



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Hidden Currents in the Tea Cup: NGO Intervention in Closed Tea Gardens of Dooars

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**Abstract:**

*Post 1990, the emergence of the drive towards opening up the diverse sectors to private players, and the consequent impact of this has been felt by those sectors that are labour intensive industries. With the gradual privatization of tea gardens the responsibilities of welfare schemes which earlier were on the shoulders of the State gradually changed hands to the private agencies. The tea gardens that were originally earning profit, suddenly were suffering losses and the impact of it was in the form of lock outs declared by the owners. The cruellest face of such cases has been rampant in the form of hunger and deaths which is a common incident, especially in the closed tea gardens of Dooars, in North Bengal. However, there are some NGOs who have filled in the space of support provider in the absence of state initiative or not so active state role, and are therefore, taking up the role of providing support system in the form of livelihood support to the workers of these tea gardens. The paper intends to probe into the nature of the welfare schemes run by some of the select NGOs in these tea gardens. In the process, this paper also intends to look into the role and intention of the NGOs, especially focusing on wherefrom the NGOs receive the funds? Are the NGOs interested to only play the role of support providers or do they have deeper intentions of collaborating with local political parties and engaging in power politics?*

**Keywords:** *Plantation labourers, Non Governmental Organisations, Profit, Lock outs, Management*

One of the prime characteristic features of the post liberation period in the Indian democracy was the rise in the number of private enterprise taking the upper hand and a setback on the part of the governmental interference in those areas controlled by the private companies. Hence forth the fate of those people working for such private agencies came to be decided by the will of the management of the private sectors. The policies in turn were guided by the higher notion of profit maximization thereby leaving very little space for the development and welfare of the people working under such companies. Here too the educated working groups which were aware of their rights and possessed the capability of questioning the management and in the case of denial of their rights were successful enough in raising their voice and getting justice. On the other hand, those working groups working in the rural interiors of the country, shattered and battered by the agonies of life fell prey to eternal subjugation which later on converted itself to exploitation unattended. Tea plantation industry happens to be a major source of income for North Bengal, especially the hilly regions and their foothills. Perhaps it would not be wrong to state that the popularity of North Bengal has its roots in the quality tea that she has been able to produce. Tea fetches a large part of the National Income as well as pocket sagging profits for the tea companies.

India is world's largest consumer, the second largest producer and the fourth largest exporter of tea after China and accounts for nearly 30% of global output and nearly 25 percent of tea produced worldwide is consumed in India. Branded market accounts for nearly 55 per cent of the total market and is growing at about 20%, while the non-branded market is growing at 10% annually. Nearly 35 lakhs workers are employed in over 1,500 tea estates across India and about 65 per cent of these are employed indirectly.

The tea Plantation industry employs a large section of the population amongst whom the tribal populace predominates. Most of these tribal people bear a history of either having been transported from some tribal zones to the tea cultivating areas as pluckers and gardeners. Speaking of West Bengal, the Hills, Terai and Dooars zones of the state are fully dependent on tea cultivation. The Dooars and Terai have a majority of tribal tea cultivators who were originally brought from Jharkhand and Chota Nagpur to work as Labourers in the tea gardens which were then owned by the British Government.

The tea plantation industry is covered by the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. The workers are mostly unionised. In West Bengal, there are 32 recognized unions. The last 10 years have seen many changes within the tea industry of the North east region, gardens in North Bengal and Assam. The region witnessed a large number of tea gardens being abandoned or closed down. More than 50 gardens had closed down in North Bengal during this period.

The closed tea gardens of Terai and Dooars namely Raipur Tea Garden, Red Bank Tea Estate and Shikarpur Tea Estate have been taken into the focus of study here. Amongst the three Shikarpur tea garden is a recently re-opened a tea garden which was shut down for a long time. Hence, a comparative inference can be drawn from this garden with reference to the difference in the living standard faced then and now. The survey was conducted from 16<sup>th</sup> till the 25<sup>th</sup> February 2015 and the previous data have also been used. The methodology of research used is that of snowball sampling and random sampling.

Taking each tea garden into focus let us begin with Raipur tea garden which is situated in the interiors of Jalpaiguri district. This tea garden has witnessed the constant closure and reopening phases and the impact of such fluctuations have been faced by the labourers the most. Raipur tea garden remained closed from October 2003 till July 2009. It was reopened in the month of August 2009 and once again the tea garden was shut down in the month of October 2013. At present, the tea garden remains closed and a total number of 650 permanent workers / labourers find themselves trapped in the net of poverty and unemployment. From amongst the 650 labourers, 400 of them are women and the remaining 250 are men. Due to a sudden closure and the snatching away of their only source of employment rampant illness, malnutrition, poverty and hunger have become the order of the day. The saddest part of the story is that frequent deaths have taken place which fail to find its place either in the local newspapers, or the ever opportunity seeking eyes of the Non Governmental Organizations or the concrete measures of the slow and snailly bureaucrats. It is very unfortunate to hear that within a time span of about one month around ten people have died, the latest being the death of a tribal lady named Rupni Mal Baharia who died at the age of 35 years because of the absence of a doctor in the tea garden. A scoop of khitchari was what that was served to the villagers as a part of crematoria ceremony. The house of the deceased looked no better than a cow shed with only half covered bamboo nets as walls. It is very surprising to think how could they survive the harsh winter in such huts. The absence of a doctor is a severe problem there because it has only one health centre without a doctor and other necessary equipments. The local residents complained about the fact that after the garden have closed down there has been not a single doctor to attend to the various illnesses of the people. Even when there was one, they have been a victim of racial discrimination as the doctors never touched the patients no matter how ill they were, considering them as unclean dirty tribal. No voice was raised against such a treatment because the victims were not at all aware of their rights, so keeping silence with a broken heart was their only option.

