

CHAPTER VI ; Child Labour in Tea Industry

Content :

- 6.1 Child Workers.
- 6.2 Wages to Child Workers.
- 6.3 Type of Work of Child Workers.
- 6.4 Distribution of Child Labour.
- 6.5 Growth of Child Labour.
- 6.6 Education to Children.
- 6.7 Summary.

6.1 Child workers

Employment of adolescent and children in the work structure is a special feature of the tea industry. This is mainly a result of the pre-independence recruitment practices in the tea plantations. In the earlier period the Planters encouraged families rather than individuals to migrate for work to tea gardens. This saved the recruitment cost. As the workers are permanently settled in the industry and as they had no scope for alternative employment the workers were forced to accept the dictated term. Again employing a family comprising a man, his wife and two children was preferable to employing four workers of different families. The planter in the later case would not only have to bear the recruiting costs of these workers but would also have to provide housing for each of them. By engaging the entire family the planter could cut costs on recruitment as well as on housing.

During the post-independence period though the problem of labour shortage was overcome the planters continued the

recruitment of child labour. In 1951, the plantation labour Act (PLA) was passed. The Act legally permits the Plantation industry to employ the children above the age of 12 years. Thus, the plantation industry is the only industry in the organized sector which is legally permitted to employ child labourer. Moreover, the minimum age of employment is two years lower than the stipulated minimum age (14 years) in the unorganized/informal sector such as bidi, cigar, carpet, glass and matches industry.

It may be mentioned here that the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines any non-adult worker as child labour. According to this definition all workers below the age of 18 years can be regarded as child labour. Accordingly, the categories of both adolescents and children in plantations are in fact child labour.

6.2 Wages to Child Workers

Adolescents are given the same wages as adult workers. Children are paid half of the wages of adult workers. In June 1992, the daily wages of a child worker in the Terai stood at Rs. 9.75, against Rs. 19.24 of adult male, female and adolescent workers. A child worker is allowed half the wages of adults, but the hours of work prescribed by the act is more than half of that of adults. The 1982 amendment of the Plantation Labour

Act (PLA) lays down that the minimum working hours of adults is 48 hours a week whereas it is 27 hours a week for children.

In the early period of tea plantation there was wage differences between adult male and female in industry. In 1975 the Government of India passed Equal Remuneration Act abolishing wage difference between male and female in all industries. This Equal Remuneration Act cover only wage difference between the sexes and does not cover the child labour. The trade unions also ignored the subject of wages of child labourer. They never demanded for equal wages for child workers.

6.3 Type of Work of Child Workers

The Plantation Labour Act (PLA) in its present form does not contain any provision regarding the type of work for the various categories of workers. Most of the employers use the non-adult workers in spraying of pesticides, weedicides and chemical fertilizers. This is because in most cases these child workers are yet to acquire the skills for plucking tea leaves; and therefore they cannot be engaged in heavy agricultural work expected of the adult male workers. The present Act does not contain any provision dealing with safety of workers as regards to health hazards connected with the spraying of chemical fertilisers.

The Government has recently introduced a Bill to amend the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 to deal with the problem of safety and health in plantations arising out of the increasing use of agro-chemicals in plantations.

The Bill seeks to enable the Government to prohibit, restrict or provide regular employment of women and non-adult workers for using or handling hazardous chemicals in plantations. Such a provision will ensure uniformity of rules regarding plantations in the country. The Bill also seeks to prohibit the employment of children aged below 14 years in plantations.

6.4 Distribution of Child Labour

The distribution of Adolescent and Child labour in tea plantations is given in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 shows that there was 75,261 child labourers in the tea industry of India in 1990, out of these 51,113 were children and 24,148 were adolescents. The bulk of the child labourer is in Assam where the total number of child labourer was 56,664 followed by West Bengal with 14,779 child labourers. Thus, we see that nearly 95 per cent child labourers is employed in the tea plantations of north-east India. The proportion of children is higher than adolescents in the tea plantations of both Assam and West Bengal.

Table 6.1

Distribution of child labour in tea industry 1990

District/State/ Region	Adolescent (A)	Children (C)	Total (A+C)
Dooars	4706 (3.08)	6725 (4.40)	11431 (7.48)
Darjeeling	440 (0.91)	748 (1.56)	1188 (2.47)
Terai	675 (1.78)	1485 (3.93)	2160 (5.71)
West Bengal	5821 (2.34)	8958 (3.61)	14779 (5.95)
Assam	15170 (2.80)	41494 (7.66)	56664 (10.46)
Tamil Nadu	1877 (1.83)	170 (0.16)	2047 (1.99)
Karnataka	75 (1.78)	22 (0.52)	97 (2.30)
Kerala	1025 (1.38)	105 (0.14)	1130 (1.52)
South India	2977 (1.64)	297 (0.16)	3274 (1.8)
All India*	24148 (2.45)	51113 (5.17)	75261 (7.62)

Note : Figures in parenthesis are the percentages.

*Includes all tea growing areas in the country.

Source : Tea Statistics, Published by Tea Board, Calcutta, 1990-91, pp.144 and 147.

The tea growing states of South India have few child labourer. They collectively employ 3274 child labourers out of which 2977 are adolescents and 297 are children. The adolescents outnumber the child workers.

In terms of percentages, in all tea gardens of India child labourers (Adolescents and child) account for 7.62 per cent. In West Bengal they account for 5.71 per cent while in Assam the child workers account for 10.46 per cent. In tea plantations of South India child labourers account for only 1.8 per cent. Thus, in tea plantations of Assam the number of child labourer is highest both in absolute term as well as in percentage term.

