

Living in the Edge: Crisis in Indian Tea Industry and Social Deprivation of Tea Garden Workers in Dooars Region of India

Authors : Saraswati Kerketta

Abstract : Tea industry is one of the oldest organised sector of India. It employs roughly 1.5 million people directly. Since the last decade Indian tea industry, especially in the northern region is experiencing worst crisis in the post-independence period. Due to many reason the prices of tea show steady decline. The workers are paid one of the lowest wage in tea industry in the world (1.5\$ a day) below the UN's \$2 a day for extreme poverty. The workers rely on addition benefits from plantation which includes food, housing and medical facilities. These have been effective means of enslavement of generations of labourers by the owners. There is hardly any change in the tea estates where the owners determine the fate of workers. When the tea garden is abandoned or is closed all the facilities disappear immediately. The workers are the descendants of tribes from central India also known as 'tea tribes'. Alienated from their native place, the geographical and social isolation compounded their vulnerability of these people. The economy of the region being totally dependent on tea has resulted in absolute unemployment for the workers of these tea gardens. With no other livelihood and no land to grow food, thousands of workers faced hunger and starvation. The Plantation Labour Act which ensures the decent working and living condition is violated continuously. The labours are forced to migrate and are also exposed to the risk of human trafficking. Those who are left behind suffers from starvation, malnutrition and disease. The condition in the sick tea plantation is no better. Wage are not paid regularly, subsidised food, fuel are also not supplied properly. Health care facilities are in very bad shape. Objectives: • To study the socio-cultural and demographic characteristics of the tea garden labourers in the study area. • To examine the social situation of workers in sick estates in dooars region. • To assess the magnitude of deprivation the impact of economic crisis on abandoned and closed tea estates in the region. Data Base: The study is based on data collected from field survey. Methods: Quantative: Cross-Tabulation, Regression analysis. Qualitative: Household Survey, Focussed Group Discussion, In-depth interview of key informants. Findings: Purchasing power parity has declined since in last three decades. There has been many fold increase in migration. Males migrates long distance towards central and west and south India. Females and children migrates both long and short distance. No one has reported to migrate back to the place of origin of their ancestors. Migrant males work mostly as construction labourers and as factory workers whereas females and children work as domestic help and construction labourers. In about 37 cases either they haven't contacted their families in last six months or are not traceable. The families with single earning members are more likely to migrate. Burden of disease and the duration of sickness, abandonment and closure of plantation are closely related. Death tolls are likely to rise 1.5 times in sick tea gardens and three times in closed tea estates. Sixty percent of the people are malnourished in the sick tea gardens and more than eighty five per cent in abandoned and sick tea gardens.

Keywords : migration, trafficking, starvation death, tea garden workers

Conference Title : ICPD 2015 : International Conference on Population and Development

Conference Location : Montreal, Canada

Conference Dates : May 11-12, 2015