

CHAPTER - V

THE LABOUR FORCEGENERAL DESCRIPTION OF LABOUR FORCE IN THE THREE GARDENS

We have already told that the labourers in the tea gardens of North Bengal have either migrated generally from Chotonagpur - Santal Pargana region or its adjacent areas of Bihar or from Nepal. The Adivasi workers of the tea gardens were composed of different tribes; such as Oraon, Munda, Kharia Baraik, Mahali, Lohar, Turi, Santal etc. from the tribal belt of Bihar. The Nepali workers also belonged to different castes and tribes. Besides, there were some workers also who have come from Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.

In the three tea gardens, we have studied, we have divided the workers into three broad categories - Tribals of Chotanagpur-Santhal Pargana region of Bihar, people of Nepali origin and others. The 'others' include those who have migrated from Orissa. Madhya Pradesh, other areas of Bihar and the Bhotiyas. There was no Bengalee worker in these tea gardens.

Table : 5.1ETHNIC GROUP OF THE WORKERS (PERCENTAGE IN BRACKETS)

<u>Ethnic group</u>	<u>Lalfa T.E.</u>	<u>Angrabhasa T.E.</u>	<u>Kurty T.E.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Chotanagpur Santhal Pargana tribals	371(94.4)	1525(82.3)	1164(79.6)	3060(82.5)
Nepaleese	7 (1.8)	310(16.7)	273(18.7)	590(15.4)
Others	15 (3.8)	18(.9)	24(1.6)	57(1.5)
	<u>393(100)</u>	<u>1853(100)</u>	<u>1461(100)</u>	<u>3707(100)</u>

The above table shows that among the 3707 workers in the three gardens Chotanagpur tribals were dominant. They were more than 82.5%. The next were the Nepaleese, they were nearly 16%. And the remaining 1.5% included the 'others'.

In the individual gardens there were similarities in ethnic composition of workers among the two gardens namely Angrabhasa and Kurty but the composition was slightly differed in the Lalfa Tea Estate. The proportion of Chotonagpur-Santal pargana tribals and 'others' was highest in this tea estate among the three estates perhaps because this tea estate is more adjascent to Bihar.

Male and Female workers

In the tea gardens both male and female workers were employed. The nature of work of tea plantation requires female workers. In some works like plucking, sorting etc., female workers are more efficient than the male workers. Besides this, the Planters also wanted a cheap and permanent labour force. So, they have induced the family based migration to establish a new settlement, the people of which have no alternative but to work in the tea gardens. In the following table we will get the number of male and female workers in the three gardens,

Table : 5.2

MALE AND FEMALE WORKERS (Percentage in brackets)

<u>SEX</u>	<u>TEA GARDENS</u>			<u>TOTAL</u>
Male	Lalfa 252(64)	Angrabhasa 978(53)	Kurty 786(54)	2016(54)
Female	141(36)	875(47)	675(46)	1691(46)
	393(100)	1853(100)	1461(100)	3707(100)

So, from the above table it is found that among the 3707 workers, 2016(54%) were males and 1691(46%) were females. The ratio of male and female workers in Angrabhasa Tea Estate to that of kurty Tea Estate was more or less same. In Angrabhasa Tea Estate the percentages of male and female workers were 53% and 47% and in Kurty Tea Estate these were 54% and 46% respectively. In Lalfa Tea Estate it differed from the other two estates.

The percentages of male and female workers in this tea estate were 64 and 36. Again if we compare the sex composition of Angrabhasa and Kurty with that of total of Dooars, we will get the more or less same types of compositions. In Dooars the numbers of male and female workers in 1987 were 77, 307(52%) and 71, 937(48%). The numbers of male and female workers in the two gardens of Dooars (Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estate), we have studied, were 1764(53%) and 1550(47%). But the sex composition of Lalfa Tea Estate (Terai) and that of Terai differed. In Terai the numbers of male and female workers in 1987 were 12, 101 (51%) and 11,517(49%), whereas in Lalfa tea estate the corresponding numbers were 252(64%) and 141(36%).

Housing

The workers generally reside within the territory of the tea estate. The work hours of the tea plantation is such that it requires the workers to reside within the area of the tea estate. The work starts at 7 A.M. and closes after 3 P.M.

The planters provide land for housing to the workers. In the earlier days the homestead land was distributed through the Sardars. The Sardars were tea garden workers and also worked as recruiters of labourers from Chotanagpur - Santhal Pargana region. The Sardars also gave the workers the materials necessary for construction of houses. Those were generally thatch, bamboo, rope etc. The planters bore no responsibility to regulate the housing or settlement pattern. In those days

most of the houses were of Kachcha type i.e. thatched roofs and bamboo walls. The walls sometimes were plastered with mud. Some houses also had roofs with corrugated iron sheets and sun dried brick walls. The workers of the same tribe generally preferred to live near each other.

The section 15 of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 makes it mandatory for every employer to provide and maintain necessary housing accommodation - a) for every worker (including his family) residing in the plantation; b) for every worker (including his family residing outside the plantation), who has put six months continuous service in the plantation and who has expressed a desire in writing to reside within the plantation.

