

Socio-economic situational analysis of tea plantation workers: a case study from Lubachhara Tea Garden, Sylhet

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Abstract

Tea is the second most highly consumed beverage in the world. The British colonial rulers introduced tea plantation in the early 1830s in the Indian subcontinent. Since then, it has been cultivated and consumed in enormous quantities. In Bangladesh, the first tea plantation was launched in the Sylhet district. Tea is an important cash crop in Bangladesh. It is widely consumed locally and exported to a few countries. The present study was carried out in Lubachhara tea garden, Sylhet as a case to examine the socio-economic situation of the tea plantation workers. Using a mixed method approach with a sample of 252 workers, the study explored the state of the workers with respect to some basic needs, such as health, sanitation, housing, nutrition, education, wages, and service benefits which were found to be very deplorable and inhumane. Based on the findings of the study, some courses of actions are suggested to improve the socio-economic situation of the workers.

Keywords: Education, employment, sanitation, wages, housing

Introduction

Globally, tea is the second most commonly consumed beverage. It is grown in more than 50 countries of the world. Bangladesh is one of the leading producers of tea in the world; it secured 11th position in 2008 in terms of production (Khan, 2012). Although in recent times, due to the huge rise of domestic consumption, tea export from Bangladesh has declined sharply. In spite of that, it is still an important source of export earnings, employment generation, import substitution and poverty reduction in rural areas (Hasan, 2014; Ahammed, 2012). Notably, the production of tea is increasing at a rate of 1.16% per annum while the consumption is increasing at a rate of 6.5% per annum (Saha et al., 2011 as cited in Saha, Acharjee, & Rahman, 2017). There are over 160 tea gardens in Bangladesh producing approximately 60 million kilograms of tea annually. Over 350,000 workers are employed in these gardens, and the majority is women (Saha, 2010 as cited in Chowdhury, Hasan, & Karim, 2011; Ahammed 2012; Ahmad, Yasin,

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Rowshan, and Rafikul, 2015). The history of tea production in the Indian subcontinent, albeit in Bangladesh, dates back to the British colonial rule (Lutgendorf, 2012). The tea industry in the Indian subcontinent was “the most spectacularly successful colonial business enterprise” (Sen, 2002). The British traders started tea plantation in India in the early 1830s (De, 2015). The first commercial cultivation of tea began at Malnichara, Sylhet in 1854 (Bangladesh Tea Board n.d.). Since then, Sylhet has been known as the land of tea production in Bangladesh as this region has the largest land area for tea cultivation in the country having over more than 130 tea gardens.

The tea industry in Bangladesh is an agro-based labour-intensive industry which demands the laborious involvement of workers at every stage of production. The British colonial planters brought workers (Adivasis/indigenous people) for tea gardens from Assam, Bihar, Madras, Orissa and other parts of India (Sen, 2002). Although tea is an important commercial crop in Bangladesh, the livelihood patterns of the labourers working in the different tea gardens are exceedingly miserable and untowardly. Deliberate social exclusion, ignorance, illiteracy and economic hardship force them to maintain a traditional life even with minimum opportunities (Ahmad et al., 2015). Overall, the condition of tea workers in the gardens is notoriously meagre due to poor facilities, benefits and abysmal wages. The tea workers are often labelled as “excluded/alienated community,” who are deprived of basic human needs and amenities of life. They often live in impoverished conditions and have historically been exploited in the gardens by the capitalist planters. Ironically, the success of the tea industry is built upon a highly exploitative and oppressive reign of labour bondage (Sen, 2002; Sarma, 2013). Inadequate wages earned compel workers to spend most of their income to survive on minimal food sets, while all the other basic needs remain unmet. Their dietary habits, nutritional status, reproductive health care, hygiene, and sanitation practices are reported to be far below than the standard level (Hossain, Azad, Rifat, Siddique, & Hasan, 2017).

