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Labour Welfare Practices in Tea Industry with Special Reference to Harmutty Tea Estate of Assam

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Abstract

The Tea worker shares a major percentage in total workforce of the plantation industry. The trendiest non-alcoholic beverage tea has been producing year after year at the finest skill of the tea workers. In the entire process of tea production, tea workers play a significant role. Being a prominent player in the tea industry, tea workers are still lagging behind in the process of socio-economic development. From time to time different Labour welfare acts and legislations have been enacted to protect the interest of the tea workers. All welfare activities are grouped under two heads viz. intra-mural and extra-mural activities. But, are these acts and legislations properly implemented at tea estate? Or are the workers deprived from labour welfare facilities? To find out the answer, an exploratory research study had been carried out at Harmutty Tea Estate of Assam. An attempt had been made to study the role of management, government, labour unions in labour welfare practices, and opinion survey was conducted among sampled respondents towards different welfare facilities.

Keywords- workers/ labour, welfare, intra-mural, extra-mural, facilities

Introduction

Tea industry is one of the labour intensive industries in the world maintaining a large number of labour forces in the entire process of tea production i.e. from plantation of tea bushes to the final produce. This large section of worker forms a significant part of labour force in the tea estate. The happiness and woes of this section of workers depends upon the welfare practices adopted by the concerned tea estate for their well being. Assam being a forerunner state in the entire world for tea production has seen a remarkable growth and development of tea industry over the decades. It has own history of tea plantation by indigenous Singpho community in upper Assam before discovery of Tea by Mr. Robert Bruce in the early part of 19th century. It was at the initiative of the British tea planters that workers from Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and other part of the country had been bought to Assam for tea plantation. These poor people gradually settled down and mingled with the socio-cultural environment of Assam; whom now known as tea tribe or Adivasi

community in Assam. This socio-cultural transition of this labour class had has been impacted a lot on their socio-economic improvement and development in Assam. Till date, the name and fame earned by the Assam tea in the world is at the cost of laborious act of the tea garden workers and the finest skill of tea leaf plucking by the women pluckers.

The labour welfare is a very comprehensive term which may include any activity, which is connected with the social, intellectual, moral and economic betterment of workers provided by any agency. Such activities may differ from country to country and from region to region or from organization to organization. It has the following objectives:

- To provide better life and health to workers.
- To make the workers happy, satisfied and efficient.
- To improve intellectual, cultural and material conditions of workers and to relieve them from industrial fatigue.

According to Royal commission on Labour (Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, central Publications, Calcutta, 1931.), “ the term welfare as applied to industrial workers is one which must be necessarily elastic, bearing a somewhat different interpretation in one country from another, according to the different social customs, the degree of industrialization and the educational development of workers.”

A study under the UN (United Nations Measures for the Economic Development for Underdeveloped Countries, New York, 1951) observed as follows “ in our opinion most underdeveloped countries are in the situation that investment in people is likely to prove as productive, in the purely material sense, as any investment in material resources and in many cases, investment in people would lead to a greater increase of the flow of goods and services than would follow upon any comparable investment in material capital.

Intra mural and extra mural welfare activities

Intra mural activities includes all those amenities and services provided by the employers inside the factory premises like provision for canteen, rest shelters, crèches, arrangement for drinking water, washing facilities, uniform and protective clothing, toilets etc.

Extra mural activities includes all those amenities and services provided by the employers outside the factory like maternity benefit, social insurance measures like gratuity, pension, provident fund. It also covers medical facilities, education facilities, housing facilities, recreation facilities, workers co-operative society, and transportation facilities to and from the place of work.

Statement of the problem

However, different labour welfare measures have been formulated by the central and state government from time to time to provide protection of workers at their work and garden premises i.e. statutory and voluntary in nature which also have been adopted by the tea estate. Despite of different labour welfare practices followed in tea estates, issues of workers had has not been resolved till date. Role of tea estate management and inactive

labour unions in this regard is a cause of concerned. Besides this, improper implementation of different provisions of the acts and regulations at grass root level and lack of knowledge about different welfare facilities provided by employer to the workers is another cause of deprivation.

