

## **Life of the Workers in an Abandoned Tea garden in North Bengal**

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**Abstract:** *A tea plantation, apart from being an economic unit, is a social institution, which, to a great extent, controls the lives of their resident work force. The tea industry of North Bengal provides employment to more than three lakh workers. These workers are dependent upon the plantation management for food, water, shelter, education, health, sanitation and more. However, it is taken to be caught in crisis since the early 2000s. The closure and abandonment of several tea plantations of North Bengal has thrown the labourers into a situation of dire uncertainty. They lose their jobs, and there comes a shift in the nature of their work, from permanent labourer in the tea estate to casual labourer elsewhere. Besides losing economic security, they are losing whatever minimum social security they had prior to the closure or abandonment of the estate. The paper aims to understand the reason(s) behind the closure of one particular tea estate from the Terai, namely, Panighatta Tea Estate. The estate has been abandoned since 2015. The paper further tries to analyse the impact of the abandonment and closure upon its concerned labourers.*

**Keywords:** Tea plantation/estate, labour, crisis, closed, abandoned migration, socio-economic, terai.

### ***Introduction***

The Indian organized tea sector employs over 1.1 million workers throughout the tea growing states all over India. The industry is characterized by an enclave estate economy with a resident labour force comprising mainly of the socially and marginalized communities who remain to be relegated even today in independent India.<sup>1</sup>

The report (2007: 4) also points that the crisis in the Indian Tea Industry has affected estates in three states namely, Kerala, Assam and West Bengal. However, neither Kerala nor Assam has suffered as much as the tea

workers of North Bengal. In India, this crisis has been manifested through the closure and abandonment of tea estates mainly in the states of Kerala and West Bengal since 2000. There has been a huge uproar on crisis of Indian tea industry that had been alleged to face from 2000 to early 2008 (Majumdar 2016: 18). The Tea industry in West Bengal is in deep crisis since the last couple of decades with the number of sick, abandoned and closed tea gardens on the rise. Those still open are under tremendous financial crisis, due to equal contribution of globalization and the inability to compete in export markets. The reasons for the present crisis are many—mostly related to the nature of ownership of the gardens. There have been numerous changes in garden ownership with new owners focusing on maximizing profit. The profit earned gets invested on diversification rather than towards the welfare of the tea industry and the labourers. Every day brings in news of a new closure.

The Status Report (2007: 97) further highlights the apathy of government, political parties as well as trade unions as a responsible factor for the present condition of tea industry of the region. The owners want to earn maximum profit from the plantations till the industry is a viable enterprise or otherwise they leave the gardens declaring locked out or abandoned. Presently, more than 50% of the population in North Bengal depends upon tea gardens for their livelihood. Closure of the garden throws these workers into a state of abject poverty and helplessness. Tea, since its very inception, has been an internationally traded commodity. It is indeed a paradoxical situation where with every passing year the graph of demand in the international market is increasing, yet gardens in North Bengal are getting closed down one after the other.

Initially, the plantation companies were European owned and they used to meet their financial requirements by raising capital from London money market. But with the rapid expansion of tea plantation industry towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the demand for capital loans also increased substantially. The gap was filled by indigenous money lenders who were mostly the cash-rich Marwari traders and *baniyas*. The tea companies started taking a large part of their loans from them. After Independence, the expatriate owners of the plantations started withdrawing from India. This indigenous money lender class now entered the tea industry acquiring the companies from retreating expatriates (Majumdar 2016: 6). The Tea gardens became a ground for extracting profit for the new tea estate owners.