The state government made the Plantation Labour Housing Scheme Rules in 1958. The rules specified the standard of housing and also provided for loans. The standard specified (except in hill areas) in this scheme was - i) Two rooms with floor area of 100 Sq.ft. ii) Kitchen and Verandah with a total floor area of 100 sq. ft. iii) Bath and Lavatory with floor area of 16sq.ft. and 12 sq.ft. respectively. iv) Storage space for food and fuel - 12 sq.ft. and the houses with ventilation lighting (if available), drainage and water tap facilities. The State Government would provide soft loans to the maximum upto 80% of the total cost of construction, but not for acquiring land. The planters have to construct annually 8% of the total houses required. The central government agreed to help the planters for construction of houses in 1967 through the Subsidised Housing Scheme for Plantation Workers. The Central Government agreed to give 50%

soft loan, 37.5% subsidy to the total cost of a house. The planters had to bear only 12.5% of the total cost. This assistance was closed in 1986.

The type and condition of housing in the three gardens studied are given below.

Table : 5.3

TYPE OF HOUSING (Percentage in brackets)

<u>Type</u>	<u>Lalfa T.E.</u>	<u>Angrabhasa T.E.</u>	<u>Kurty T.E.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Pucca	139(61)	797(76)	550(73)	1486(73.5)
Kuchcha	90(39)	246(24)	200(27)	536(26.5)
Grand Total	229(100)	1043(100)	750(100)	1022(100)

So, from the above table it is found that nearly 3/4th of the total number of houses in the three gardens were of Pucca type and the remaining were of Kuchcha type. In Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estates the number of Pucca houses were high (more than 76% and 73% respectively) compare to Lalfa Tea Estate (nearly 61%) as the former two tea estates were owned by a agency house company.

The houses were situated in the rows of labour lines. The Pucca houses generally had one room, one verandah and one kitchen. Their walls were brick built with corrugated iron roofs. The average size of the houses was 16' x 12'. The Kuchcha houses, sometimes had more than one room. The walls of these houses were

built of bamboo, thatch and plastered with mud and the roofs were made of bamboo and thatch. No houses had the facilities of latrines or sanitation. There were some community bathrooms and latrines in the labour lines. There was no provision of electricity in the houses. Insufficient sunlight due to small window made it more unhygienic and unhealthy with the common feature of overcrowdedness. The roads in the labour lines did not have brick-saling, they were uneven and made of mud. In the two gardens of Dooars some of the houses had small pieces of land for kitchen garden.

Such was the condition of housing in the three gardens. Houses were not built according to the specification. The government, the management and even the workers were not careful about it. If we trace the history of workers' movements in these gardens (Chapter - IV), we would rarely find that the workers are demanding for proper housing facilities. In the tri-annual wage settlements the demand for proper housing is included, but this demand was not discussed or considered seriously. However, workers' demand for repairing of houses was more common.

Wages

In the early years of tea plantation the wages were fixed arbitrarily by the planters. The government normally had no say in this matter. In the post-independence period (i.e. after 1947) the government started mediating in provision of minimum wages. Moreover with the growth of trade unions the workers were also able to bargain with the planters in matters

relating to wages.

Wages of plantation workers is a combination of both cash and kind. The workers get rations at a subsidized rate , a limited amount of free fuel, free housing, free medical facilities etc. and a cash wage. All these constitute the total wage.

In the earlier days the wages in the tea plantation were very low. In spite of the increase in wages during the post-independence period they are lower than the wages in the other industries in the organized sector such as Jute, Coal, Textile etc.

The First Minimum Wages Advisory Committee for Tea Plantations of West Bengal government was set up in 1950. This committee was known as Modak Committee and it recommended that the minimum wage must not be merely a subsistence wage. Besides providing for his food, it should also help the worker preserve his efficiency by providing for education for his children, medical and other amenities (Bhowmik 1981:88). This Committee took nearly two years to study the situation and after these lofty ideals it recommended the minimum wages as Rs.1.19 for male and Rs.1.06 for female workers. This was fairly low wages compared to the 1952 consumer price index level. In spite of this, the planters, just after the implementation of the Modak Committee recommendations, resorted to a wage cut on the issue that there was a crisis in the tea industry. The government appointed a committee-The Second Minimum Wages Committee in November, 1952 to examine the justification of planters' step. This committee was known as Banerjee Committee.

It recommended the minimum wages laid down by the Modak Committee, but curtailed certain other facilities (Ibid:87). The workers were supplied food grains (Rice and Wheat) at a subsidised rate of Rs.5 per maund. This was to be increased to Rs.15 per maund. They were also getting pulses, mustard oil, kerosene at a slight concessional rate since the food crisis after the Second world war. These were to be withdrawn and as a compensation to this, workers would get an additional 34 paise per day.

In 1955, the workers got 18 paise adhoc increment in their daily wages, because there was a sudden spurt in the tea market in India in this year as a result of Korean war.

The another adhoc increment was given in 1959. In 1958-59 the consumer price index rose to a high point. The State government issued a notice that there should be rise in the dearness allowance as compensation. So, the tea workers got an increase of 13 paise in their daily wages in 1959.

