

Let Chai be Sweeter

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Abstract—Tea industry in India which is said to have been in crisis since the 1990s has been a matter of great concern for many decades. One of the manifestations of this crisis has been a fall in the labour productivity which showed a negative growth rate during the crisis. This can be attributed to the disincentives provided by the employers to the workers. The paper attempts to highlight the socio economic condition of the workers and how tea has been a sector where several generations of workers have been kept in systematic poverty despite the presence of unions. It highlights how the employers have been successful in keeping the wages of the workers abysmally low even over six decades of legislative provisions. Infact the percentage change in the wage rate in 1974 and 1992 has been negative with -37.69% and -7.1 % respectively. The workers are educationally lagging behind, health facilities are not adequate and safety measures are lacking. The paper argues that if the workers are provided with good incentives such as an increase in the wages and provision of health, housing, water and sanitation facilities then the labour productivity can be increased. Furthermore, integration of the tea estates with the rest of the city/town and building ecotourism in and around the tea estate can help build a bridge between the tea workers and the mainstream. This symbiosis would help the tea workers gain knowledge and awareness of their rights and at the same time people from the cities would get a chance to understand the exploitative realities behind their cup of tea.

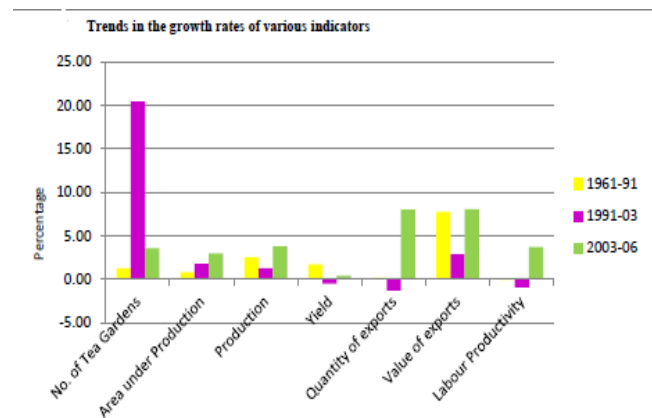
1. INTRODUCTION

The tea industry is said to be one of the most important contributors in the history of development of the economy of India through exports, employment and income. This industry is said to have been in crisis since the 1990s (Mishra, Upadhyay and Sarma 2012: 1). Manifestations of the crisis are stagnated production, fall in the exports and closing down of tea gardens. Different groups of people have given different reasons for the crisis. For example, the planters/employers argued that the wages of the workers were high and since the tea industry was a labour intensive industry, high labour costs led to its failure in India (Sivaram 2000; Bhowmik 2002; Mishra et al. 2012). Others blame the low productivity, inability to expand the area under tea and so on (Ibid). As a result of the crisis and the closing down of the tea gardens, the livelihoods of the workers in these plantations were threatened to such an extent that today hundreds of workers have lost their lives due to mass starvation (One World South Asia 2004).

The economic policies of 1991 which started the deregulation and liberalisation of the Indian economy has been highly appreciated for the country's growth performance. Though the overall performance of the economy has been appreciable, the reforms have failed to have its positive impacts in the case of agriculture as the productivity growth rate started declining from the 1990s which led to an agrarian crisis in the poorer areas of the country (Mishra et al. 2012).

2. PERFORMANCE OF THE TEA INDUSTRY IN INDIA POST INDEPENDENCE

The study period of the tea industry in India post independence can be divided into the following periods : (i) Pre Crisis (1961-1991), (ii) Period of Crisis (1991-2003) and (iii) Post Crisis (2003-06). Fig. 1 shows the trend in the growth rates of various indicators. It can be observed that apart from the area under cultivation and the number of tea gardens, all the other indicators have had a decline in their growth rates in the period 1991-03 which is marked as the Period of Crisis. The rise in the number of gardens and the area under tea cultivation is due to the entry of small growers which was at a high scale during this period especially in the state of Assam. The fall in the exports can be attributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union who was the bulk importer of Indian tea.