It is very clear that with the closure of the plantations, workers lose all the benefits or rather the minimum benefits that they were receiving prior to its

abandonment and closure. Also, since the Plantation Acts makes it mandatory for the employers to provide these facilities; the workers cannot get any support from the Panchayat (Bhowmik 2009: 21-22). They have to depend upon the relief services provided by the NGOs and other sources. Therefore, because of the sudden closure and abandonment, the workers and their families concerned are thrown into the worst possible situations. Also lack of basic infrastructure like medical, educational and other facilities have resulted in deaths due to starvation, suicides and have compelled the students section to drop-out from schools. Added to this, there has been a tremendous increase in the pattern of out- migration.<sup>2</sup>

One interesting nature of such abandonment is that the owners do not declare the tea garden to be closed but conveniently abandon them without any prior notice to the workers. They simply run away from their responsibilities of paying Provident Funds and Gratuity, wages, bonus, rations and other facilities to the workers (Rai 2017). The labourers receive Rs. 176 per day as wage after working for 8 hours in a day and this in spite of the profit the industry is making. The workers have been fighting for their right to Minimum wage which is yet to be achieved. According to the Minimum Wage Act (1948) providing wages to the workers below minimum wage is regarded as bonded labour.

### ***Tea Plantation of North Bengal and the crisis***

North Bengal has around 276 organized tea estates in the entire state which is spread over Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts. More than 32 out of 276 tea estates have been closed down in the different regions of Darjeeling hills, Dooars and Terai. To name a few closed tea gardens; we have Jogmaya, Peshok, Doothria- Kalej Valley in the hills, Panighatta, Maruti, Koti in the Terai region; Lankapara, Hantapara, Garganda, Tulsipara, Madhu, Bandapani, Dheklapara, Dharanipur, Surendranagar, Bagrakote, Red Bank, Joybirpara, and others in Dooars. Adding to the list, Singtom Tea Garden in the hills was closed on 24th February 2020.

According to Majumdar, there has been a huge uproar on the 'crisis' of Indian tea industry that had been alleged to start from 2000 to early 2008. It has been attributed to a set of factors like declining tea prices, stagnant demand in the domestic market, and shrinkage of export market for tea, escalation in the input of cost including labour cost and the supply of large quantities of tea by the unorganized sector comprising of small tea growers and bought leaf factories (Majumdar 2016: 18). Most of the planters cite

the over-supply situation as the main reason for the fall in tea prices. The over-supply situation arose because of (a) Falling exports (b) growing imports (c) falling tea consumption in India and (d) rising labour costs. The falling tea prices due to the oversupply of tea and the declining demand in the global market, combined with stiff competition from many tea producing countries are other cited reasons that have caused a slump in the profit, leading to the crisis in the India's Tea Industry (Roy 2013: 347).

According to a report of 2003<sup>3</sup>, earlier the employers were traditional planters but of late traders, who have very little knowledge of tea plantations, run the tea plantations. The traders are making profit whilst the workers in various tea plantations are dying of starvation. The other narrative says that the number of workers in the garden are becoming less every year. Migration was one of the tangible impacts of the crisis in the tea plantation sector. The disinterest to work as plantation labour coupled with poor economic conditions and rising cost of living push men and women to migrate for work (Rasaily 2014).

The Convener of the co-ordination committee of Plantation workers, the largest conglomeration of Leftist trade unions for tea garden workers in West Bengal has stated that the tea garden crisis is artificially articulated problems of the tea garden owners (Sharma 2010: 34). There is hardly anyone who takes the responsibilities of the crisis in the tea industry. The owner easily runs away shutting down the garden, the trade unions are least bothered about going after the management to reopen closed estates. At the end the one who suffers are the poor workers. These workers are the poorest and most backward section in the organized sector. These workers and their families remain secluded and dependent on the plantations for their survival (Bhowmik 2009: 21-22). Amidst all these reasons, the workers are the ones who are clearly at loss.