Bearing in mind the harsh realities of the tea workers in Bangladesh, this study was conducted to assess and internalize the situation prevailing in a particular tea garden of the Sylhet region in Bangladesh. It is to note that despite having a long history of tea plantation in Bangladesh, studies on tea workers and their socio-economic situation are still very limited. Conversely, there are a good number of scientific studies on tea and tea plantation mechanism in Bangladesh. This study is justified in some important ways. Firstly, it would add value to the existing knowledge base with respect to the situational analysis of the tea garden workers in Bangladesh. Secondly; findings would deliver directions to conduct in-depth qualitative studies to deeply delve into the problems of the workers. Thirdly; exploration of the socio-economic situation of the tea workers would provide guidelines to undertake appropriate policy measures to improve the situation of workers. In this connection, the recommendations that have been made by this study can be used for policy implications.

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Study Area

The area of this study was located at Lubachhara tea garden, Kanaighat, Sylhet. The garden was a part of Kachar district before the colonial division of India. Loobacherra is one of the oldest gardens in Bangladesh, where plantation began in 1844. The reason for choosing the garden is to examine the condition of the workers of a tea garden which maintains a long tradition of the plantation. Currently, it is a “C” category garden occupying approximately 1839 acres of land. The production output determines the category of a garden. Notably, the total output of this tea garden was 638,994 kilograms in 2014. During the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, the factory of this garden was fully destroyed by the enemy force, which relegated the garden to layoff for around 14 years. The workers of this garden originate from Orissa, Ranchi, and Bihar of India. Religiously, they are predominantly the followers of Hinduism.

Map of the Study Area



Research Methods

A mixed-method approach was adopted in the study, which combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques although the former was the principal mode of data collection. Using the random sampling method, 252 respondents were selected for interviews. A structured questionnaire was used in the study. After necessary modifications and corrections based on the pre-testing results, the final version of the questionnaire was administered. The socio-economic situation of the workers in the garden was also closely observed through several visits. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. On the other hand, observation data

were used to support the findings of the survey and analysed accordingly. The study was conducted from May 2015 to June 2015 in person by the researchers. Research ethics were strictly maintained in the study. Informed consent was taken from each of the respondents before the interview. The full anonymity of the respondents was retained in the whole process and product of the study. Moreover, official approval from the garden management was obtained before entering the research site and launching the study. A wide range of secondary sources, such as books, journals, reports, and web sources were also consulted.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study on some important socio-economic indicators have been described in the following manner.

Demographic Information

During the fieldwork, 217 permanent workers were employed in the garden. Amongst them, 111 were men, and 106 were women. A number of 102 casual workers were also employed in the garden. Moreover, amongst the selected respondents, 2% were less than 15 years old, 23.4% were between 15-20 years old, 12.7% were between 21-25 years old, 14.3% were between 26-30 years old, 10.30% were between 31-35 years old, 15.90% were 36-40 years old and 21.40% were above 41 years old. The distribution of the population indicates that most of the workers in this garden were above 40 years of age.

Education

Level of education of the respondents was categorized into five groups, such as illiterate, literate, primary, secondary and higher secondary. The data revealed that 36.9% of the respondents were illiterate and 49.6% of the respondents were literate. Only 13.5% of respondents had completed primary level education. No single respondent had completed the secondary and higher secondary education. During data collection, no secondary or higher secondary school was found within the boundary of the garden. One government primary school and two NGO-managed primary schools namely: Shishu Shikka Aloghar and Alobari were available inside the garden. The garden owner used to provide some financial support to the NGO-managed schools every month. Each NGO-managed school had only two teachers. The nearest secondary school was about 2 km away from the garden; and the degree college is about 14 km away. During data collection, it was found that only 10 children of the respondents were studying at the higher secondary level and four at the degree level. Due to expenses associated with education, problems with communication, problems with the security of the female children, poor workers were hesitant in sending their children to schools or colleges. The employer did not provide any fringe benefit or facility for the education of tea workers and their children. The assumption is that if the children get education, they might not work in the garden. Thus, employers might lose workers permanently. Children of the workers become workers by tradition.

Daily Meal and Nutrition

By close observation, it was noticed that the workers mostly ate vegetables and rice as the daily meal. The money they received as wages did not suffice their need to have nutritious food on a regular basis. They caught fish at nearby Luba River during holidays. Besides, they could hardly afford meat of any kind. Thus, most of the workers and their family members were overtly malnourished.