Source: Tea Board of India.

Fig. 1: Trends in the growth rates of various indicators.

As far as production of tea in India is concerned, the decline is because of the fall in the yield of the tea bushes in India which is because of the ageing of bushes. It has been found out that the bushes has its maximum yield at the age group of 15-30 years. Unfortunately, India has the maximum number of tea bushes which are more than 50 years of age. This has obviously led to a decline in the yield and hence the production of tea. Various developmental strategies have been carried out, such as the introduction of new technologies or setting up of numerous research institutes solely focused on tea. The point that is missed out is that no matter how advanced the technology is or how improved and high yielding fertilizers are used, as long as the bushes are old, it will not have any positive impact. There has been massive nitrogen fertilizer application in tea plantations which ought to result in improved productivity per unit area, but older tea plantations do not respond to nitrogen fertilizers.

Labour productivity is another variable which shows a negative growth rate and which is of crucial importance. It can be defined as the output produced by each labour which is very low in the Pre Crisis period as well as the Crisis Period. There can be a number of reasons for the low productivity such as low wages, malnutrition and so on but most importantly, if the yield of the bushes itself is declining then the labourers cannot help but produce less.

Along with the other variables, there seem to have been an improvement in the labour productivity as well in the Post Crisis Period. The improvement in the industry was brought about through many developmental strategies. During the Eight Plan and the Ninth Plan, high priority was accorded to the scientific management of small tea gardens, replanting of old and uneconomic tea bushes by high yielding planting material, reduction in regional disparity in tea productivity, extension of tea cultivation in traditional and non-traditional areas through encouragement at family tea gardens, tea cooperatives and group farming system and popularization of Indian tea in the global market (Karmakar and Banerjee 2005). All these have had positive impacts on the industry which can be seen in Fig. 1 in 2003-06 period. If such strategies could have a positive impact on the performance of the industry then why are the labourers still dying of mass starvation?

One World Asia report claimed that more than 800 workers died of starvation over a three-year period in West Bengal alone as a result of plantation closures. "In 1988, around 600 people died in the tea gardens of Assam" (Lahiri, S. 2000). Similarly, 240 workers died of starvation between March 2002 and February 2003 (Human Rights Law Network 2009). These alarming Fig. s lead us to examine the socio economic condition of the labourers and the reason behind it which is dealt in the next section.

3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE TEA GARDEN LABOURERS

-Pick a kilogram more than 24 kgs and the workers get an extra rupee per kg.

-Pick a kilogram over 30 kgs and the management pays the workers Rs.1.50 for every extra kg.

-Over 35 kgs it is Rs.1.75 extra per kg.

-More importantly, a worker gets penalized if she plucks 5 kgs below the stipulated amount.

-“A Tea Plantation Worker’s Story”, 2013.

Sipping over a cup of tea in a bungalow and admiring the lush green tea gardens with a beam of sunlight streaming through the peaks of the mountains might just be the perfect holiday destination but what about giving a thought to the labour and the effort applied in that cup of tea? The story of a tea worker is not all that lush green. The tea Industry remains one of the largest employers of workers in India. It is estimated that almost 50% of the workers are women. The majority of the workers work as wage labourers on the plantations, also known as estates; there are also farmers who produce tea leaves on small pieces of land. Tea plantations inherently have been exploitative right from their inception in the colonial times. Like other plantations cultivating rubber, sugar, etc. they were created to extract the maximum from the workers, as a part of the colonial economy. The situation has not changed even after more than 65 years of Indian independence.

History of the socio economic conditions of the tea workers shows that the social status has always been ignored for generations. The abusive conditions are rooted in the colonial origins of the plantation life and this clearly reflects the extreme hierarchical social structure, the compensation scheme and the ruthless management which exercises excessive power. The hierarchical social structure has not been able to be broken down as most of the tea workers come from the marginalized communities. Those of Assam and West Bengal come from the Adivasi and Dalit communities and hence continue to remain in the lower strata of the social structure as well as the lowest employment positions in the tea industry even till today.