### ***Starvation death, suicide or institutional murder?***

The crisis in the tea gardens is a major issue in North Bengal. The news of workers dying in the closed and abandoned tea gardens because of malnutrition reaches us through some medium or the other. The social scientists have termed this as 'starvation death'. It is because of lack of proper food intake and medical assistance people are losing their lives. A Joint Fact-Finding Exercise undertaken by the Centre for Education and Communication (CEC) and United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) in 2003 suggests that most of the workers in the tea gardens die due to blood

dysentery and cardio respiratory failure. The third largest number of deaths was due to acute anemia followed by gastric ulcers and hepatitis. As the supply of rations and drinking water to the estates had stopped, the workers resorted to eating fruits and vegetables from the jungle, unhealthy food and drinking water from unsafe sources. However, the workers and their family members are not losing their lives just because of the lack of proper food or hunger. There have been cases in the past where the worker(s) of several tea estates were forced to commit suicide because of the worsening condition of the garden and also because of the ill treatment of the garden authorities towards them.

On 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2006, Shri Baburam Dewan committed suicide in protest of the frequent lockouts of Chongtong Tea Garden in Darjeeling. He was one of the sub-staffs of the garden. He died with a suicide note hung on his chest. The garden was purchased by an enterprising industrialist of Darjeeling district in the year 1983. From that year till 2006 the garden was locked out for more than 20 times. Similar kind of incident happened in Orange Valley Tea Estate of Darjeeling on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2007. Shri Sukbir Rai of Orange Valley Tea Estate committed suicide because of the harsh behaviour of the management of the garden.<sup>4</sup>

Tracing the exact number of deaths in the closed gardens is very difficult. These deaths are not registered and finding a source to know the count is quite a task. Even in spite of witnessing such incidents in the past the Government and the owners have remained silent. The Trade Unions too fail to meet the needs of the workers and cater them in the time of such crisis. These are just few cases that have come out of the gardens. Sometimes people do not want to discuss about such incidents because of the fear of being targeted by the concerned authority.

Since, the paper deals with one of the closed Tea Estates of Terai, therefore I present a brief history of tea plantation of the region.

### ***History of Terai Tea Plantation***

Tista River demarcates the North Bengal plains into two parts. The western part of Tista River is known as Terai while the eastern part as Dooars. Tea production in Terai is mostly concentrated in Siliguri Subdivision of Darjeeling district (Roy 2013: 337).

The planters began to turn their attention to the Tarai, where experimental plantation had already been started. Here in 1862, the first garden was opened out at Champta, near Khaprail, by Mr. James White, who had

previously planted out the Singel Estate near Kurseong, which is still one of the largest gardens in the district. Others followed suit, and by 1866 more gardens had been opened out at Terai (O'Malley 1907: 93). Right after then more tea gardens were opened in various pockets of Terai region.

The labour force of Terai consists of the Adivasis who were brought here from the Chottanagpur plateau, Bihar, Jharkhand and the adjoining regions. While others belong to Nepali population and they have migrated from Nepal.

Going back to the written history, the development of tea industry in Terai had to contend against serious drawbacks. It is an extremely unhealthy tract; it has suffered severely from blights and it has been further handicapped by having its labour drawn away to the Duars (O'Malley 1907: 95). There is a difference in the quantity of tea produced in Darjeeling hills and Terai region. Mohini R. Das Secretary of Terai Indian Planters' Associations said that most of the tea gardens (75%) in the region do not produce the best quality tea, as this was not a traditional tea producing area. Agricultural land has been converted into tea plantations because of the high price fetched by tea.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Panighatta Tea Estate: Background***

Panighatta Tea Estate is located in Mirik Tehsil of Darjeeling district in West Bengal, India. Darjeeling is the districts headquarters of Panighatta village. The total area of the village is 925.12 hectares. Panighatta has a total population of 5,235 people. There are about 1,058 houses in Panighatta. These houses are situated in different labour lines of the Tea estate. There are 12 labour lines in the estate. These are *Bich* Line, *NF Colony*, *Girmit* Line, *Gairi* Line, *Dus* (10<sup>th</sup>) number, *Balay Busty*, two *Naya* lines, two *Dara* lines, *Adivasi* line and *Premnagar*.

