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### Problems of Tea Industry and its impact on the Tea workers in Dooars: A study of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts in West Bengal

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#### Abstract:

*Tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India. The Tea industry of India has provided employment for a large number of people. In west Bengal, the Adivasi and Nepali workers all along formed the majority of the work force of this industry. The economy of Doors was formed on the tea estates from British era. Dooars has around 165 organized tea estate which is spread over Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts. However, last few decades the tea workers, especially the one drawn from the tribal areas of Dooars region, are facing innumerable difficulties. The Doors regions a considerable number of tea gardens have gone sick due to lack of infrastructure, modernization and efficient management. The tea garden workers have been suffering from the basic disadvantages of living in the remotest corner, away from the modern facilities that make life easier. In this situation of crisis, the tea garden workers are turning towards the Government with a hope of getting some relief. Central and State government have to work collectively to find solution from this crisis. This article attempts to explore the problems of the industry and the social and economic situations of tea garden labourers in Dooars regions. The basic aim of this article is to highlight the condition of tea garden labourers in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts in the context of wide spread crisis in Tea industry Sector in the country and its consequent impact on the Tea workers. In this article, I have tried to show that the condition of the tea gardens of Dooars is needed to be discussed.*

**Key-word: Tea, Adivasi, Dooars, suffering, relief, Solution.**

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Cultivation of tea in Doors was originated by the British aid from the mid eighteenth century in colonial India. The geographical location of Doors is not significant only for tour purposes but the diverse ambience with tea gardens, forest and tribal people are the cause of attraction for the tourists. In North Bengal the green geographical area the from the Himalayan foothill to Bongnaigao district of Assam is called Doors. The word Doors means the door of Bhutan. The beautiful Doors is formed with 4750 square kilometres of Jalpaiguri formerly Kamtapur, alipurduar, and Coochbehar districts. The economy of Doors was formed on the tea estates from British era. Mainly Onrao, Munda, Kheria, MalPahari

tribal people from Chhotonagpur and Mech Rabha Toto tribal people work as tea labours. The tea gardens over hundred years are hampered due to several reasons. The tea workers are alienated from the main stream of the society. They are deprived from getting the fundamental components like food, shelter, education, health. The tea gardens of Jalpaiguri and alipurduar of West Bengal had become weak due to insufficient infrastructure. Output from the Tea gardens had been hampered and the workers are facing starvation due to negligence of the owners, inactivity of trade unions and lack of government initiatives. On this perspective the condition of the tea gardens of Dooars is needed to be discussed.

The history of tea plantation in Dooars a colonial legacy. Tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India. Major tea producing regions in India lies in Tarai and Dooars belts for the foothill of the eastern Himalayas located in West Bengal and Assam. In Dooars, first tea estate was established by British planters in 1874 at Gazoldoba. So, Europeans merchant was started tea plantation and tea gardens gradually increased in Dooars. As per report, by 1876 as many as 13 tea gardens were established in Dooars region. In the year the 1877 was remarkable in the history of tea of plantation in Dooars, as because of, for the first time an Indian had taken lease for the purpose of cultivation of tea at Jaldhaka. After 1877 many tea gardens were established in Dooars region. Mainly the rich Indian merchants and Govt. servants invested money for the yield of tea in Dooars. Bhagwan Chandra Das, father of eminent Scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, who became the Deputy Magistrate at Jalpaiguri encouraged the Indian entrepreneurs to take initiatives for tea plantations. In 1879, Indian planters formed joint stock Companies in Dooars and the number of tea gardens increased to 245. In January 1919, Indian tea Planters' Association was formed with the exclusive of looking after the interest of Indian tea planters. However, most of the workers in this industry were migrant labours who came to the plantation estates during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Adivasi people and Nepali workers all along formed the majority of the work force to this industry. Regarding the living conditions of tea plantation workers in India, it is not given much importance by the tea estate administrators. However, North Bengal has about 450 tea gardens spread out in in the Darjeeling Hills, Tarai, and Dooars regions that are registered as sellers in the Siliguri Tea Auction Centre. Most of the tea gardens in the Jalpaiguri district are members of the Dooars Branch of the Indian Tea Association (DBITA)

Dooars has around 165 organized tea estate in the entire state which is spread over Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts. More than 25 tea estate have been close down in Dooars. To name a few close tea gardens are Beach, Dalsingpara, Tasatee, Torsa and others in Dooars. Recently Torsa Tea Garden in the Dooars was close on 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2024. After nine years Bandapani tea estate in Alipurduar had reopen on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2024. Indian tea industry had crisis from 2000. It has been attributed to a set of causes like decline of tea price. Stagnant demand in the domestic market, and shrinkage of export market for tea, escalation in the input of cost including labour cost and over supply unorganized sector etc. Due to this reason, the crisis in the tea gardens is a major issue in Dooars. The tea garden workers have been suffering from the basic disadvantages of living in the remotest corner, away from the

modern facilities that make life easier. They are still away from food, housing, education, nutrition, transport, health, the mainstream of civil society. They are isolated in every respect. Most of the people were depreciated in the tea garden areas of Dooars of Bengal being affected by hunger, poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and various incurable diseases, trafficking of children and women in particular. Between 2000 and 2015, fourteen hundreds (1400) people died in 17 tea gardens in the North Bengal.