The Central Wage Board for Tea Plantation was appointed in December, 1960 according to a decision of the 15th session of the Indian Labour Conference held in July, 1957. The conference set the guidelines for a national wage policy by unanimously adopting the need based minimum wage formula. It recommended the setting up of wage boards in each industry as a device for implementing the formula (Ibid:89). The Central government appointed wage boards in 22 industries including tea plantations. The recommendations of this board came after five years and six months i.e. in April 1966. The board announced

two interim wage increments of 8 paise and 6 paise during this time. The final recommendations of the board was that the wages ^{would} be increased by 13 paise, 10 paise and 7 paise respectively for Male, Female and Children from 1, January, 1966. It also announced a further increase of 2 paise for Male and 1 paise for Female and Children from 1 April, 1966.

It is difficult to understand the basis of fixing the wages. The standard formula for fixing a need based wage was to take 3 units of consumption for every adult male worker, among other things. In the tea industry the units of consumption taken were 1.5 as the employers argued that employment was family-based. Though the board did not agreed totally with the argument of the employers, yet they fixed a wage which was based on 1.5 consumption unit.

The Second Minimum Wage Fixation Committee for Tea Plantations was appointed by the State Government in April, 1973. The Committee was a tripartite body, consisting of representatives from the employers' organisation, workers' organisations and presided over by the state labour commissioner as a government representative. The final recommendations of this committee was made in July, 1977. But, before it the committee had announced three interim increase of the wages. The wages at that time (i.e. in April 1973) was Rs.3 for male, Rs.2.83 for female and Rs.1.50 for children. From 1966 i.e. after the final recommendations of the Central Wage Board to 1975 the wages were increased by small amounts, either by tripartite settlements or through the workers' movements as in 1969. The Second Minimum Wage Fixation Committee just after its formation, announced an

interim increase of wages 15 paise for males and females and 7 paise for children. In 1974 Co-ordination Committee of Tea Plantation Workers (CCTPW) put a memorandum of demands before the Wage Fixation Committee, demanding a need based wage. The CCTPW demanded Rs.7.40 as daily wages. The daily wages at that time was Rs.3.15 more males. Initially the Consultative Committee of Plantation Association agreed to increase the daily wage by 7 paise only. The workers did not agree, they started demonstrations and token strikes. Then the Wage Fixation Committee, in July 1977, announced another interim increase of 25 paise. But this was mopped up by the compulsory deposit scheme introduced by the central government in that year. In 1975, there was an extra ordinary price hike in the tea market. The workers naturally put a strong demand for wage increase. After a prolonged discussions for a few months, the Wage Fixation Committee in December 1975 announced an interim increase of Rs.1.15 in two instalments; the first one by 60 paise from January, 1976. This increase was fairly large one compared to previous increments.

The committee finally recommended that daily wages were to increase by Rs.1.00 from August, 1977 and a further increase of another Rs.1.00 from July, 1978. The extra leaf price was increased to 10 paise per kg. from 7 paise per kg. This was the highest increase of daily wages of tea plantation workers ever since. The reasons for such increase were that the rise in the prices of tea had stabilised at a point which was more

than double the prices of the 1975 period. If there would be a decrease in tea prices, in future that would be minimum and permanent. Another reason was that, in June, 1977 the left front had come to power in the State which had a pro-labour policy.

The difference between wages of male and female workers was deemed abolished from December, 1976 when the Labour Ministry clarified that the Equal Remuneration Act applied to equal nature of work and not to equal volume of work.

The previous agreement expired on June 30, 1979. In April, 1980 a tripartite committee, constituting representatives of CCTPW* , CCPA* and the State Government decided to increase the wages by 90 paise annually for the next three years i.e. upto June 30, 1982 with retrospective effect from July, 1979. Thus the daily wage became Rs.9 per day from July, 1981.

(*C.C.T.P.W. - Coordination Committee for tea plantation workers

*C.C.P.A. - Consultative Committee for Planters' Association)

The next agreement was signed after one year of the previous agreement had expired i.e. in August, 1983 and the increase was reduced to 75 paise per annum for three years with retrospective effect from April, 1, 1983, not from July, 1982. This agreement expired on June 30, 1986 when the daily wage was Rs.11.25.

The latest agreement, at the time of my field work, was made in June, 1987. It was also signed after one year of the previous agreement had expired. It was agreed that daily wages would be increased by 85 paise per annum for the next three years. The retrospective effect of this agreement was from February 14, 1987, though it should have been from July 1, 1986. So, at the end of the three years i.e. in June, 1990 a worker would get Rs.13.80 per day. The doubly (Extra leaf price) would be increased to 19 paise per kg. from 16 paise per kg. In this settlement the workers' original demand was Rs.6.75 per annum while they got only 85 paise per annum.

Both these agreements had some things in common. Both came into operation a year after the previous agreements had expired. The three year wage agreement of came into force only in June, 1983. The last agreement expired on May 30, 1986 but the present agreement came into effect only from June, 1987. So, in both cases workers lost their enhanced wages for one year each. Both agreements have retrospective effect, but this does not cover the full year. The previous agreement was retrospective from April 1, 1983 not June 1, 1982 and the present one is from February 14, 1987 though it should have been from June 1, 1986. Further, the next annual increment was from June, 1, 1988 and not one year from the date from which the agreement was in effect (February 14, 1987).