Established in 1880s by the British, Panighatta tea estate covers around 1200 hectares of land. There are around 900 permanent labourers in the estate and 1200 casual labourers. Among these 900, 275 are *Adivasi* workers and the rest are Nepali workers.<sup>6</sup>

When the British left the garden, the ownership was taken over by Dalmia. The owner of the estate Dalmia was known to the labourers by the name *Pawan Bau*<sup>7</sup>. *Pawan Bau* had a brother. Both of them were given two different tea gardens by their parents. *Pawan* received Panighatta Tea Estate and his brother got Belgachi Tea Estate from their parents. *Pawan Bau* was successful in running the garden for more than 35 years. Because

of his age and ailing health, he could not come to the garden regularly and handling the work of the garden became strenuous for him. Later, the garden was taken over by a person named Kansal, commonly known to the labourers as *KansalBau*. After his retirement the garden was handed over to some other family members of Kansal in the year 2011. Again, the ownership was transferred to Sarafs, a wealthy business class of Kolkata. This was the first time that the Sarafs got the ownership of any garden and were new into the business. Time and again, the ownership of Panighatta Tea Estate kept on changing.

The crisis in Panighatta Tea Estate started from early 2006 i.e. even before the Sarafs had taken over the ownership. The garden had recurrently closed down and reopened. The mismanagement is one of the main reasons behind the closure of several tea gardens in North Bengal and the same happened to Panighatta Tea Estate. One interesting fact about this Tea Estate is that the incident of closure or suspension of work was not something new for the workers. The garden had gone through several closures in the past. The garden experienced closure on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2006 for 15 days. The garden management on 6<sup>th</sup> April deserted the estate after putting up a notice of suspension of work. The tea estate reopened on 21<sup>st</sup> April after a successful tri-partite meeting. The workers were rendered jobless at that time. The incident was repeated again in 2009 and it lasted for 10 days. The story of closure or abandonment of the garden does not end here. Panighatta Tea Estate was once again shut down on 27<sup>th</sup> December 2011 and it got reopened on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2012. One common feature of the closure is that the garden usually gets closed during the lean period and gets reopened during the plucking season. Adding to the list further, the tea estate was abandoned on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2015 when the management ran away from the garden at the darkest hour of night.

### ***What led to the closure of the garden?***

According to the workers and the staffs, Panighatta Tea Estate started falling into crisis since 2006. The Sharafs had very little knowledge about the functioning of the tea garden. The lease of the garden was given to each Sharaf brothers for a period of 5 years. Each one of them came with a motive of earning profit from the garden and was least bothered about re-investing the profit back into the garden.

The tea bush needs re-plantation after it reaches 50 years, then after the tea bush loses its productivity. However, re-plantation was done only in 8th

number and 63rd number.<sup>8</sup> Once uprooting was done in 4th number but re-plantation was not done. Even at the time of the field work, some areas in the garden were still vacant without any re-plantation. Poor management and negligence on the part of owner can be regarded as one of the important reasons which led to the closure of the garden.

S. Gour (F, 28) a permanent worker of the garden says “If only the old bushes were replaced with the new ones then the condition of the garden would be much better now. Re-plantation was done only in 8th number and 63rd number. Uprooting was done in 4th number but re-plantation was not done.” I could not get the information about the volume of production of the past or scale of profits etc. This is because the Garden office was closed and no officials were to be located. The labourers also pointed out at misuse of power by some Political parties and the Trade Union leaders for the closure of Panighatta Tea Estate.

M. Tamang (M, 52), a permanent worker expressed the same disgust regarding the Trade Union leaders - “The Company is profit-motive oriented. They try to take every profit from the garden. They have eaten up the garden from inside. The manager ran from the garden a day before we could get the *Puja* Bonus. The Trade Union leaders are all the same. We are not sure but they might be in good terms with the company (owner).”

R. Gour (F, 35), a casual worker says “There were some labourers who used to remain absent from the work but they used to get full wage, because of this reason the condition of the garden started deteriorating. Though it was unfair we could not protest because of the leaders. Had we protested we would have been targeted and could lose our job.”