Medical Facilities

Cold, cough, fever, viral fever, diarrhoea and pneumonia were the common diseases of the workers in the garden. Only primary health services were provided at the local medical centre. There was no certified medical doctor in the garden. A medical compounder was employed in the garden who rendered primary medical services to the workers. Every month about 10-15 patients were referred for better treatment to the upazilla or district hospital. It was also revealed that 59% of the respondents were extremely dissatisfied with medical facilities, 31% were partially satisfied with medical facilities, and only 10% were pleased with the facilities. The woman workers particularly reported that they do not receive any extra care during pregnancy. Most of the pregnant workers gave birth at their own houses. During the study, no visible family planning activity was noticed in the garden. Most of the female workers gave birth to two to six children on average, which further adds burden to their lowest income. Around 98% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with family planning activities. Due to the remote location as well as the poor communication system, government medical and family planning services were seldom available in the garden.

Sanitation

Although it is the responsibility of the employer to provide complete sanitary installations in the garden, the reality is often different. Two NGOs namely CARITAS and BRAC provided 30 sets sanitary latrines for 20 families. After receiving sanitary instruments from the NGOs, the workers themselves constructed the latrines at their own cost. The rest of the families used either indigenous latrines or defecates in open areas. Using indigenous latrines and defecating in public places were the two widespread unhygienic practices in the garden.

Drinking Water

Pure drinking water is one of the major concerns in the garden. The workers mostly depend on the ring wells for supply of water. There are total seven ring wells in the garden for three hundred people. Water is available in these ring-wells during the rainy season, but hardly found during the dry season. During the dry season, the workers rely on a hilly natural water source or dig out 2-4 feet deep caves to excavate water. On the other hand, the women fetch water from a distance as a usual practice.

Nature of Employment

The workers in the garden are categorized either as casual or permanent whose main duties include plantation, plucking, withering, transporting, cleaning, spraying pesticide, nursing, suckling and the like. The data revealed that 70.6% of the respondents were employed on a permanent basis while 29.4% were employed on a temporary/casual basis. Every day a worker must pluck 22 kilograms of leaves. In return, a worker receives taka 2 only for per kilogram leaf plucked in addition to daily wages. March to August is the leaf plucking period in the garden.

A worker is entitled to enjoy 20 days sick leave in a year. About 20% of the total workers work in the factory and 80% work in the field. Among the field workers, 60% are involved in leaf plucking. A few workers are also employed as staff at the official bungalows, security guards and tractor drivers. A worker must work at least 8 hours in a day. There is no fixed rule for overtime although most of the workers are interested in doing overtime. Only those who work at the bungalows as well as the drivers of leaf carrying tractors enjoy overtime facilities.

Wages, Provident Fund and Festival Bonus

A permanent worker received Bangladeshi taka 66 per day which is less than 1 United States dollar while a casual worker received taka 54 per day. A few discrepancies were also noticed about the payment of wages. For example, 83.7% of respondents reported receiving wages regularly while the rest stated that they received wages irregularly. Around 39.3% workers received wages between taka 300 to 350, 57.9% received wages between taka 351 to 400, and the 2.8% received more than taka 400. Considering the present day-to-day living expenses in Bangladesh, it can be assumed that it was so difficult for the workers to maintain a decent livelihood with the amount they received as wages from the garden. They only lived hand to mouth. On the other hand, the provision of provident fund applied to the permanent workers while no such provision was sanctioned for the casual workers. A worker joins the garden usually at the age of 18 (minimum age) and retires at the age of 60. Every month, 7.5% of the total basic is deducted from the salary of a permanent worker. During the time of retirement, a worker receives double of the deposited amount along with bank interest. The respondents also reported many discrepancies and mismanagement regarding the claims of provident funds. Every year, a permanent worker receives two festival bonuses amounting to taka 700 each while there is no such provision for the casual workers. Then again, it is hard to meet the demands of the family members with this negligible amount during the festivals.

