

CHAPTER-VIII

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH TEA INDUSTRY

INTRODUCTION

Plantation work is the main occupation of the people in this region. But the economic condition of the people has remained precarious. Despite of its favourable physical, climatic and geographical conditions which favour tea cultivation, the region has remained backward. Floods and droughts are the main natural calamity which affects the annual tea production each year. Though India remains the world's largest producer of tea, but each year a little of its international presence is lost to learner and meaner competition.

The traditional cup that cheers is ceaselessly reinvented for the Americans, Europeans and Asians who are taking to it in increasing numbers. It is this millennium challenge that faces Indian tea producers. Sadly, far from being able to invent and create new beverages or experiment with existing ones, they are burdened with taxes, political uncertainties, infrastructure costs, and the menacing shadow of terrorism. The key observation made from study is that there is a serious crisis in the tea industry of West Bengal.

8.1 TEA PLANTATIONS OF WEST BENGAL IN CRISIS

Pipli Mahali, 34, was a permanent worker living with her husband Mani Mahali and a two and a half year-old son in one of the closed tea gardens of the study area. However, she found it difficult to manage the household after the crisis in the tea estate began. Her husband was suffering from tuberculosis but, as the hospital was not equipped with any medicine, he died a slow death in early 2002. When the employers abandoned the tea estate in November, 2002, there was no foodstuff available in the estate at all. Hence, Pipli was forced to feed her son whatever fruits and vegetables were available in the nearby jungles. Unable to digest these wild fruits, her son succumbed to blood dysentery in November, 2002. Pipli now lives alone in a house and has sold off all her belongings in order to survive. She is suffering from tuberculosis and very few people visit her at home. She is helplessly awaiting her death. In the Terai and Dooars region there are many tea plantations, which have been closed or abandoned by the owners. The senior managers have deserted these plantations. The closures have affected nearly 30,000 workers along with their families in these plantations.

8.1.1 Deaths Due to Starvation and Drinking of Contaminated Water

The tea plantations of this region have witnessed an abnormal number of deaths. More than 240 people have died in only four plantations between March 2002 to February 2003 in the

Terai and Dooars regions. Most of the workers are dying due to blood dysentery, liver cirrhosis, anaemia and cardio respiratory failure. An analysis of the death registers revealed that the death rates significantly increased after the closure of the tea plantations. The children and the aged constitute the largest number of the dead but many young workers were also dying. The number of female deaths in the age group of 16-35 is higher than the males because of a large number of deaths during childbirth.

In West Bengal the management provides concessional foodstuff as part of the workers wages. However, after the closure or abandoning of the tea plantations, there was absolutely no food available for the workers. Some workers survived by selling their household items and by crushing stones, but many of them are starving and suffering from acute malnutrition. The condition of the aged, women children and the ailing is the worst. In order to survive, some of the workers consumed any food that was available and cheap, resulting in chronic under nourishment or food poisoning and slow death.

8.1.2 Non-functional Estate Hospitals

In almost all the closed or abandoned tea plantations, the estate hospitals have closed down after the doctors left the estates. A few hospitals, which are still run by the compounders, have no medicines. There are no ambulances available to take the seriously ill or injured workers for advanced medical care to the city hospitals. Most of the people who were dying in these tea plantations could have been saved if the estate hospitals were functioning normally. There are many cases of women workers dying during childbirth. There is hardly any medicine left at the estate hospital and the inexperienced nurses are attending complicated delivery cases using kerosene lamps as the electricity connections have been cut off. In some plantations, there are ambulances, but are stationary, as there is no fuel available.

8.1.3 Condition of the Women and Children Workers

The permanent workers in the tea plantations of West Bengal are mostly women, because they usually do most of the plucking work. As the main wage earners, women workers are under tremendous pressure. They are restricted by a lack of skills from joining other income earning activities, an absence of alternate employment opportunities and unfavourable conditions for migrating long distances in search of alternate opportunities of work. During study it was found that many households where only the woman worker was staying at the tea plantations. They could not leave the security of the line room, which was allotted, to them and where they had been staying for generations. Many women workers had died due to pregnancy related

complications. Some fortunate women had been shifted to the city hospital in a lorry when the workers pooled in money to help them out, but such cases were rare.