Among the three tea growing regions of West Bengal the highest percentage of child labourer is employed in Dooars. They are 7.48 per cent of total working force followed by Terai with 5.71 per cent and Darjeeling with 2.47 per cent.

6.5 Growth of Child Labour

The growth of child labour in the tea gardens of West Bengal and Terai is presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 shows that the child labour in the Terai tea gardens increased by nearly 227 per cent over the last 30 years period from 1961 to 1990; but in all tea gardens of West Bengal

Table 6.2

Child labour in the tea gardens of West Bengal and Terai
1961-1990

State/Region	1961	1971	1981	1990	% increase over 1961
Terai	661	1235	1670	2160	226.78
West Bengal	13372	17990	19052	14779	10.52

Note : Number of child labour includes both adolescent and children.

Source : Appendix II.

it increased by only 10.52 per cent during the same period of time. Since 1981 the child labour in all tea gardens of West Bengal showed decreasing trend. But in the Terai they showed increasing trend throughout the period from 1961 to 1990.

In Table 6.3 we ^{have} presented the annual growth rate of child labour in the Terai and all West Bengal tea gardens and compare the same with that of adult (male and female) labour.

Table 6.3 shows that the child labour in Terai has grown at the rate of 4.03 per cent per year during the period from 1961 to 1990; whereas in all tea gardens of West Bengal the child labourer has grown at the rate of 0.33 per cent per year during the same period of time. So the rate of absorption of child labourer in Terai is much higher than the all West Bengal average. Another special feature of employment practices in the tea gardens as revealed by Table 6.3 that the child labour

Table 6.3
Annual growth rate of child and adult labour
1961-1990

Year	West Bengal		Terai	
	Adult	Child	Adult	Child
1961-1970	0.06	3.60	0.83	6.96
1971-1980	0.94	1.60	1.37	5.55
1981-1990	1.86	(-)2.50	5.67	2.61
1961-1990	0.87	0.33	2.62	4-03

Note ; i) Adult includes both male and female.
ii) Child includes both adolescents and children.

Source : Appendix II.

is employed at a much higher rate than the adult male and female. This is because the employers get some benefits by employing the children. Normally the children are those whose parents are also employed in the same tea gardens. So the employer does not ^{have} to provide any additional housing to them. Besides the lower daily wage rates of children encouraged the employers to employ large number of child workers.

All the trade union leaders interviewed confessed the existence of child labourer in the tea gardens. But they are not making any effort to stop the employment of child labour. They supported the issue on the ground of family income. So, economic reason is one of the important causes on the part

of the workers to send their children to work. On the other hand, the employers also deliberately ignore the aspect of imparting education to the children. This is perhaps, to keep a steady supply of the future labour force for the industry.

6.6 Education to Children

According to the provision of the Plantation Labour Act the employers have to run Primary Schools within the plantation when there are twenty five or more children between the ages of six and twelve years. At the same time, by permitting employment of children, above the age of 12 the act implied that children above this age should not be given any facilities for school. Besides the act also provides that the employers need not provide for a school if there is already one maintained by the State within a distance of one mile from the place of residence of the workers. The children in plantations in the hills or terai have to walk more than one mile or even more for the school, run by the government. They have to leave early morning, and have to return late in the evening. Unless special efforts are made, the education of the boys or girls are bound to suffer.

At present the State Government is collecting 'education cess' from the employers. This policy of the State Government has created a controversy about the responsibility of the

education of the children of the workers. The employers are of the view that as they are paying education cess to the State Government, it should take the full responsibility of the education of the children of the workers. Thus, the aspect of education of the children has been affected by the education cess.

Regarding the education of the children the trade unions have a vital role to play. So far they have accepted the employment of child labourers on the issue of family income. Their present views should be changed. They should encourage the workers to send out their children to schools. The employment of children is a temporary solution of economic crisis of the tea garden workers. The present bulk of the illiterate children will make pressure on the employment of tea industry in future. This will lead to surplus labour force in the industry in future. In this respect, the trade unions should exercise special effort to prevent the employment of child labourer and all efforts should be made to educate them.

6.7 Summary

The practice of employment of child labour in the work structure of tea industry has been continued since independence. After independence, the plantation Labour Act of 1951, legally

permits the employment of child labourer. At present there is 75,000 child labourer working in the tea gardens of different regions of India. In terms of percentage it is 8% of the total labour force. The highest number of child labourer is employed in the tea gardens of Assam and followed by West Bengal. Only 5% of total child labourer is employed in the tea gardens of South India. The tea gardens of West Bengal employed nearly 20% of the total child labourer.

As regards growth of child labourer, we observed that the number of child labourer in West Bengal tea gardens significantly decreased between the period 1981 to 1990. But its tea growing region of Terai showed increasing trend of child labourer throughout the period 1961 to 1990.

By employing children in the work structure the employer gets economic benefit. As a child worker is allowed half the wages of adults, but they work more than half of the period of that of adults. So far the employer deliberately ignore the education of the children of the workers to keep secure the supply of future labour force in the industry. On the other hand, due to economic crisis in family the workers send their children to work. The trade union leaders also ignore the aspect of child labourer on the ground of family income. So the children have been employed to fulfil the needs of both the workers and employers.

Due to lack of educational facilities and employment of child labourer the population in the tea gardens have been depended on the tea gardens generation after generation. Thus, huge number of surplus population is generated in tea industry. In order to prevent employment of child labour and to reduce employment pressure in tea gardens all efforts should be made to educate the children. For this purpose a tripartite effort is essential from the ends of Government, trade unions and employers.