Objectives of the study

- i) To study the different labour welfare practices adopted by the management of the selected tea estate;
- ii) To conduct opinion survey of sampled respondents, make analysis and draw conclusions;
- iii) To study the role of Government and labour unions in welfare practices.

Methodology

An exploratory study was conducted at Harmutty tea estate of Lakhimpur district of Assam. Field survey was carried out to make an in-depth investigation of the labour welfare practices followed at the Tea estate. A sample of 100 respondents i.e. workers selected through simple random sampling technique. Interview schedule was used for collection of primary data. Personal interview with the Labour welfare officer, workers, and workers union had also been made. Besides these, secondary data had been incorporated from books, research papers, unpublished PhD thesis, and websites of Tea board of India and Assam government. Different provisions of Plantation labour act 1951, Assam Tea Plantation Provident Fund and Pension Fund Scheme Act, 1955, and Assam Tea Plantation Employees Welfare Fund Act, 1959 had also been reviewed.

Results and discussions

Surveyed Tea Estate has been providing different intra-mural and extra mural facilities notified under different labour welfare act. The surveyed tea estate is owned by the Goodricke Group Ltd which compliance and adhered to social and health and safety policy for the welfare of the workers.

A. Social Policy

A policy of equal opportunity is followed irrespective of gender, caste, race, religion, political or ethnic group. There is no forced labour and no worker is exposed to either physical or sexual harassment.

- i. Workers have the right to form an association or union and their elected representatives, together with any worker have direct access to the management for exchange of any communication.
- ii. Child below the age of 15 years are not employed and compliance is strict as per the child labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986.
- iii. Management provides free primary level education and also grants scholarship for higher education to deserving dependent of employees.

- iv. The Estate gives special emphasis to health of its workers and their families. It provides a well equipped hospital with an ambulance, doctor, and trained nursing staff at tea estate.
- v. Management extends to its employees proper benefits like sickness allowance, sick leave, maternity leave and allowances, workmen's compensation. In case of any injury at work, workers enjoy their paid leave, and retiring workers get gratuity and provident fund benefits as specified in the various acts and rules.
- vi. All permanent workers are provided with proper accommodation with sanitary facilities as recommended in the plantation labour act 1952, with suitable electricity and water facilities.
- vii. Normal working hours with a weekly holiday are adhered to. All are paid as per the industry made agreement which is above the minimum wages as notified by the state. Proper agreement for overtime payments, whenever applicable is paid with incentive schemes offered on specified targets for a few selected works as applicable. Bonus payments are made annually which is generally above the minimum as recommended by the payment of bonus act 1965.
- viii. All workers and their dependents are also given subsidized ration together with firewood/fuel requirement as per industry norms.
- ix. Estate organizes and promotes various cultural functions and activities and holds annual sports, baby shows, inter village/line football tournaments.

B. Health and safety policy

The tea estate focuses on the development of its healthy workforce. The emphasis has been made to make all employees aware of essential aspects related to health and safety. It includes-

- i. Workers are made aware of certain health issues education through awareness programmes, Tuberculosis surveillance, Anti malaria camps etc. To control the spread of diseases regular workshops are organized for prevention of diseases, family planning etc, which is attended by the Medical officer and the Labour Welfare officer. Water purification and chlorination processes are regularly undertaken; blood camps and baby show and mothers club activities are also held.
- ii. Female workers comprise of majority of the workforce in the tea estate, hence proper attention their sickness pattern and counseling on health and hygiene is given to strengthen them.
- iii. Line mapping on the basis of diseases is undertaken which helps the medical officer to take preventive actions.
- iv. Emphasis is laid on crèche care which can directly improve child health. Regular de-worming programmes are undertaken.
- v. Management gives priority to sanitation and clean water supply.
- vi. Management employs welfare officer to look into welfare and health of the workers and works in coordination with medical officer of the garden.
- vii. The management maintains a well-equipped hospital at garden level. The hospital is staff headed by a qualified doctor and supported by a trained compounder,

pharmacist, Nurses, and Midwives. An isolation ward exists for patients with infectious diseases. The Hospital is equipped to handle basic emergency cases. Ambulances are on standby to transfer to specialized hospitals if need arises. At the outdoor patients department (OPD) employees particularly of factory are given regular checks on their health and finding are recorded on their respective health cards.