Most of the children in the tea plantations of the Duars and Terai regions stopped going to school. Instead they were cooking food and carrying it for their parents who were crushing stones in the dry riverbeds.

8.1.4 Non-payment of Wages

The wages of the tea plantation workers of West Bengal are the lowest in the organized sector. The workers barely manage to survive with the paltry daily wages of Rs. 49.25 in West Bengal, which is lower than Rs. 65.88 in Assam (The tea garden workers in Assam and West Bengal receive concessional foodstuff as part of their wages) and much lower than the tea workers' daily wages in Kerala, Rs. 76.17 and Rs. 72.62 in Tamil Nadu. These low wages prevail in spite of the fact that labour productivity in West Bengal is one of the highest in the country and so is the land yield and overall price of tea. However, due to the closure of the tea plantations, the workers have been deprived of even the low wages they were receiving.

8.1.5 Growing Unemployment in the Tea Estates

Thousands of workers were rendered jobless because of the closure of the tea estates. In some of the functional tea plantations, the managements proposed reduced days of work and not employing temporary workers.

8.2 PHYSICAL PROBLEM

Some of the other problems associated with the industry includes physical problem. Physical problem is the most important hindrance in the economic development of a region, because physical factors are responsible for the concentration of population and their activities are greatly controlled by the nature of land, climatic phenomena and soil composition. Various physical factors are responsible for the quality of tea in tea garden. The ecological constraint for lowering the quality of tea is being discussed in the following paragraph.

8.2.1 Uneven distribution of rainfall: It is seen that the study area enjoys a sub-tropical type of climate where rainfall during the year July to September is heavy and dry during rest of the months. During the rainy months floods occur whereas the rest of the year, rainfall is scanty. This phenomenon not only affects the surface run off but also tea cultivation. It also brings natural hazards like drought and floods in the area.

8.2.2 Floods

Floods exceptionally high precipitation during the monsoons along the lesser Himalayas causes a very sharp increase in the discharge rate of rivers in the area. The heavy sediment load brought down by the rivers from the hills get deposited on the river beds once they debouch into the plain causing serious shallowing of the river beds consequently they become incapable to carry sudden increased discharge during monsoon. This causes overflowing of banks and extensive flooding of wide areas leading to damage of life and property. River migration in the plains is also prevalent during such high discharge period when the existing channel is suddenly abandoned by the river and starts flowing through an old aggraded course.

Shifting of rivers and serious migration and bank erosion are major problem of the Balason River. Road and railway communication in the district also gets disrupted. Run off from hill sides as well as under ground water in some cases with no proper outlets from draining out the water are the main factor for such water logging.

8.1.3 Drought

Drought is another factor which affects the quality of tea. Drought is a common feature in this area (photo 8.1). It is generally noticed that drought is common in every alternate year of flood.



Photo 8.1: Drought Affected Bush

Bushes are severely affected due to drought. After the devastating flood in 1993, the tea industry in North Bengal is now facing a deep trouble due to intense drought. The plants face red spider, red slug and helopeltis attack due to severe drought conditions (photo 8.2). If this

pest attack is not checked the whole lot of bushes get affected which hampers the annual production. During the past 70 years such low amount of rainfall between January and April has never been recorded. Naturally annual growth was reduced. About 18 % of total annual tea production occurs between January and April. On the other hand it has been noticed that, export of Indian tea to the foreign market has been reduced significantly.



Photo 8.2: Helopeltis Affected Bush

8.2.4 Soil Erosion

Soil erosion is another menace in this area. The entire economy of this area depends on the top soil as it contains most of the food for growth and nutrition of plants. The soil erosion is a problem in the tea gardens of North Bengal. In the name of so called development, for constructing roads in hilly region, detonators are often used for blasting stones or part of hills, which causes loosening and cracking of stones and ultimately causes sleeps.

