

CHAPTER V : Casual Labour in Tea Industry.

Content :

- 5.1 Casual Labour.**
- 5.2 Size and Casualization.**
- 5.3 Causes of Casualization.**
- 5.4 Summary.**

5.1 Casual Labour

Casual labourers in tea industry are known as bigha. During the pre-independence period the proportion of casual workers in the total labour force was insignificant. In Table 5.1 we have presented the break-up of permanent and casual workers in the tea gardens of Jalpagirui and Darjeeling during the period 1901 to 1941.

Table 5.1 shows that as the total number of workers increased the number of casual workers decreased. The percentage of casual workers in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri decreased from 30.97 per cent in 1901 to 3.46 per cent by 1941. In Darjeeling tea gardens the percentage of casual workers decreased from 40.03 per cent to 2.67 per cent during the same period of time. Thus, the temporary employment in tea gardens of West Bengal had more and more given way to permanent tenures. The overwhelming majority of permanent labourers indicates a settled labour policy.

Table 5.1

Permanent and temporary labour force in tea gardens
1901-1941

Year	Jalpaiguri			Darjeeling		
	Number of labourers employed			Number of labourers employed		
	Permanent	Temporary	Total	Permanent	Temporary	Total
1901	47,365 (69.03)	21,254 (30.97)	68,619 (100.00)	24,257 (59.97)	16,194 (40.03)	40,451 (100.00)
1911	56,693 (75.27)	18,622 (24.73)	75,315 (100.00)	26,510 (67.01)	13,051 (32.99)	39,561 (100.00)
1921	86,693 (97.89)	1,871 (2.11)	88,564 (100.00)	45,977 (94.39)	2,733 (5.61)	48,710 (100.00)
1931	1,12,591 (96.35)	4,262 (3.65)	1,16,853 (100.00)	61,572 (96.71)	2,093 (3.29)	63,665 (100.00)
1941	1,36,491 (96.54)	4,896 (3.46)	1,41,387 (100.00)	67,838 (97.33)	1,861 (2.67)	69,699 (100.00)

Note : Figures in parenthesis are the percentages.

Source : Data compiled from Mitra, A.K., Census of India 1951, Vol. VI, Part-IA (West Bengal, Sikkim and Chandernagore) Report, Calcutta, 1953, pp. 263 and 266.

But in the post independence period particularly during the few decades the number of casual workers increased significantly. The employers always suppressed the figures of casual workers. There is no published data on casual labourers during the

post-independence period. The Tea Statistics, published by Tea Board, Calcutta only gives the figures of temporary workers drawn from outside the garden. But in fact, a large proportion of resident workers who are related to the permanent workers in the tea garden concerned, worked as casual workers, the figures of which are not presented separately in Tea Statistics. Thus, it is very difficult to get the exact figure on casual workers.

Here, we have consulted three survey reports to get an estimation of casual workers in the Terai tea gardens. They are Techno Economic Survey of Darjeeling Tea Industry of National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi (1977), Techno Economic Survey of Terai Tea Industry of Tea Board, Calcutta (1982) and the survey made by Dr. Sharit Kumar Bhowmik, Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Delhi University. The figures on casual workers obtained by these survey are presented in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 shows that the casualization in the Terai tea gardens increased much significantly during the last decade. At present there is about 37 per cent of the total work force is casual. The employers mainly engaged adults as casual labourers. There are relatively fewer number of children. The sex composition is more or less evenly balanced in the Terai.

Table 5.2

Permanent and casual labour employed in Terai tea gardens
(in percentage)

Year	Permanent	Casual	Total
1973	75.6	24.4	100.00
1981	78.8	21.2	100.00
1991	63.2	36.8	100.00

Source : Figures of 1973 and 1981 are compiled from Techno Economic Survey of Darjeeling Tea Industry, 1977, p.37, published by National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) New Delhi and Techno Economic Survey of Terai Tea Industry, 1982, p.54 published by Tea Board, Calcutta. Figures of 1991 are compiled from the article, "Tea Plantations", Bhowmik, Sharit Kumar, 'Employment and Unionisation in Indian Industry' - published by Friedrich Ebert Foundation, New Delhi, 1992, p.37.

5.2 Size and Casualization

Table 5.3 gives the break up of permanent and casual labour according to the size groups of tea gardens.