- viii. Management strives to provide a safe working environment to all its employees. It adheres to safety requirements as stipulated in the Factories Act. All factories have safety board of the prescribed sizes and colour which are prominently displayed.
- ix. Vulnerable movable parts of the machinery are protected to prevent accidents. Regular training on First Aid, use of fire fighting equipments and fire fighting drive is also provided to workers. Workers whose specified tasks include spraying are provided with protective gear covering and trained on all safety aspects.
- x. Estate has a safety committee comprising of the Estate Manager, Factory Assistant Manager, garden Doctor, and a few senior factory clerical members .Regular training on safety issues are being provided by them to all workers.

The surveyed tea estate has followed aforesaid social and health and safety polices for the well being of the workers or employees.

Respondents' opinions towards Health facilities

The following data reveals the opinion of respondents towards Health facilities which includes drinking water facilities, latrines and urinals, and medical facilities.

Table-1: Respondents opinions towards Health facilities

Health Facilities	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	No opinion
Drinking water	55	45	00
Latrines and Urinals	30	40	30
Medical	50	30	20

Source: Field survey

The opinion survey towards health facilities (includes drinking water, latrines and urinals and medical) reveals that out of sampled respondents 55% are satisfied and 45% are dissatisfied in respect of drinking water facility. While opinion regarding Latrines and Urinals facilities, 30% satisfied, 40% dissatisfied and 30% did not provide any opinion. Reason for the 30% no opinion is due to shyness attitude of women respondents regarding latrines and urinals. In case of medical facilities, 50% was satisfied, 30% was dissatisfied with medical service, and 20% respondents did not visit hospital.

Respondents' opinions towards Welfare facilities

Different welfare facilities like Canteen, Crèches, Recreational, Education, and housing facilities are provided by management and opinion of respondents as follows:

Table-2: Respondents' opinions towards Welfare facilities

Welfare facilities	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	No opinion
Canteen	40	60	00
Crèches	45	40	15
Recreational	25	35	40
Educational	90	10	00
Housing	35	65	00
Transportation	70	30	00

Source: Field survey

The survey data related to welfare facilities which reveal that 40% was satisfied and 60% was dissatisfied with Canteen facilities. In case of Crèche facilities 45% was provided satisfactory opinion, 40% was dissatisfied and 15% of the respondents did not provide any opinion but they kept their child at home. Sampled respondent of 25% was satisfied, 35% was dissatisfied with Recreational facilities provided by the employer, and 40% of respondents did not provide any opinion because they were not aware of recreational facilities. 90% of the respondents were satisfied with the educational facilities provided at tea estate and 10% was dissatisfied. With regard to Housing facilities 35% respondents were satisfied and rest 65% showed higher degree of dissatisfaction. 70% of sampled respondents were satisfied with transportation facilities provided by employer and rest 30% showed dissatisfaction on the ground of providing more Buses for transportation to and from workplace due to over crowdedness.

Role of Central and State government in Welfare practices

The labour departments of the central and state government take on the responsibility in the state. The departments have been armed with the number of labour welfare legislations passed by the Indian parliament and State assembly. The legislation so far enacted cover public and private sector establishments. The employers have been brought under purview of the legislation and are expected to adopt necessary welfare measures in their establishments. Some these acts and regulations are: The Workers Compensation Act 1923, The Indian Trade Union Act 1926, Payment Of Wages Act 1936, The Tea District Emigrant Labour Act, 1934, Factories Act 1948, Minimum Wages Act 1948, Plantation Labour Act 1951, Assam Plantation Provident Fund Scheme Act 1955, etc. These acts and regulations cover a wide range of labour welfare measures such as housing, medical, education, nutrition, establishment of canteens, sanitation, rest, and recreation, holiday with pay and sickness benefits etc. The Labour Directorate of Government of Assam is responsible for the implementation of the above acts and regulations.