According to the view of tea workers, the owners could not run the garden properly. The use of different kind of fertilizers and pesticides is also one of the causes of low yield of the tea leaves. At present around 7500 workers rendered jobless in Alipurduar district because of the certain closure of the tea garden without any prior suspension notice by the management. After the abandonment of the garden, many tea workers started going to the adjacent areas for daily worker in agriculture field. Most of women started going to the nearby forest to collect wood. Some of them migrated to the other states like Delhi, Kerala and Maharashtra in search of a job. It has also been seen in reality that due to the lack of job opportunities in the garden, the men of the family migrate to other states in India in search of profession such as masons, textile workers, waiters in restaurants and hotel etc. The garden was the main source of income for these workers. But when the garden was closed, they become hopeless.

In a garden area, no fixed daily wage for the tea labourers. Some gardens pay Rs.220 and some up to Rs. 250 per day. Is the amount enough for the workers and their families to survive? In this situation, migration is happening not only from the close and abandoned tea garden but from the running garden as well. Since the abandonment of the garden, one person from every family has migrated to other states in search of work. Due to above reason, how the workers people in Dooars regions are compelled to take different professions in other states of India leaving their conventional professions being affected by lockout or closure of tea gardens. Similarly, the problem of trafficking has become rampant in the tea garden areas in Dooars. Trafficking incidence is higher among close and sick tea gardens. So, the administration has to take a strong initiative to tackle the situation of human trafficking. The basic reasons for migration and trafficking in the tea gardens are poverty and unemployment. There are several such cases of human trafficking which go unreported. It is often said that the tea garden North Bengal are a hotbed of human trafficking

The socio-economic conditions of the tea workers in Dooars region become more vulnerable when tea garden is locked out or the work is temporarily suspended. There are two types of workers (permanent and temporary) present in the tea estate of Dooars region. The permanent, those who are engaged throughout the year and temporary workers, locally called 'bigha wala' The permanent workers consider themselves superior in status than the temporary and unskilled workers. The workers in tea estate get work on an average for 280 days. The daily wage of the workers was Rs. 250. So, the average annual income comes to  $(280 \times 230) = 64400$  approximately. Monthly family income for tea workers are very low in all gardens areas. On an average, 40% family have monthly income below 4800. Income

above Rs. 10,000 per month are noticed in a few families. When the tea gardens remain closed or abandoned for a long time and then there is no income of the workers. Unfortunately, many of the tea plantation authorities did not pay labourers' Provident fund to the concerned department. In Dooars areas many tea estates have huge PF dues and closed garden shows wages and ration due. Wage and ration due create hunger and malnutrition syndrome among the workers. The government providing rice through AAY and financial assistance (per month 1500) under FAWLOI scheme which is effect from 01.04. 1998. Tea workers livelihood is dependent on the garden but the closure phenomena make them vulnerable.

Health is the integral parts of human life. In tea gardens areas the health scenario is not well condition. In almost all the close or abandoned tea plantations in North Bengal, the estate hospitals have been closed down after the doctors left the estates. A few health centres, which are still run by the compounders, have no medicines. There are no ambulance facilities to take the seriously sick or injured workers for better medical treatment to the sub divisional hospitals. Most of the people who were dying in these tea plantations could have been their live if the hospitals would run normally. There are many cases of women workers dying during childbirth. There are lack of sources of drinking water in almost all tea gardens, proper sanitation problems are there. In recent years, tea gardens labourers in Dooars have affected from serious starvation and hunger related problems. For example, a case from tea gardens of North Bengal, few months ago a news published that, the tea workers of Bengal struggle with hunger, poor pay and the intermittent shutting down of large tea plantation. A worker's name Dhani Oraon died at 58, allegedly of starvation, and Asharani Oraon weighs 29. 9kg. When she was rescued by the district administration after pressure from tea garden unions and brought to a hospital on February 6, 2024 four day after Dhani dead, Asharani weighed 26 kg. Dhani was a worker at Madhu Tea Garden West Bengal's Alipurduar district, which had reopened in December 2021 after being closed for about seven years. As per West Bengal Government data, from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, the number of deaths in the North Bengal tea Gardens is 235. The reality that, 80% of such death the workers did not get a minimum medical facility. Some tea garden authorities have taken welfare programme for their workers health, but the health conditions of tea workers have not been changed.