Basic health and hygiene is very poor as there are no toilet facilities because of which people relieve themselves irrespective of their gender. Frustration, anger and agony of the people have led to suicides as well where on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb, the death of Sanjeev Oraon a young man of 25 can be sited. Besides, Rimpa Bhuney, Vivek Munda and Suddhu Subashi are the recent deaths in the village. People, inspite of their efforts of selling domestic animals have not been able to save the lives of their loved ones.

Due to its remoteness, there have been no constant and dedicated NGOs working in the area. However the West Bengal Land Labour Union, commonly termed as Anuradha Talwar, has been working to raise the awareness of the labourers about their rights. The Government has provided job cards to the villagers which to some extent have been helpful to them. However, this cannot be regarded as an alternative to their employment opportunities. Self Help groups have also been operating with considerable success. It is the Christian Missionaries who at times visit the area and provide relief food materials irrespective of their religion or race. The next question that arises is what kind of help would be a permanent solution for sustainable development amongst the people of such closed tea gardens. Raipur is simply one such closed garden representing the many which have closed down. Why are the multi dimensional NGOs not interested in operating in such areas is a question that strikes every researcher. If nobody is eager to work for them who should take the main role, is it the government or is it the management. It can be rightly said that it is the people who is suffering the most and need immediate help. They should be the subject of prime importance rather than blaming each other by the government or the management. Hence, irrespective of the fact that the private companies are the sole owners of such areas, the government should keep constant vigil over such industries as somewhere or the other the people are not ready to be fully left alone under private entrepreneurship. Special trainings should be imparted to the labourers, especially women so that they can be armed to face the world if such closures take place.

The tea gardens have been violating the basic provisions of the Tea Plantation Labour Act with impunity. Provisions of crèche, medical facilities, ambulance, and house repair have all become things of the past. Moreover, many tea gardens of the region have also not deposited the provident fund dues of the workers while the state governments have provided full support to the garden owners by being silent observers. Wages in the tea plantation sector have been set through tripartite agreements in West Bengal and through a bipartite mechanism in Assam. These negotiations have been infrequent and skewed in favour of the plantation owners.

The Red Bank tea garden and Shikarpur tea garden (which was once a closed tea garden) has the active participation of some groups like the Child in Need Institute, The Jesuits or the Christian missionaries, the Canadian Jesuits International, The Human Life development and Research centre etc. The CINI has been basically working in Education, Protection and nutrition of women and children. However, there must be some other bodies who should work for the people.

- Role of the Government

In this entire fiasco, and the crisis that faces 22 gardens, 20000 workers and over a lakh people, the role of the Government (both State and Central) has left much to be desired. Its role as a regulator of industry and a watchdog over workers' rights has left much to be desired.

In spite of strong laws that are in place for recovery of Provident Fund dues, the Provident Fund

The commissioner has taken very little action. Under the law, it is possible for the establishment's property and the other property of the owner to be attached and criminal cases to be filed against employers. Except in one or two cases, this has not been done. The Labour Department has also allowed the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act to be gradually flouted. They have turned a blind eye

to the open exploitation of the workers. On the other hand, they have also allowed employers to behave with carelessness as far as investment in the tea land is concerned. This is in spite of the fact that the Government is the owner of this land and has leased it out to the owners. Arrears of land revenue have been ignored by the Government. The stripping of gardens has also been ignored. While it is possible for the Government (through the Tea Board) to encourage investment in re-plantation, it is alleged that huge amounts of money that were taken from the Tea Board for this purpose have been frittered away.

Somewhere or the other the people are used by some of the NGOs who collect data of the people and take their pathetic photographs thereby making it a tool to earn money. Once their motive is fetched the people are left in their miserable condition to suffer. Some NGOs even vanish in the air after making the people dependent on them. The NGOs have become a power, fetching and capital collecting business houses which are sometimes financed by the foreign agencies or are backed up by the political parties. Hence, keeping aside politics and debates, it becomes the social responsibility of the students, scholars, teachers and academicians get involved and be a part of social activism so that these voiceless people get a voice and in turn learn to be a voice for themselves for a better future which each Indian deserves to live in be it from the metropolitan city or the darkest interiors of the Indian Soil.

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