In Terai the daily wage was 6 paise less than that of Dooars and in the gardens less than 500 acres the wage was 3 paise less in Dooars.

Other facilities

We have already mentioned that tea workers get wages in cash and kind. Beside the cash wages discussed above, they also get subsidised ration, free housing, free fuel, free tea, medical facilities and protective clothings etc.

Ration - In a workers' family, dependants upto 18 years get full ration and those between the ages 2 and 12 get half rations. The quota for an adult is 3 kg. 260 Gms. cereals (1kg. rice and 2 kg. 260 gm. wheat) at a rate of Rs.1.40 per kg. A child is entitled to 1.22 kg. (500 gm. rice and 720 gm. wheat) at the same rate.

The facility of subsidised ration came into existence because the Dooars is a deficit area in food grains. The rations given to the workers do not fully cover their weekly needs and they have to purchase food grains from the open market. The quality of ration was not always good. It was often found that the workers were demanding good quality of ration(chapter IV).

Housing - We have already discussed about it.

Firewood - A worker is entitled 2.5 pill firewood, free of cost per year. One pill is approximately equal to 12.5 maunds. This also does not fulfill the need of a worker's family. So, they have to collect firewood from nearby forest or from other sources, The supply of firewood was not also regular. Workers were found demanding for more quantity of regular supply of

firewood (chapter IV).

Tea - The management provides 275 gms. tea per month per worker, free of cost.

Medical facilities - The management is supposed to provide all medical facilities to the workers.

While the Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estates had hospitals with 22 and 12 beds respectively, the Lalfa Tea Estate had no bed. Even it did not have a permanent doctor, but only a part time doctor. The Angrabhasa Tea Estate had two doctors and Kurty had one. The number of other staffs (i.e. nurse, midwife, compounder, cook, sweeper chowkider etc.) in these three estates were four, nine and six respectively in Lalfa, Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estates. In no way, these were sufficient or adequate. The number of workers in Angrabhasa Tea Estate was 1853 and in Kurty Tea Estate it was 1461. The total population was 7020 (workers' population 6877) and 4172 (workers' population 4087) respectively in these two tea estates. The number of beds (only 22 and 12 beds) in the hospitals of these two tea estates were extremely less according to the need. Then we can not expect 24 hours service from a person. A hospital should have atleast 3 doctors and other staff accordingly. Moreover the supply of medicine in all these three estates was extremely poor. Thus the patients in these three tea estates had to depend either on the private medical practitioners or on the government hospital.

In the following table we have given the medical facilities available in the three gardens in 1987.

Table 5.4

MEDICAL FACILITIES IN THE THREE GARDENS

Name of the Garden	No. of workers	Total Population	No. of Hospital/Dispensary	No. of beds	No. of doctors	No. of Mid-wives	No. of Nurses	No. of Coma	No. of H.A.
LALFA T.E.	393	1114	1		*R-V 1	1	1	1	1
ANGRABHASA T.E.	1853	7020	1	22	2	1	1	1	1
KURTY T.E.	1461	4172	1	12	1	1	1	1	1

Protective clothings - The workers are given certain items for their type of work. These are umbrellas, Hessian (Jute) clothes to collect tea leaves, cotton blankets, Aprons to protect their clothes from tea bushes, Mask for spraying pesticides etc. But these are not always provided according to necessity.

*R = Residential

V = Visiting

SAMPLE COMPOSITION :

The respondents were five hundred in number - one hundred from Lalfa Tea Estate and two hundred each from Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estate as the latter two estates were larger than the former. Respondents were selected randomly, keeping some points in mind. Those are, the sample should cover members of all trade unions in these three gardens, more or less all ethnic groups, different ages and both sexes.

The description of the sample i.e. its Ethnic composition, Age, Sex, Places of origin, Places of birth, Religion, Years of service, Secondary occupations, Languages, Literacy etc. is given below.

Ethnic Composition :

The respondents belonged to different ethnic groups. They were Adibasis of Chotanagpur - Santhal Pargana region and its adjacent areas, Nepalis, Oriyas, Biharis and also Bhotias. The adivasis were locally known as Madesia which means people of my country. Externally they appeared to be homogeneous, but they were divided into different tribes. They are Oraon, Munda, Kheria, Baraik, Santhal, Mahali, Turi and so on. We did not break up them into different tribes, We have lumped them into a broad term. The Nepalis also were divided into various castes and tribes.

From the table below we have the break up of different ethnic groups among the respondents.