The workers further pointed out how the garden’s interest was overlooked several times. To give an example, G. Tamang (M, 60), Security Guard of the Garden’s factory says “The new owners had little knowledge about the tea industry which did not work out well for the garden. Re-plantation was not done. If the bush died the workers would uproot it but the place would remain vacant. Slowly, in the last 10-20 years there were many vacant places in the garden without any bush. They did not give proper care to the garden and were only concerned about the profit. The trees were chopped but new trees were not planted which is very important as it gives shade to the tea bushes.”

S K. Chettri (M, 60) expressed the same sentiment. “The new owners could not run the garden properly. Slowly, the garden lost its charm. The

use of different kinds of fertilizers and pesticides is also one of the causes of low productivity of the tea leaves.”

This supports the fact that mismanagement of the garden by the owners is one of the main factors that led to the closure of the garden. The new owners were not capable of operating the garden properly. Their only motive was to extract profit and invest the surplus somewhere else rather than investing back in the garden. The Trade Union did bare minimum. Rather than helping the workers they misused their power in the Tea Estate. The workers clearly were not able to seek any assistance from them.

### ***Dues to be paid***

The owner of the Panighatta Tea Estate is liable of paying a huge sum of money to the workers. Part of the Provident Fund was not submitted in the PF's Office since 2003. Rs.15 Crore is due only to Provident Funds. The workers were yet to receive rations for more than 42 weeks. Wages of 2 weeks were due along with the bonus for the year 2015. Even when the garden was open, the labourers were not receiving fringe benefits such as umbrellas, blankets, slippers, firewood, etc. Repairing of the house used to be done by the management but that also got stopped. The workers, who were liable of receiving retirement benefits, are still in hope of receiving all the liabilities like Provident Fund, Gratuity, and Arrears etc. Those who retired before the closure of the garden were yet to receive their dues.

During the interviews several respondents expressed their feelings that they do not want the old management but rather someone who understands the proper functioning of the garden. According to these workers the garden needs new owner who will not cheat the workers but work for the benefit of the labourers and the garden as a whole.

L. Tanti (M, 50), permanent worker of the garden said “For better functioning of the garden, the new owner and management will have to be very strict otherwise the garden will not function properly. Payments must be given to the workers regularly. The daily wage must also increase.”

K. Chettri (F, 40), permanent worker says that “Rs.132 per day is not enough to run the entire family. She feels that the minimum wage should be at least Rs.350 per day.”

According to K. Rai (F, 50) the garden should reopen and never close down again. She feels that the workers need good owner who can pay the wages on time and provide all the facilities to them. A ‘good company’

should take over the garden for the worker's benefit. The dues must be cleared. She does not want to beg for the things that are her rightful dues.

All the workers felt the need of wage revision. At the time of undertaking the field work, the garden had remained closed for 2 years, so getting the exact sum of dues was not possible. Even though some of the staffs were interviewed, they were not able to produce the written documents as both the office and the factory was locked by the High Court. They said that there are many dues and they themselves have forgotten about the exact amount of the dues.

### ***Government's Initiative for the workers***

In this situation of crisis, the tea garden workers are turning towards the Government with a hope of getting some relief. Though the NGOs provide some relief now and then, but this relief does not seem to be the solution in the long run.

Now, the Government is providing the workers with Rs. 1500 every month under FAWLOI (Financial Assistance for Workers in Locked out Industries). Only the permanent workers are eligible of getting this relief amount provided they did not exceed the age of 58 years. The permanent workers of Panighatta started receiving FAWLOI from the month of June 2016. Among the 900 permanent workers, 156 workers were yet to receive the amount. These 156 permanent workers do not pose the necessary documents to procure benefit from this initiative. However, the question still lingers as to till when these workers would be depended upon such relief materials? Is the amount enough for the workers and their families to survive? Or is it enough to cover the damages that the closure has brought into their lives?