Classifying the labour into permanent and casual according to the size group of the tea gardens, it is found that the percentage of casual labour is highest in the gardens less than 200 hectares and lowest in the gardens of the size group between 200 hectares and 400 hectares. One of the important causes for highest share of casual workers in the tea gardens of less than

Table 5.3

Distribution of permanent and casual labour by size-group
(in percentage)

Size-group	Permanent	Casual	Total
Less than 200	61.24	38.76	100.00
200 - 400	64.58	35.42	100.00
More than 400	62.45	37.55	100.00
All sizes	63.15	36.85	100.00

Source : "Tea Plantations", Bhowmik, Sharit Kumar, Employment and Unionisation in Indian Industry - Published by Friedrich Ebert Foundations, New Delhi, 1992.

200 hectares is that most of these tea gardens are engaged only in the plucking of tea leaves. They sold the green leaves to the other big tea gardens. So they employ a large number of workers only in the peak season on casual basis to minimize the cost.

5.3 Causes of Casualization

The most important cause of increasing share of casual workers in the tea industry is the enactment of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951 and the Bengal Plantation Labour Rule, 1956, which makes it mandatory for the employers to provide accommodation, food at subsidised rate to the permanent workers. As a result the employers took the policy of employment of casual workers to avoid their statutory obligations,

towards the workers. However after the general strike of 1969, the resident casual (bigha) workers were given the same amount of subsidised rations as permanent workers. But till the tripartite agreement of 1990 this facility is not extended to the nonresident bigha workers. One of the important cause of it is that the employers provided subsidised ration also to the dependants (up to 18 years of old) of adult workers. So they could save the cost of subsidised ration by employing those dependants as casual workers.

The growing rate of unemployment in the tea gardens is the main reason of increasing percentage of casual workers. We have observed in Chapter III that the employers during the early days encouraged the recruitment of family rather than individual. But after independence the industry has not expanded at a faster rate as we have observed in the second chapter. Due to lack of employment opportunities in the vicinity of the tea gardens resulted in a large unemployment. These unemployed people served as casual workers in the tea gardens.

The tea gardens are located in backward regions and the workers are isolated from urban industrial situation. In tea gardens they live amongst their own community with their traditions. Education among the children of the workers has not been widespread. As a result of backwardness of location of tea

gardens and illiteracy of workers the dependence of new generation on the tea gardens increased. But the industry has not expanded much since the 1950 and there was ~~an~~^{apparent} saturation of employment. This situation gave the employers wide opportunity to employ casual workers. As most of the casual workers are related to the permanent workers; Permanent workers are beneficial as their family income increases. Thus the reduction of casual labour will directly, affect the permanent labour force.

The law provides that a person can be employed as a casual labourer for a maximum period of six months, after which his or her employment has to be confirmed. The employers, however, are able to circumvent this law by breaking the casual labourer's service by a day on the completion of six months. Sometimes they did not even have to do this. They simply changed the workers' name and for official purposes it was a different person. In most cases this is done without the knowledge of the workers concerned, since the majority of the tea garden workers are illiterate.

We may conclude that the backwardness of the tea garden regions is the prime cause of developing casual labour force in the tea gardens. To overcome this problem we may suggest to develop the tea garden regions for generating other employment opportunities near the vicinity of tea gardens. This could absorb the surplus population of tea gardens. So far

the tea garden area has not developed because of its placement. A tea garden falls neither in municipal area nor in panchayat. It exclusively falls under a tea garden mouza. As a result, it could not be connected with the development schemes of municipality and panchayat. Besides the State Government does not take any separate scheme of development for tea garden areas. As a remedial we may suggest for the inclusion of tea garden areas with Panchayat.

There is need to ensure that the children of the tea garden workers are imparted some technical skills so that they can seek employment outside the tea garden areas. In this connection we may suggest to extend the training scheme of Nehru Rozgar Yozona amongst the children of the tea garden workers. At present the scheme is only available for the poorer section of municipal and panchayat areas. At the same time both the government and trade unions should seriously concern about the expansion of primary education amongst the children of the tea garden workers.

5.4 Summary

The early records show that during the pre-independence period the temporary employment in the tea gardens of West Bengal had more and more given way to permanent tenures. Between the period 1901 to 1941, casualization in the tea gardens of West Bengal dropped to 3.46 per cent from 30.97

per cent and in Darjeeling tea gardens it decreased to 2.67 per cent from 40.03 per cent during the same period of time. But during the post independence period the number of casual workers increased significantly. By 1991, the percentage of casual labour reached to nearly 37 per cent of the total working force.

The growing rate of unemployment in the tea garden areas is the prime cause of increasing percentage of casual workers. Due to backwardness of the tea garden areas other employment opportunity could not be generated in the tea garden areas. Moreover, since 1950 the tea areas expanded at a very slow rate. Thus huge number of unemployed workers here found in the families of tea garden workers. Due to illiteracy they are not fit for other jobs outside the tea gardens. These people served as casual labour in tea industry.