Table : 5.5ETHNIC GROUP (Percentage in brackets)

<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Lalfa T.E.</u>	<u>Angrabhasa T.E.</u>	<u>Kurty T.E.</u>	<u>Total</u>	
Adivasi	93(93)	170(85)	182(91)	445	(89)
Nepali	2(2)	26(13)	12(6)	40	(8)
Bihari	5(5)	2(1)	2(1)	9	(2)
Oriya	0	1(.5)	4(2)	5	(.8)
Bhotia	0	1(.5)	0	1	(.2)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500	(100)

Among the five hundred respondents, Adivasis were numerically dominant. They formed 89% (i.e. 445) of the total respondents. The Nepalis were 8% (i.e. 40) and the remaining 3% were Biharies, Oriya and Bhotia.

If we see the gardenwise break up, we will find that among the respondents, Adivasis were more or less equal in percentage in the three gardens. But the respondents of Nepali Origin differed. It was only 2% in Lalfa Tea Estate of Terai and 13% and 6% in Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estate of Dooars respectively. In Terai and also in Lalfa Tea Estate the ratio of workers of Nepali origin to the Adivasi workers was less than that of Dooars and also of Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estate. From our sample it may be taken that percentage of workers of Nepali origin in Kurty Tea Estate was less than that of Angrabhasa Tea Estate. But this was not true. Percentage of workers

belonged to Nepali origin was more or less same in the two tea estates of Dooars. The sample does not show the true picture here because during the time of my fieldwork Gorkhaland movement was in its full swing and the Metelli area was a hot belt of this movement. The Nepali workers of this area were afraid of any discussion with an outsider. That is why the Nepali workers of the Kurty Tea Estate were rarely found to be respondents.

The number of caste people of Bihar was highest in Lalfa Tea Estate, perhaps because Bihar is more adjacent to Terai than the Dooars.

Age Group

We have divided the respondents into five age groups such as children (12-16 yrs.), adolescents (16-18 yrs.) and three groups among the adult workers. They are given in the table below.

Table : 5.6

AGE GROUP (Percentage in brackets)

Age Group	Lalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
12-16 yrs	1(1)	0	1(.5)	2(.4)
16-18 yrs	2(2)	4(2)	2(1)	8(1.6)
18-30 yrs	45(45)	86(43)	87(43.5)	218(44)
30-40 yrs	27(27)	58(29)	51(25.5)	136(27)
40+ yrs	25(25)	52(26)	59(29.5)	136(27)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

Among the respondents only two were children and eight were adolescents. The remaining four hundred Ninety (i.e. 98%) were adults. The largest group of respondents (i.e. 43.6%) was of the age of 18-30 yrs. They were followed by the respondents in the 30-40 yrs. and 40 + yrs. age groups. Both of them formed 27.2% of the respondents. This table also shows that the majority (nearly 71%) of the workers were between 18-40 yrs., hence they were young. We have also seen that majority (nearly 75%) of the union leaders were also young (chapterVI). These may have some bearings on the trade union movement, social changes among the workers, which we would try to see in the following chapters.

The breakup of the three gardens shows that respondents of the different age groups were distributed more or less uniformly.

Sex Composition :

We have already mentioned that the employment in the tea estates were family based. The nature of work tea plantation is such that it required participation of female workers. Besides, there were some other reasons also for family based employment which have already been discussed earlier in the same chapter. The table below will show us the sex composition of the respondents.

Table 5.7SEX COMPOSITION (Percentage in brackets)

Sex	Lalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Male	66(66)	141(70.5)	136(68)	343(69)
Female	34(34)	59(29.5)	64(32)	157(31)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

Among the 500 respondents, 343 i.e. nearly 69% were males and the rest 157 i.e. a slight above 31% were females. The break-up of three gardens shows that except the Lalfa Tea Estate the percentage of female respondents in respect of male is lower than the actual percentage of male and female workers in the other two gardens i.e. in Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estate. This was because women workers generally felt shy to be respondents to a male investigator.

Place of Origin

Most of the workers have migrated either from the Chotonagpur-Santhal Pargana region and its adjacent areas or from Nepal. A few of them also came from the other places. We have already discussed (chapter IV) the factors responsible for this migration. From the Table below we will get the places of origin of the respondents.

Table 5.8

PLACE OF ORIGIN (Percentage in brackets)

Place	Lalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Chotanagpur- Santhal Pargana region.	88(88)	170(85)	181(90.5)	439(87.8)
Nepal	2(2)	24(12)	12(6)	38(7.6)
Darjeeling	0	1(.5)	0	1(.2)
Sikkim	0	1(.5)	0	1(.2)
Other districts of Bihar.	10(10)	1(.5)	0	11(2.2)
Orissa	0	2(1)	7(3.5)	9(1.8)
Bhutan	0	1(.5)	0	1(.2)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

The above table shows that nearly 88% of the respondents' places of origin were Chotanagpur-Santhal Pargana region, 8% came mainly from Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim and the remaining 2% from the other districts (except Chotanagpur - Santhal Pargana region) of Bihar and Orissa and only one from Bhutan.

The gardenwise breakup shows that the percentages of respondents born in Chotanagpur Santhal Pargana region were more or less evenly distributed in the three gardens but the

same of the respondents of Nepali origin and other districts of Bihar differed. We have already discussed the reasons of these in the same chapter (see-Ethnic Group).