### ***Impact of closure upon the labourers of Panighatta Tea Estate***

Around 2,450 workers were rendered jobless because of the certain closure of the tea garden without any prior notice by the management on 10.10.2015. The workers were left with no choice but to move around nearby places in search of a livelihood. After the abandonment of the garden, many labourers started going to the nearby River Balason to collect boulders; women started chipping stones on the river side to sell it to the local contractors. Some of them migrated to the urban spaces like Delhi, Bangalore, Kerala and Mumbai in search of a job. Apart from this, the people started going to nearby tea gardens like Garidhura, Longview, Nischintapur, New Chamta, Simulbarie,

Quiney, Sukuna, Kadapani, Baigunbarie to pluck tea leaves during the plucking season. Working in the nearby tea gardens is one option for them and there are contractors who arrange such jobs. However, they work purely on casual basis. Hence, the permanent workers of the garden have become casual workers elsewhere.

The labourers are mostly recruited in the nearby Garidhura Tea Estate, Sukuna Tea estate, New Chamta Tea Estate, Gulma, Nischintapur Tea Estate etc. Every morning 10-15 vehicles gather in front of the Panighatta Police Station. The workers need to assemble between 6:30- 7 am. All these vehicles get loaded with workers and leave by 7:30 am towards different gardens. These vehicles are usually tightly packed. After the work gets over, the same vehicle takes the workers back to Panighatta. There is no fixed daily wage for the labourers. Some gardens pay Rs.132 and some up to Rs.150 per day.

The lives of these workers were miserable when the garden was open. The sudden closure added to their miseries. The meager amount of Rs.132.50<sup>9</sup> was not enough to run the entire family. Even after working for 6 days in a week, the amount of money they used to get was not sufficient to meet the ends. The tea garden was the main source of income for these workers. Generation after generation they have been working in the garden and its sudden closure swept away the ground from their feet. Since, they do not possess the land rights, at least one person from one household has to work in the garden otherwise they will have to leave the garden.

Apart from working as a casual labourer in other tea gardens, the labourers and the family members between the age group of 18 and 45 work in the nearby Balasun River. For some, work in the river bed is an additional source of income. During the winter season when there is no work in other tea gardens they come to the river as this is best time to work with less flow of water in the river. By the end of November, the tea garden labourers start their work on the river bed.

The workers come to the river early in the morning at 5- 6 am and work till 4-5 pm in the evening. They bring their lunch along with them. The men usually collect boulders from the river and load them in a truck or tractors. Since the work demands lot of strength and man power they usually form a group of 7-10 people to complete the task. For 1 tractor load of boulders they get Rs.350 and for one big truckload they can even get Rs.700 which is equally distributed among the group members. They usually do 5-6 trips in a day. It is very tough to work in the river as compared to the tea gardens.

There is high risk of getting injured while working in the river. There are possibilities of getting injured while loading the boulders.

Women too are involved in the work in the river bed. They are usually involved in chipping stones which is very time consuming and needs a lot of strength. First, they separate stones from sand. Then they chip the stones. Later, the sand can also be sold to the contractors. The chipped stones are sold for Rs.400-500 per vehicle. These women have to wake up early in the morning, prepare breakfast and lunch and leave home for work. After coming back from the work, it is the women who do the entire household chores like cooking, cleaning and washing.

### ***The story of migration(s)***

Out-migration from the tea estates is not a new phenomenon. Migration is happening not only from the closed and abandoned tea garden but from the running garden as well. The case of Panighatta Tea Estate is no different. Since the abandonment of the garden, one person from every family has migrated to other states in search of work. The percentage of migration within the state is quite low as compared to migration to other states. Both men and women have migrated and are still migrating in search of work to support the family. They mostly migrate to Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kerala and other big urban cities. Men gets employed as security-guards, daily wage earners in factories, waiters in restaurants and hotels etc. while the women folk work as domestic helper for the rich families or work as babysitters. They usually go with someone who is already working outside the tea estate. Sometimes they leave with their family members or sometimes with their friends.