8.2.5 Deforestation

In the past the area was full of natural forest resources. But now-a-days deforestation has become a severe problem in this region. Our earth supports about 5 to 10 million species of plants and animals which have been the result of 3 billion years of evolution involving mutation, recombination and natural selection. Changing environment like ice age followed by warm period exerted severe selection pressure which was responsible for the evolution of new species and also extinction of others. But present day scenario has changed, human being instead of worshipping nature, has begun exploiting natural resource which has lead to

deterioration of the environment. By the end of this century it is supposed that one million species out of 50 million species will be eliminated. Thus there is an ecological crisis threatening the whole system (Khoshoo 1986).

The consequences of deforestation comes about through increased erosion and declining water table which is associated by reduction in atmospheric humidity and cloud cover, increased heat reflectivity and lowering of rainfall. Forests reflect moisture back into their immediate atmosphere by transpiration where it again falls as rain. If the forests are removed the natural cycle is broken and destroyed.

There is little doubt that the environment throughout the area has been rendered barren (except tea plantation) and inhospitable by excessive pressure from the axes, it is going on at an increasing rate, as the ignorant people believe that forests are unlimited. The tea gardens and forests have existed as a part of the eco- system in north Bengal for a very long time. This is the largest and most organized industry operating in North Bengal and as such this industry has a role to play in environmental conservation.

8.3 LAND MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

Tea industry was started in 1874 in this region. About 10 lakh workers are directly related to the tea industry in North Bengal and about 45 lakh workers are indirectly dependant on it. Though India ranks first in tea production in the world and West Bengal ranks second in the country, but it has suffered various management problems (i) Land management problem (ii) Problem in world trade and marketing (iii) Administrative problems.

In North Bengal there are two types of tea gardens. The first one is old type, known as "set gardens", where they have a factory, workers' colony and hospital, etc. There are 300 registered tea gardens in North Bengal which have taken land on lease from the forest department for 99 years. The second type of tea gardens are new, relatively very small, but numerous, which are mushrooming in the past few decades. These unregistered tea gardens are spread wide over North Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar districts. They care a fig for plantation legislations, and sell tea leaves produced by poorly paid labour in the wholesale market. This "green tea" is transformed into "made tea" in "bought leaf" factories. Here, producing tea by employing contract labour reduces the cost in comparison to "set gardens". Instead of registering these gardens, the government has legalized them by giving "no objection certificates" to few of the gardens but, there are gardens which are yet to receive "no objection certificates".

Most of these tea estates have come up on disputed land throughout North Bengal. These gardens were set up in 1988-89, when tea prices were abnormally high. Tempted by the lucrative yield, a number of speculators purchased land in these districts on behalf of reputed tea companies, many of them based in Kolkata. This buying and selling of land turned out to be illegal in many cases as both parties had taken advantage of legal loopholes. Most of the land purchased was agricultural land under barga cultivation and land for Relief and Rehabilitation department. Over the past five years, both political parties and cultivators had protested against this illegal land transaction. They allege that the administration of this particular area including the Panchayat were aware of the deals.

In December 1990, Mr. Kanu Sanyal, the Naxalite leader and the working President of West Bengal Tea Garden Labour Union, along with his associates had submitted a memorandum to the then Divisional Commissioner of Bengal, Miss Kalyani Choudhury, urging her to stop the unauthorized growth of tea gardens in prohibited areas. They had also warned of an agrarian movement by the cultivators in these districts. A few months before this memorandum was submitted, the West Bengal Government had drawn up guidelines for the setting up of new tea plantations in North Bengal. These were incorporated in a resolution which was sent to the Divisional Commissioner and all the District Magistrates in North Bengal. Directives were issued to deal with the problem of land grabbing in the prohibited areas.