Place of birth :

Now-a-days migration to the tea districts of North Bengal has been stopped. It is very rare now that a group of people migrate from the Chotanagpur - Santhal Pargana region or from Nepal for work in the plantations. The main reason is that the employment opportunities in the tea gardens have already been more or less saturated. So, it was expected that most of the respondents' places of birth would be the tea gardens of North Bengal as the table below shows.

Table 5.9

PLACE OF BIRTH

(Percentage in brackets)

<u>Place of Birth</u>	<u>Lalfa T.E.</u>	<u>Angrabhasa T.E.</u>	<u>Kurty T.E.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Place of origin	20(20)	17(8.5)	41(20.5)	78(15.6)
Same garden	60(60)	146(73)	112(56)	318(63.6)
Other garden	15(15)	32(16)	44(22)	91(18.2)
Busty	5(5)	5(2.5)	3(1.5)	13(2.6)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

Among the respondents, nearly 80% (i.e. 399 = 318 + 91) were born in the tea gardens (same gardens and other gardens), nearly 15.6% (i.e. 78) respondents were born in their places of origin and a few more than the 2% (i.e. 13) were born in the bustees (villages) of North Bengal.

Religion :

The workers were divided into different religions such as Samsar, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Islam. The traditional religion of the tribal workers was Samsar. It is a religion based on animistic beliefs. They believe that all or many selected physical phenomena - inanimate as well as animate, have an indwelling personalized spiritual being (such as soul) which is at least potentially separable from the physical object with which it is associated. But while living in a area for years which is surrounded by Hindu people some Hindu rituals and religious practices crept among the tribals; most of these tribal workers (non-christian tribals) claimed themselves as Hindus. Besides the above reason, the other reason perhaps was to elevate their status as they had a concept that Hindu religion was superior to their traditional religion. However, in the prolonged discussions with them, they admitted that they were Samsars. The table below will show the religions of the respondents.

Table 5.10

RELIGION(Percentage in brackets)

Religion	Kalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Hindu	4(4)	20(10)	36(18)	60(12)
Samsar	89(89)	154(77)	154(78)	399(80)
Christian	6(3)	15(7.5)	7(3.5)	28(5.6)
Budhist	0	11(3.5)	0	11(2)
Islam	1(1)	0	1(.5)	2(.4)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

From the above table it is found that nearly 80% (i.e. 399) of the respondents were Samsars, 12% (i.e. 60) were Hindus, 5.6% (i.e. 28) were Christians, a little above the 2% (i.e. 11) were Bushists and only 2 were Muslims.

The Hindus were mainly Nepaleese and some lower castes migrants of Orissa and Bihar. All the Samsars were also adivasis. The Budhists were Nepaleese and Bhotia and the Muslims were Biharies.

Drastic changes have taken place in the religious life of these people. The work schedule of tea plantation gives little scope for observing all traditional religious practices and festivals in full length. Besides, living side by side with a

number of different ethnic groups having different cultural traditions, the tea garden workers had to give up some of their religious practices like ancestor worship, household worship, family festivals etc. While giving up some of these religious practices they used to perform worships like Gram Puja, Fagua etc., where people of all ethnic groups and religions participated. The workers also organise Durga Puja, Biswakarma Puja, Saraswati Puja in the tea gardens with the staff members of the tea gardens,

Primary Occupation (Daily rated worker and sub-staff) :

Earlier we have discussed about the Daily rated workers and that the sub-staff play important roles both in the sectors of production and union activities. Nearly half of the union leaders are sub-staff (chapter VIII).

In the work organisation sub-staff is the link between the management and the daily rated workers. Both the sub-staff and daily rated category of workers belonged to same ethnic groups.

Among the respondents about 88% (i.e. 439) were daily rated workers and the remaining about 12% (i.e. 61) were sub-staff. The table below give us the breakup.

Table 5.11

DAILY RATED WORKERS AND SUB-STAFF (Percentage in brackets)

Daily Rated workers	Lalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Daily Rated workers	94(94)	169(84.5)	176(88)	439(88)
Sub-staff	6(6)	31(15.5)	24(12)	61(12)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

Years of service :

In tea plantation a person could work after attaining 12 years of age. The retirement age is 58 yrs. So, the years of service of the respondents may vary from less than 1 year to the maximum 46 years. The following table will give us the break up of the years of service of the respondents.

Table 5.12

YEARS OF SERVICE

(Percentage in brackets)

Years	Lalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
1 to 5	32(32)	37(18.5)	36(18)	105(21)
5 to 10	13(13)	39(19.5)	39(19.5)	91(18)
10 to 15	21(21)	40(20)	39(19.5)	100(20)
15 to 20	15(15)	28(14)	27(13.5)	70(14)
20 +	19(19)	56(28)	59(29.5)	94(19)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

We have seen earlier that about 71% of the respondents were young (between 18 to 40 yrs.). Hence a majority (67.2%) of the respondents' years of service varies between less than one to 15 year.

