Table 3: Number of Deaths in the Closed Tea Gardens

Year	Mujnai	Raimatong	Dheklapara	Ramjhora	Total
1998	29	53	24	24	130
1999	26	41	25	16	108
2000	11	30	32	22	95
2001	7	43	19	23	92
2002	41	63	24	41	169
2003	54	73	31	54	212
Average number of death per year (before the crisis)	18	42	25	21	106
Average number of deaths per year (after closure)	48	68	28	48	191
Percentage increase in deaths	62	39	9	55	44

Reproduced Source: Report on Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal, January, 2004.

At present the health status remains stagnant, the area don't have even a primary health centre and have to depend on the main health centre which is around 9-10 km from the area. The health infrastructures have remained underdeveloped in the study area .The workers are dependent on local medicines available from nearby village shops, and on emergency issues only they prefer to visit the health centre located by the nearest vicinity.

Other Impacts

One of the major impacts among the workers due to the closure of tea gardens has been loss of basic facilities, which used to be their life support that was provided by tea garden while it was operating. As per the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, the tea owners is required to provide the works with basic facilities like housing, health, nurseries and crèches, primary education to the children of the workers, weekly ration etc. At present the housing facilities are available, but other facilities like health, weekly ration consumption, education etc needs to be bought by spending their amount. An increase in the household income due to engagement of more family members in earning process has been noticed by dropping out children from education, cutting up expenses, enrolling women's to government schemes like MGNREGA.

Table 4: Amount spent on weekly consumption of Ration PDS

Amount Spent on Weekly Ration Consumption in Rs	Households in Percentage
20-25	77.45
35-50	16.66
50-65	5.88

Source: Field Survey March -April 2014

Table 5: Food intake on daily basis among the households

Consumption of Food	Households in Percentage
2 times	54.9
3 times	44.1

Source: Field Survey March -April 2014

Though the amount spent on weekly ration seems to be quite less as per the data obtained from field but the amount of quantity received by the workers is also less. As per the information collected from the field the quantity received is around 200gm for each individual, as such their dependence on outside source is quite high than on PDS.

Impact on Education

The closing phase of tea garden saw a decline in the education of the youths where dropping out from education had been a common strategy to support their family. At present the status remains the same where dropping children from education, unwillingness of children for going schools and unable to meet with the demands of children have been seen in the study area.

Table 6: Impact on Education

Impact on Education	Households in Percentage
Dropouts	60.7
Education Gap	14.7
Selling of Property	4.9
Unaffected	19.6

Source: Field Survey March -April 2014

Migration an alternative to Livelihood

The process of migration in the study area seems to be high among the youths who have been migrating to different urban centres of the country to. The pull factor has been very high in the study area, and a chain of migrants have followed them to different urban centres working as daily wage labourers, housemaids, waiter in hotels, cooks etc adding up support to their family income. The remittance send by the migrants to their houses are either on monthly basis or they bring all together when they visit their home once or twice a year. Some of the migrants have been misguided by their owners with respect to monthly income, which seems to be a growing concern among the migrants.

Table 7: Destination of the Migrants

Destination of Migrants	Percentage of Migrants
Delhi	48.38
Kerala	3.22
Bihar	3.22
Hyderabad	3.22
Punjab and Haryana	22.58
Mumbai	6.45
Madhya Pradesh	3.22
Uttar Pradesh	3.22
Gujarat	6.45

Source: Field Survey March -April 2014

The role of Government

The effort of government in solving the problem seems to be quite negligible. The government has been neglecting the issues, though there has been a visit by government officials and ministers from time to time. The government has been providing the workers with a monthly fixed income of Rs. 1500 known as fawlai. It was found that there has been a delay in providing the amount to the workers. Though certain government schemes are under utilization in the study area but have been worthless while observing the impact of the schemes among the workers. Schemes like MGNREGA have been functioning in the study

area, but there has also been a delay in respect to wages provided to the workers. The local institutions have been supporting the workers by engaging them in plucking up the leaves and selling to the other tea gardens at a daily wage of Rs 35 which to some extent helps in supporting the family of the workers.

The Growing Vulnerabilities and Challenges

A study on Vulnerability, Forced Migration and Trafficking in Children and Women has come up with a finding that there has been an increase in trafficking of women in children from the tea gardens of North Bengal, who are either performing as a sick unit or has been closed. (Ghosh, 2014) The study reveals the fact the regions has been an exposure to placement agencies who enjoys the benefits of illiteracy and unskilled workers providing hope to the youth workers of placements outside the region. The growing incident of such trafficking is becoming worse and worse with parents of the victims not raising up their voices for the problem. The problem is not only found in the closed or the sick tea gardens, but it has also been very common in working tea gardens, as less income has contributed to the exposure of youths to the outside world.

Conclusion

The overall study brings out the plight of the workers in Dheklapara tea garden, where underdevelopments in different fields have affected the overall development process of the area and the people in all. The unawareness and lack of education have impacted a lot in the study area, as such the workers have been exposed too much vulnerability that was unknown prior to few decades. Their livelihood has undergone a drastic change and has been struggling to deal with problems that have engulfed them at the present date. The venture of the government to develop the region as a hotspot tourist region should also focus on providing opportunities to these people who have lost their livelihood a decade ago. The development of vocational training institutes, training centres on handicrafts to women can be seen an opportunity of developing these communities, since the region has a lot to provide them along with tea industry.

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