Housing

The authority ensures residential accommodation for the workers within the garden, but the quality of accommodation facilities is very unsatisfactory. Eighty (80%) respondents expressed their strong dissatisfaction with the accommodation facilities while only less than 1% of the respondents reported that the facilities were somehow manageable. There is a well-built

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rationale for such a wide span of dissatisfaction among the respondents. For example, a permanent worker is allotted with a house, which consists of only two rooms i.e. one bedroom and a kitchen). Each house is made of mud, bamboo, and grass. There is no electricity and gas supply. The size of a room is very small, and there is no window as well. The workers live so inhumanly, often without privacy, along with other family members. Sometimes they also accommodate cattle in their rooms.

Discussion

Based on the opinions of the respondents and close observation, it can be stated that the socio-economic situation of the workers in the Lubacherra tea garden is overtly dissatisfying. The basic rights of the workers are seriously violated, and they are forced to live in severely dilapidated conditions. They face numerous problems with regard to housing, sanitation, education, pure drinking water, wages, health, and nutrition. Similarly, some earlier studies conducted by Das and Islam (2006), Barakat (2010), Chowdhury et al. (2011), and Ahmad et al. (2015) also identified that tea gardens workers in Bangladesh were leading a miserable life without minimum opportunities, and they were one of the marginalized, deprived and alienated groups in Bangladesh. The present study reconfirms some of the earlier findings and adds some new dynamics to the situation, such as exploitation of the workers by irregular payments, the complexity associated with overtime, in-humane housing and sanitation condition, limited supply of fresh water, hindrance to avail education and like. It is imperative to improve the status of the tea workers by providing essential and basic services. Ironically, the planters/owners emphasize more increasing the production of tea rather than improving the basic requirements of the workers (De, 2015). The wellbeing of the workers is wholly contingent upon the wish of the employers (Barakat, 2010). Despite the intensive involvement of the tea garden workers in the entire production system of the industry, very little attention is paid from any corner to improve their human situation in the gardens (Das & Islam, 2006). The findings of the present study are consistent with the assumptions drawn by the few studies discussed above. Moreover, tea as an industry is relatively old in Bangladesh. If the workers involved in the industry are not content with their basic demands or are deprived of their basic rights, a sustainable development of the industry with increased productivity, perhaps, will be unattainable. Bangladesh is well known in the world as a good quality tea producing country, and the contribution of the tea workers to the GDP is not negligible (Ahmad et al., 2015). As such, workers who are the main drivers of the development of the tea industry deserve to enjoy all kinds of human and basic rights without fail.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study was carried out to assess and internalize the situation of the workers of a specific tea garden in Bangladesh. Although the workers are the key drivers of the tea industry, their socio-economic situation is unsatisfactory. The workers of the garden are deprived of many essential socio-economic rights. As hinted earlier, Bangladesh tea has a worldwide

reputation for its quality. To keep going with this reputation, the tea sector must be developed in some important ways. In this regard, improving the situation of the workers is of paramount importance. No sector can be sustainable if it exploits or overlooks the wellbeing of the workers. The workers have the right to live in dignity. The authority concerned has every responsibility to uphold the dignity of the workers as human beings. Various pragmatic efforts having policy implications may be carried out to improve the situation of the workers of the tea gardens in Bangladesh. Some of the suggestions are stated below:

i) Both formal and non-formal education may be introduced for the children of the tea workers. The employers as well as the government should provide them free education. A massive awareness campaign regarding educational entitlement of the tea workers should be undertaken. The government and the NGOs should work jointly on such motivational campaigns.

ii) The workers are forced to be employed in the garden generation after generation. Such a provision restricts their occupational mobility and allows planters to exploit them by all means. Some policy measures are required to expand the professional mobility of the workers. They should be given the opportunity to be employed in other sectors as well.

iii) On the other hand, wages and other benefits should be increased for the workers. There should be minimum standard wages for the tea section and that must be reviewed regularly and increased annually.

iv) Housing, sanitation, water and other utility services should be provided in the workers' colony. The government and the NGOs should come forward with specific schemes to improve the situation of the colony. At the same time, the government should have a policy mechanism to oblige the planters to extend the core services in the workers' colony.

v) Family planning, medical and immunization services should be extended in the garden. To improve the mental and physical health of the workers, sports and recreational activities should be arranged in the garden for both male and female workers

vi) Finally, there is no alternative to an amicable working relationship between the employer and the employees. Problems of the workers can be solved through positive negotiations. It will also ensure higher productivity in the garden.

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