Secondary Occupation :

The workers of the tea gardens often have to depend on subsidiary occupations to supplement their low wages. Cultivation is the most lucrative secondary occupation among the workers as most of the workers have agricultural background and possession of land also elevate their status in their society. In the tea gardens, where there was surplus land, it was generally distributed among the workers for cultivation. The affluent workers sometimes also purchase land in the adjacent areas of the gardens. Besides land, a very few of them were also engaged in petty trades or services like small shops (pan-bidi etc.), hariya (Rice beer), video, tailoring etc. The following table will show us the number of respondents engaged in secondary occupation and the type of occupations.

Table 5.13
SECONDARY OCCUPATION
(Percentage in brackets)

Type of occupation	Lalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Cultivation	25(25)	43(21.5)	37(18.5)	105(21)
Petty Trade/ Services		4(2)	2(1)	6(1.2)
Cultivation and Petty Trade	1(1)	3(1.5)		4(.8)
Nil	74(74)	150(75)	161(80.5)	385(77)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

Among the respondents 23% (i.e. 115) had secondary occupations. Of them more than 91% (i.e. 105) were engaged only in cultivation, only 4 were engaged both in cultivation and petty trade and only 6 respondents were doing petty trade, services etc.

Again, we can see from the above fact that in Lalfa Tea Estate cultivation as a secondary occupation was highest (i.e. 25%) among the three tea estate, followed by Angrabhasa Tea Estate (21.5%) and Kurty Tea Estate (18.5%). This was due to that land availability for cultivation was highest in Lalfa Tea Estate. Generally, the proposed tea land are given to the workers for cultivation. In the Lalfa Tea Estate in respect to the number of workers proposed tea land was highest following by Angrabhasa and Kurty Tea Estate (Please see Description of the three tea estates, chapter III). Petty trade and services even including petty trade along with cultivation as secondary occupation was only 2% (i.e. 10). Among this only one worker was in Lalfa Tea Estate and other six workers in Angrabhasa and the remaining two workers in Kurty Tea Estate. There was little scope for trade or services in the adjacent area of Lalfa Tea Estate. While Angrabhasa Tea Estate is situated just beside the Birpara town which is a densely populated area and a trade centre. In case of Kurty Tea Estate, the adjacent area is Metelli which is a less populated area than Birpara and also not an important trade centre as Birpara. Besides, the workers

were more interested in cultivation as they were familiar with its management.

A majority of the workers did not have any secondary occupation. With this low wage it was not possible for them to invest money for buying land, setting up of shops etc.

Language :

The lingua franca of workers of all ethnic groups was Sadri. Sadri is a mixture of tribal dialects and Hindi. It is even spoken by the adibasis of Chotanagpur. Besides, every tribe had their own language or dialect. The Oraons had Kurukh a language belonging to the Dravidian family. The Mundas spoke Mundari, a language of the Kolarian group. The other tribes such as, Kharia, Turi, Mahali, Baraik etc. spoke languages of the same group (E.T. Datton : 1972). Grierson referred to this group as Kherwari (Grierson 1906:7). But only the Oraons could retain their mother tongue in the tea gardens, perhaps because they formed over half of the adivasi population and their language belonged to a distinct family than the others. The Mundas, though they have forgotten their own language, were aware of it. All other tribes mostly have totally forgotten their languages. Now, Sadri have become their mother tongues also. The Nepalees had their own language Nepali. It is also the lingua franca of different castes and tribes of this group. They could retain the use of their language. The workers of other ethnic groups such as Biharies, Oriyas, Tanti* etc. had their own.

mother tongues like Hindi, Maithali, Oriya, Tanti etc.

*(In Kurty tea estate there was a line called Tanti line. The inhabitants of this line were Tantis. They came from Bihar. They called their mother tongue as Tanti.)

We will get a picture of different mother tongues/ dialects of the workers as staged in the table below.

Table 5.14

MOTHER TONGUE
(Percentage in brackets)

Name of Mother Tongue/ Dialect	Lalfa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Kuruk	19(19)	118(58)	83(41.5)	220(44)
Sadri	43(43)	35(17.5)	71(35.5)	149(29.8)
Mundari	23(23)	11(5.5)	6(3)	40(8)
Kalandi	0	0	4(2)	4(8)
Tanti	0	0	12(6)	12(2.4)
Kheriya	8(8)	5(2.5)	3(1.5)	16(3.2)
Maithali	3(3)	0	0	3(.6)
Hindi	2(2)	2(1)	2(1)	6(1.2)
Oriya	0	2(1)	7(3.5)	9(1.8)
Nepali	2(2)	26(13)	12(6)	40(8)
Bhotia	0	1(1)	0	1(.2)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

The table shows that Kuruk was the mother tongue of 44% (i.e. 220) respondents. Nearly 30% (i.e. 149) respondents' mother tongue was Sadri, followed by Mundari and Nepali, which are the Mother tongue of 8% (i.e. 40) of the respondents, each. The remaining 10% of the respondents included Kheriya, Tanti, Oriya, Hindi, Kalandi and Bhotia.