Modern civilization cannot progress without education. Illiteracy and ignorance are the prime causes behind the backwardness among the tea workers in Dooars. Education can be a tool for their development. But they fail to adopt languages like Bengali or English. Even the Hindi does not serve the purpose. As per report, the female children of this region feel it easier to follow their parents doing works than going to school. In Dooars literacy rate is very poor among the tribes in Malbazar, Kumargram and Kalchini subdivision. In other parts of Dooars the literacy ratio is not satisfactory. The main cause behind the poor illiteracy of tea garden in Dooars is close association of tribal with the non-tribal and presence of Bengali medium school thereon. Although, among the literates, most of the people have formal primary education. The old age people are either illiterate or have

primary education. At present, spread of missionary activities has changed the literacy rate among the children to some extent. The average tribal literacy rate for Mal subdivision is 60%, Kalchini subdivision is 61% and Kumargram subdivision is 62% as per 2011 census. However, the Dooars areas where literacy rate is much below than the district level.

Though the main tea cultivation area of West Bengal had been formed in Darjeeling and Kalimpong district there are more than one hundred and fifty tea gardens in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts of Dooars zone. Most of the tea gardens of Alipurduar had been closed including Dalsingpara, Tasati, Torsa, Beach. The Dooars regions a considerable number of tea gardens have gone sick due to lack of infrastructure, modernization and efficient management. The quality of tea leaves had been degraded for unfavourable weather. On the other hand, tea cultivation in Dooars is hampered by the attack of Helopeltis in winter, green fly, red slider, red slug, thrips. It is also hampered by Looper in every year. Tea cultivation got affected by weather, attack of insects, heavy rain in June to August, sudden degradation of temperature. Apart from this tea gardens are hampered by conflict with the workers for wages and bonus. The conflict between the owners and the workers is also a main issue. In this regard the trade unions could perform better but couldn't do so due to inability of going beyond the interests of political parties that is to be analyzed briefly. Present tea management is also responsible in this regard. In North Bengal ten lakhs' people are directly associated with tea cultivation. The management should look after on the issue of the enhancement of the quality of Indian tea and its international trading. Once India had monopoly in tea trading on international level but currently is taking backward position in competition with Srilanka, Kenya, Japan, and China.

In this situation of crisis, the tea garden workers are turning towards the Government with a hope of getting some relief. Though the NGOs provide some relief now, but this relief does not seem to be the solution in the long run. Now, the government is providing the workers with Rs.1500 every month under FAWLOI (Financial Assistance for Workers in Locked out Industries) Only the permanent workers are eligible of getting this relief amount provided they did not exceed the age of 58 years. On the other hand, the West Bengal Government has been launching schemes relevant for tea workers and 500 crores has been allocated for housing development project (Chaii Sundari), primary health centre, child care centre and other Financial Assistance to the workers of Locked out Industries supporting benefits for returning migrants. MGNREGA has introduced but payments are delayed. The Alipurduar district administration launched 'Aparn Bagane Proshashan' to conduct meeting with workers and consciousness of government schemes.

The tea industry is one of the most important agro based industries. About 10 lakhs of workers are directly related to the tea industry in North Bengal and about 45 lakhs of such workers are indirectly dependent upon it. So, it is to be said that the crisis in tea cultivation has direct impact upon the socio-economic sides of tea industries. Central and State government have to work collectively to find solution from this crisis. Modern technological system is to be adopted for the increase of cultivation. Government initiative is very urgent for regular supervision upon the tea gardens, examination of the soil quality,

beginning of new gardens, maintaining the demand of Indian tea in international market. As Doors is a notable tourist spot, efficient and trained workers are needed for constructing home stay in tea gardens, making tea tourism attractive, creating alternative professions. Apart from this government initiative is needed for the health issues of female workers, prevention of human trafficking in tea gardens, providing shelter, education of the families of tea workers. Collaborative efforts of State and Central government, owners and workers is needed in order to come out from the ongoing crisis of tea gardens.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion it is to be said that the tea workers are passing through lots of deprivations and oppression since 20<sup>th</sup> century in the socio economic sector. After independence the scenario of tea workers has been no change. The tea garden authorities have to ensure the proper implementation of the Planters Labour Act in favour of these workers. But problem of trafficking, habit of drinking alcohol, gambling etc. are rampant among the plantation workers. In tea regions, the wage of the tea garden labourer in North Bengal is very low. At present day, this amount is not enough to run the entire family. The wage of the plantation workers should be increased. The tea estate company should take steps to provide the quality of education and health facilities. In this situation, the administration, Trade union and Political parties can take steps for the tea workers development.

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