In January 2014, the Columbia Law School’s Human Rights Institute published a report – “The More Things Change.... The World Bank, Tata and Enduring Abuses on India’s tea Plantations” which showed how poor the condition of the tea workers were in India, particularly in Assam. The report alleged that the tea workers were bullied over sick leave, denied free health care and the living conditions on the plantations presented some of the most conspicuous violations of Indian law.

Another study shows that the literacy rates of the workers were very low and there was non – availability of any other

livelihood in the region which ensured that the children of the plantation workers were left with no other option than to work on the plantations under very poor conditions. "There was no escape from the vicious circle of the highest level of exploitation" (Hazarika 2011). The workers were devoid of even basic amenities such as safe drinking water which often results in the spread of diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera and other water borne diseases. Since it was mostly the women who were exposed to the fields for plucking, unfortunately they also had to bear the brunt as they were exposed to a variety of occupational health and safety hazards such as respiratory problems, various skin lesions, diarrhoea, back pain, cholera and many more. Though the country provides the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, the socio-economic conditions of the workers have not improved. Infact it has deteriorated.

It is the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) of 1951 which covers the tea workers in India and regulates the working and living conditions of the workers. The PLA does not only prescribe standards for housing, healthcare, subsidized food, crèches, sanitation and education but it also regulates conditions at the workplace such as maximum working hours, overtime payments, child labour, paid leave, sickness and maternity benefits. Apart from providing social benefits, the Plantations labour Act of 1951 also imposes certain limits on the employers regarding their control over the workers.

The Plantations Labour Act (PLA), adopted soon after independence, created a formal legal structure for the system that existed on the plantations (PLA amended 2010). The main objective of introducing this Act was to harmonize the 'social benefits' into the daily lives of the tea workers through the practices and customs of the employers and to minimize the then existing problems related to the conditions of the labourers. As a result the PLA laid down certain minimum standards for the benefits/facilities provided by the employers such as clinics, crèches, schools and housing. As already mentioned above, the Act also provided certain limits to control the power of the management on the workers. One such example can be of the removal of the control of the employers over public access to the areas where the workers lived commonly known as the "labour lines". This sort of marked a great change in the lives of the workers as prior to this the worker's entry and exit was very restricted. They were neither allowed to bring visitors to their place of dwelling nor their own relatives. However, it is important to note here that the responsibility of the State to provide basic necessities such as safe drinking water were smoothly passed on the employers' shoulders who hardly incurred this expenditure thinking that it was the duty of the State to provide such facilities. Some companies/employers felt that though the PLA has been in existence, it is the implementation that is lacking due to "inadequate, understaffed and weak state enforcement, on the one hand, and politically compromised company unions on the other" (World Bank 2014).

Unlike the Factories Act, the Plantations Act did not provide any guidance for occupational safety in the plantations until 2010. Moreover, everyone who is directly or indirectly involved in the tea industry or its studies knows very well that the Plantation Act has not been enforced properly. "Scholars like Virginius Xaxa, who grew up on what is now an APPL plantation (Amalgamated Plantations Pvt Ltd), describe vast gaps in compliance, many of which have only grown larger over time" (Ibid). Not only him but several studies on the tea garden workers show non compliance of the PLA even in areas such as housing, water, sanitation, education and health care. Sharit Bhowmick(2002) who has done massive research on tea gardens in India also agrees with the fact that the main problem lies in the proper enforcement of the laws under the PLA. Similarly, in 2006 a survey was conducted in Dibrugarh, Assam which reported widespread malnutrition whereby 59.9% of preschool children, 73.1% of women and 65.7% of men were underweight ((Medhi et al. 2006). In addition, 72% of the total workers were anemic and 13% of the children who were below the age of five suffered from respiratory problems (Ibid).