The enactment of Plantation labour act 1951 has brought about improvement in the working conditions of the plantation workers in Assam. It is a comprehensive act and put employers under obligation to all tea, coffee, rubber, and cinchona plantation with an area of 25 acres or more and employing 30 or more persons. It provides for creation of

inspecting staff by the state government and imposition of penalties for contravention of provisions of the act. Under this act employers are required to provide drinking water, sufficient latrines and urinals for men and women, canteens in every plantation where 150 or more workers are employed and crèches where 50 or more women are employed. Employers are also required to make arrangements for proper medical and educational facilities for the workers and their children. Employers are also responsible for providing standard type housing accommodation for the workers and their families. Besides maternity and sickness benefits, the workers are allowed leave with wages. Children below 12 years are not to work in plantation and night work between 7 P.M. and 6 A.M. is prohibited for women and adolescents. Welfare officers are to be appointed in every plantation where 300 or more workers are employed.

The introduction of Assam Tea Plantation Provident Fund and Pension Fund Scheme Act, 1955 has ushered in a new era of socio-economic uplift of plantation workers in Assam. It extends the statutory guarantee of social justice and social security to the working class engaged in the plantation in the estates.

The enactment of the Assam Tea Plantation Employees Welfare Fund Act, 1959 is another land mark in the history of welfare legislation for the tea employees in Assam. Under the provisions of this act a fund is to be constituted out of the fines realised from the employees in the course of management of the plantations, all unpaid accumulations, all grants from the central or state governments or the Tea Board, any voluntary donation, any sum borrowed under section 8 of the act and any sum unclaimed for forfeited in the provident fund account of the employees. The fund shall be maintained by the board of trustees constituted by the state government and shall be applied to meet the expenditure in connection with measures which in the opinion of the state government are necessary for promoting the welfare of the employees employed in the state of Assam.

Role of Trade union

In proper implementation of different welfare practices in estate level, trade union can play a significant role. Inter-union rivalry, lack of willingness, inactiveness, and indifferent attitude are contributed to the disfunctionality of the unions. Some of the respondents are of the view that unions leaders are under the influence and direct control of management.

Major Findings

1. Despite the formulation and implementation of Social and Health & Safety policies for the labour welfare by the surveyed Tea estate, the welfare practices towards workers are more or less unresolved which is reflected at their opinions.
2. There have been marked differences in the level of satisfaction of the respondents in respect of drinking water, latrines and urinals and medical facilities. This is because of lack of awareness of respondents and improper implementation of health facilities.

3. Respondents' opinions towards different welfare facilities have showed a dismal picture. There is a higher degree of satisfaction level in education facility and transportation facility.
4. The Central and state government though formulated and implemented different welfare acts and regulations which are not being properly working at estate level.
5. Role of trade unions are of neutral observer and showed an influenced of the employer.

Conclusion

The highest labour intensive tea industry of Assam has long been in backward position in development of labour community. Tea workers are still in most backward stage and empowerment of this group is much necessary to ensure sustain growth of tea industry. Labour welfare practices are indispensable in Tea estate which ensures better productivity, harmonious industrial relation, low absenteeism, favourable work environment, job satisfaction, and security. Welfare schemes should be regarded as wise investment which brings a profitable return in the form of greater efficiency and satisfaction. Lack of awareness about different welfare schemes is another factor of underdevelopment of workers. Awareness campaign like street play, drama can be organized to make empower about their social, economic, and political right. In this regard non-government organization can play a significant role. Therefore, all effort should be made to provide welfare facilities by concerned stakeholders to workers in order to improve their quality of work life.

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