D. Darjee (F, 50) was a permanent worker of the garden and started working from the year 1997. Her husband also worked as a permanent labour in the garden when it was functioning. On the other hand, her daughter Manisha (23) worked as a *bigha-wala* (casual) in the garden. She went to work in other gardens as well but never received the full payment. Because of the uncertainty of work in the garden she had to migrate out of the state in search of a living. She worked as a domestic help in Mumbai for some months. She had to work from 7 am in the morning till 11-12 at night. Initially she was promised a salary of Rs.9000 but later she found out that the payment was not made at once, but was in installment. She is in a hope that the garden will reopen soon but if there is no chance of opening her

daughter Manisha will leave for Bangalore. She said she will be working in a beauty parlor but she does not have any formal training.

Suraj (M, 47) was a permanent worker and his wife a casual worker. It has been almost 30 years of his work in the garden. He works as a carpenter and sometimes works in other tea gardens as well. After the garden was abandoned, he has worked in Garidhuri, Saureni, Toklan Tea Estates etc. He stayed in Dowhill School for 3 months and in Victoria School in Kurseong for 2 months. He went there to work as carpenter and received Rs.300 per day. He says 'One cannot choose jobs if one has none'. Suraj's son died mysteriously in Delhi some 5-6 years ago. He had gone there to work. The family is still unaware of the reason of his son's death. They were lucky enough get his dead body. He was 23 years old.

S. Biswakarma (M, 32) was working as a temporary labourer in Panighatta Tea Estate before its closure. After the factory was shut down, he did almost every kind of job that came his way from working in the river side, as a casual labourer in other tea gardens to migrating as a construction labourer to Nepal. It has been almost 9 months of his work in Nepal. He was taken to work there by a contractor. There are at least 20-22 men from the garden that work in Nepal. His father (58) had a permanent job (*nij*) in the garden and his mother (55) worked as a casual labourer (*bighawala*). Both his parents work in Garidhura Tea Estate now. Apart from that, his father has worked in Nischintapur, Longview and Singhijhora Tea Estates.

S. Rai (M, 37) was a permanent worker of Panighatta Tea Estate. He got recruited in place of his mother after she died in 2006. He opted for different kinds of jobs after the closure of the tea garden. He worked in Darjeeling Hills, Mizoram and Nepal. He was taken to these places by different Contractors. He says that it is quite difficult to remember the exact month or year of the work as he is always on the move. He worked for almost a year in Nepal and in Mizoram for 2 months. He was supposed to work for 3 months but the whole area was infected by malaria so he had to return after 2 months. He used to get Rs.250 per day including free food and stay. He worked in a place called *Langtalai*. They had to work from 5 am to 7pm. It was tough for them as they were not familiar with the language of that place. There were altogether 45 labourers from Panighatta.

These case studies clearly portray the precarious life of the labourers. It is not at all easy for them to get work outside the garden. There is no certainty

of work in the garden as well as outside the garden. They have been running errands to earn a living.

### ***Trafficking***

The migrants leave their home with a dream and hope of earning money so that they can provide a comfortable life to their family. But there are times when they unfortunately fall into the trap of traffickers. This happened with 12 people of Panighatta Tea Estate.

Rangu Souriya, the chairperson of KhanchanjunghaUddhar Kendra, an NGO that fights against human trafficking crime against woman and children and child labour, is also one of the residents of Panighatta Tea Estate. She related some instances of trafficking from the tea belts of North Bengal, not only from the closed gardens but from the running gardens as well. On September 2016, her NGO rescued 12 bonded labourers (all men) of Panighatta from Mumbai. All these men were local residents of Panighatta Tea Estate. They were sent to Mumbai by an agent who also happens to be a local resident. These men were promised to be given Rs.15, 000 a month with free food and lodging facilities. They were told that they had to work as labourer in the sea port for loading and unloading of goods. But they were taken to some other place which was far from the sea. They were kept in a warehouse and were asked to carry big gunny bags for Rs.2 per sack. The family members of these trafficked men somehow got to know about the situation and came to Rangu Souriya seeking her help. Then after few days the NGO rescued those men. The family members of these trafficked men did not file any complaint in the Police Station as the agent was from the garden. They did not want to drag the issue further.