Literacy :

Here literate were those who at least could sign their names. According to this definition nearly 50% (i.e. 246) respondents were literates. Among the literates 35.4% (i.e. 177 persons) had formal education and the remaining 13.8% (i.e. 69 persons) could sign their names only, but did not have any formal education. The literacy rate among the respondents was rather high than the state average (40.94% - 1981). The probable reasons were i) all these three tea gardens had primary schools, though not sufficiently equipped, ii) in an organised sector, workers had to maintain some official formalities. However, higher education among them was rare. Only 5 respondents had passed Madhyamik (class 10) and 1 read upto class XII. No one was graduate among them. A little over 18% (i.e. 92) respondents read upto primary level and nearly 18% (i.e. 79) had crossed the primary level but could not cross the Madhyamik level. Again, excluding those who only could sign their names the percentage of literates was only 35.4%. This was too low as earlier we have seen that most of the respondents

were young. Regular classes were not taken in primary schools of these gardens, all these schools did not have separate class rooms for separate classes, all class rooms did not have even blackboards. The condition of the school building was not also good. There was no arrangement for mid-day tiffin in these schools to encourage students to attend classes. Moreover, the stratification in the work organisation in the tea plantation was such that it was difficult for educated tribal youth to get employment in the white collar category as vacancies here were reserved for the children of those already in these categories. They naturally did not feel encouraged to take higher education, though Madhyamik and Higher secondary schools were situated close to two of the gardens. Besides, the trade unions did not show sufficient interest on this aspect. They did not encourage workers to send their children to the schools. Demand for development of schools was included in the charter of demands, but no union bothered to press for it during the conciliations and they did not give any special effort to encourage the spread of education.

The low rate of literacy, particularly the low rate of higher education had some bearings on the trade union movements. Except for some small things the workers had to wait for the outsider leaders who were more educated. They even could not write answers to the charge sheets. Low education made difficult for them to understand the labour laws. Ultimately they became more and more dependable on the outside leaders.

Low education was also a barrier to grow awareness among the workers. They could not mix up properly with the neighbouring (outside the tea gardens) societies. Mixing with the neighbouring societies might help to exchange views.

In this respect, the management had always an edge over the workers. The workers felt hesitated while talking with the management regarding any bargaining etc. As we have earlier mentioned that the workers faced difficulties in understanding the labour laws and they themselves could not write the answers of these charge sheets. All these made them more submissive to the management. The management took these advantages.

The management's apathy to the development of education among the workers and on the otherhand unions' less interest about it, ultimately hampered the growth of trade union movement. The table below will show us the level of literacy of the workers.

Table 5.15

LEVEL OF LITERACY

(Percentage in brackets)

Level of literacy	Lalpa T.E.	Angrabhasa T.E.	Kurty T.E.	Total
Can sign	10(10)	26(13)	33(16.5)	69(13.8)
Primary	16(16)	42(21)	34(17)	92(18.4)
V to IX	16(16)	29(14.5)	34(17)	79(15.8)
S.F.	1(1)	2(1)	2(1)	5(1)
XI to XII	0	0	1(.5)	1(.2)
Graduate	0	0	0	0
Illiterate	57(57)	101(50.5)	96(48)	254(50.8)
	100(100)	200(100)	200(100)	500(100)

CONCLUSION :

From the general description of the labour force of the three tea gardens discussed above we find that the workers have migrated from the tribal belt of Bihar and its adjacent areas and Nepal. The migration was family based. The local people like Mech, Dhimal, Robha, Rajbansis, Toto etc. would rarely be found as plantation labourers.

The workers inspite of their economic homogeneity, are divided into different ethnic groups and religions. They were Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Baraik, Mahali and of Nepali origins etc. and their religions were Samsar, Hindu, Christian, Buddhism

and Islam. Each ethnic group has its own dialect or mother tongue, though their lingua franca is Sadri.

Though our sample shows that the rate of literacy among them is about 50% but 1991 census data states that it is only 21.52% in the tea gardens of Dooars (STATESMAN:FEB.4, 92). The same for the tea gardens in Terai is not available. But a survey on the composition of labour force in the tea gardens of Terai was done in 1975 by the then S.D.O. of Siliguri Sub-division shows that only 14% workers were literates in the tea plantation of Terai (Dasgupta 1988:17).

The condition of their existence have changed to some extent, but not according to expectations. They are still the lowest paid workers among the organised sectors. They work throughout under sun and in the rain in the rainy season. The condition and standard of their houses are also bad.

The houses are overcrowded without any sanitation, most of them are deprived of sunlight and no proper maintenance of the houses have been done by the management. The medical facilities are barely minimum. The opportunities of subsidiary occupation are also limited. They do not have surplus money to invest for land or for any trade.

Their isolation from the outside world is not so much as it was in the post independence period. They are now more open to the outside world. Better communication with the development of roads, establishment of schools

in the tea gardens and the formations of trade unions help to break the former isolation, but still they are comparatively isolated, uneducated, ignorant at the end of this 20th century. The interaction between the tribal societies of tea gardens and the neighbouring (outside the tea gardens) Bengali societies is not frequent and large scale. The garden workers use to come to the markets for different purposes, but it is rarely found that they pay any social visit to the adjacent societies. The rate of literacy as well as the level of education is extremely poor. This is also a barrier for development of trade union movements.

Given the background of the workers let us examine the impact of trade unions on their life in the next three chapters.