The Government resolution stated that all proposals for setting up new tea plantations should be examined by the District-Level Committee, comprising the Collector, the Sabhadipati of the Zilla Parishad and District Land Revenue Officer. The recommendation of the Committee would have to be examined by the Divisional Commissioner and then sent to the Land and Land Revenue Department for the No Objection Certificate. But it is seen that the Government's proposals have remained on paper. Official sources said that it was not possible to implement the resolution in the absence of Penal provision. The State Government turned helpless as the issue turned into a law and order problem. There had been frequent clashes between the cultivators and those who bought the land. In 1990, two farmers were killed in police firing at Huduvita in Siliguri sub-division.

In India, presently tea is produced in about 4 lakh hectares of land. In West Bengal itself such land area for tea production is about 1 lakh hectares. This land area should be spread further. Here, again land problem has created a barrier for further progress in this direction, and this problem is seen especially in the Terai and Dooars region. A demand has been raised to increase the quota of tea growing land as per government.

8.4 PROBLEMS IN WORLD TRADE AND MARKETING

India, the world's largest producer of tea with annual production exceeding 850 million kilogram's, has been hit badly because its traditional markets in the countries that made up the former Soviet Union have been steadily drying up. Tea exports have declined from 99 million kg in the 2001-2002 fiscal years to 71 million in the last fiscal year, representing a 28 percent drop in what is a major export earner for the country. On top of that, domestic consumption of tea, which accounted for 673 million tones in 2001, has increasingly been losing out to the manufacturers of bottled beverages. Transnational like Coca-Cola and Pepsi have been carving out large chunks of the market ever since they were allowed into the country under India's decade-old liberalization policies.

8.5 ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS

The theft of tea leaves in the Terai has arisen alarmingly. The culprits are mostly local villagers who are backed by traders, who have set up illegal centers in the region. These centers openly sell the plucked leaves often as low as Rs 6 per kg. The person involved in the thefts can earn as much as 100 per day. The tea planters had submitted a memorandum to the local Superintendent of Police. The delegation was assured that all action would be taken to curb the thefts. Not only tea leaves, tea garden resources like irrigation pipes and motors are regularly stolen. Even the wire fencing put up to prevent cattle from straying in to the garden are stolen. The plantation owners bear the loss, employees too are affected.

CONCLUSION

It is true that man has no control over nature. After the devastating flood of 1993 the tea industry of North Bengal is now facing a deep trouble due to drought. Drought leads to loss in production. Lack of rain has caused a serious threat to standing crop yield. Soil erosion is also noticed in this region. There was a time when Indian tea had a monopoly in the world market. But recently several countries are participants in this respect. After the political collapse of Soviet Union, the export of Indian tea has faced a great blow. The social life of the workers is very poor. The medical facility provided is minimum. There is little scope for education. The management intervenes only to those issues in which they have profit. Hence they are unlikely to take any initiative to improve the status of workers unless they find there is a correlation between the status of worker and their productivity.

Currently, the Indian tea industry is facing very rough times. Low prices, cheap imports and stiff competition from other beverages have resulted in a year that has been dubbed as one

of the worst in the industry's history. The situation has taken a turn for the worse since 1998, eroding the profitability of the tea estates. Besides this, the industry has been under severe cost pressures.

The plight of the producers has worsened since mid – 1999 when the average price of tea started falling. Exports had net shown the requisite increase because Indian tea was being priced out of the market by other countries that were selling their product at much lower prices. It has been witnessed that the morale of tea companies is low. The performance of recent years has been much below expectations and there is little sign of the business gathering momentum. To top it all, there is also the threat of unrestricted imports. Price is the problem number one of tea. Over the last 60 years, inflation is estimated to have increased the general price level by 150 times in India while the whole sale or auction prices of the tea have appreciated only about 25 times.

To overcome the problems of the tea industry besides the planters the government should come forward and measures should be taken to improve the situation. So it's essential to study the strategies for future development of tea industry in the following chapter.