This is just one instance of one Tea Estate of North Bengal. There are several such cases of human trafficking which go unreported. It is often said that tea gardens of North Bengal are a hotbed of human trafficking.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The situation in the Tea industry of North Bengal is no less than a calamity. The sudden closure and abandonment of the plantation has hit the normal functioning of the garden leaving the tea workers in a situation of uncertainty. The pattern of closure is almost same in many tea gardens. They close down during the winter season i.e. the lean period when plucking of the leaves is at halt and reopens during the first flush. Problem of trafficking is

rampant, many of which goes unreported. Out migration has become common.

The management of Panighatta Tea Estate did not submit Provident Fund for more than 14 years. The poor management of the owner is one of the main factors that led to the closure of the garden. The new owners had little knowledge about the proper functioning of the garden and took over the garden with a motive of earning profit. They were reluctant to invest money back into the garden. The old tea bushes were not replaced and those uprooted places remained vacant without further re-plantation. The garden was not closed for the first time but the workers were left in the similar kind of situation several times before as well. With no hope of the owner returning back, the workers of Panighatta Tea Estate had to search for an alternate means of livelihood to support the family. At least one member of the family has migrated to other states in search of alternate means of livelihood.

The garden might get auctioned but the workers seemed quite unsure if any company would take over the Tea Estate. The new owner(s) will have to make a huge investment on the garden to revive the factory and garden. Though the workers hope for the garden to reopen, they do not want their children to become Tea Garden labourers. The younger generations are also likely to opt for work outside the garden because there is no certainty of the smooth functioning of the Tea Estate and also the wages are too low to support the entire family.

The women headed households face more problem as there are no male members of the family to migrate to earn a living. There were few cases of dropouts. It was not only because of the closure of the garden but the children of these workers cannot attain higher education because of the low income of the family. Even when the Garden was open the children of the tea garden workers could barely study up to standard 12. After which they are bound to search for a job to support the family. There were few families that could send their wards to college as only because the family members have jobs outside the garden as well. Majority of the workers do not want their children to work in the Tea Gardens like them. They hope that their children will get a stable Government job that will provide them security.

Since, the wage of the tea garden labourer in North Bengal is very low, it is impossible for them to break the shackles of poverty and the cycle of precarity seems to never end. Therefore an increment in the daily wage of

these labourers is the need of the hour. The workers should be treated as an asset rather than as a liability.

### **Notes**

1. Behind Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens- Status Report of India. September 2007. p. 4.
2. Tea Plantation of West Bengal in Crisis (May 2003). 97-98.
3. *Tea Plantations of West Bengal in Crisis- A Joint Fact-Finding Exercise*. May 2003. New Delhi: Centre for Education and Communication (CEC) and United Trade Union Congress. p. 28.
4. Out- migration is not only happening from the closed gardens but from the open gardens as well. As the daily wage of the tea garden labourer is not sufficient to run the family, out- migration has become an option for majority of them.
5. Tea Plantation of West Bengal in Crisis A Joint Fact-Finding Exercise (May 2003: 29)
6. This information was provided by the workers and office staffs.
7. 'Bau' in Nepali means 'father'. Most of the workers are not aware of the real names of the owners. So, they address them by adding the term 'Bau' after their names. This also shows that the owners are considered as a father figure for the entire work force of the tea estate.
8. Since the tea plantation is spread over a vast area, it needs to be segregated to make it easy for the labourers to get distributed for their work every day. So, the garden is divided into "Numbers" or lines.
9. The daily wage of the tea garden labourers was Rs.132.50 before the closure of the Panighatta Tea Estate. The wage was revised and at present the daily wage of the tea garden workers is Rs.176.
10. <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/08/01/tea-gardens-bengal-hotbed-human-trafficking/> (accessed on 1.04.2020)

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