"Dilapidated and overcrowded houses are common, as are overflowing latrines, poorly stocked medical facilities, and abandoned crèches. Some of the most damning evidence about the implementation of the PLA, however, comes not from observations on specific plantations, but from governmental surveys of the sector. Presumably, after 60 years of guaranteed health care, housing, sanitation and food support in a stable population, social indicators should be positive. But the opposite is true: the surveys reveal that tea plantation workers are an impoverished community living on the margins."

–(World Bank 2014)

The Ministry of Labour and Employment published a report on the socio economic conditions of the tea garden workers (women) in 2008-09. According to this report, the all India Fig. showed that only 86 % of the total workers had been provided free houses by the employers. Leaky roofs, cracked walls and crumbling infrastructure are usually common sights in the plantations. Majority of the workers live in independent houses with quite a few in chawls and hutment. To make matters worse, 64.4% are semi pucca houses and 28.6% are still katcha houses. It is only 6.9% which is pucca. This shows how the house of a worker which is supposed to be the safest place is not safe at all. For example, in case of Assam, 46.8% is katcha and 45.1% is semi pucca which can be easily damaged or washed off during seasons of heavy monsoon with the tides of Brahmaputra raging high. The basic necessities that are needed in a house are also not available. The workers still have to depend upon firewood for cooking and kerosene oil as a source of lighting even in the 21st century.

Section 9 of the Plantations Labour Act provides clean and sufficient latrines and urinals for males and females separately

and this too is not provided. Instead there are open cess pools which are just a few steps away from the main door of the house which often remain clogged. Only 10.6% of the units provide urinal and latrine facilities at the workplace. The rest of the 89.4% do not provide any such facilities which obviously results in the workers to make their own arrangements such as digging cesspools or walking into the jungle for almost half a mile with the paths lined with human waste or by simply placing a thin plank across the opening of a foothold. It is shocking to know that the highest percentage of units providing urinal and latrine facilities is just 20% (Tamil Nadu) followed by 16.7% (West Bengal) and 8.3% (Assam). Making the scenario even worse, not even 1% of the plantations provide any of the sanitation facilities.

Drinking water and health services which are the most basic necessities are also deprived of. It is only in the case of Assam where all the plantations provide drinking water but on the other hand there are states such as Tamil Nadu where only 30% of the units provide drinking water to its workers.

In repetition to what has already been said earlier, the above Fig. 2 are of the plantations that are open. The crisis in the tea industry started recovering from 2003 onwards but the condition of the workers has not improved. Rather it has deteriorated and if this is the case of those still working in the plantations which are running then one can well imagine the state of those who have been unemployed. The present condition of the workers is not only because of the mischievous employers not adhering to the laws but also because of the neglect on the part of the Government.

One of the main reasons as to why the above socio economic indicators show such poor living and working conditions of the tea workers and no improvement at all is due to the lack of education among the workers. The educational level of the women workers is very low with only 66.2% of the workers as illiterate. Only 10.7% of the workers are educated till primary level, 9.4% till middle school and 5.4% till the higher secondary level. Assam has the highest level of illiterate workers which is 83.5% and Tamil Nadu and Kerala have the highest percentage of literate workers at 75.4% and 74.4% respectively. The employers would not want their workers and their children to be well educated because being educated would mean being aware of their rights and duties. This would lead to no more suppression of the workers by the employers.

The trade unions are not very active and at the same time they do not take much interest in the welfare of the people. Adding fuel to the fire, the workers are also not very interested in the activities of the union or being a part of it and some of them even fail to understand the role of the unions. Hence they are more loyal to the management than to the unions. The unions only thrive on political considerations instead of thriving on a contented, satisfied, self – dependent and assertive work force Bansal (2005). Therefore, there is a need to educate the workers and make them aware of all the schemes and their proper functioning.

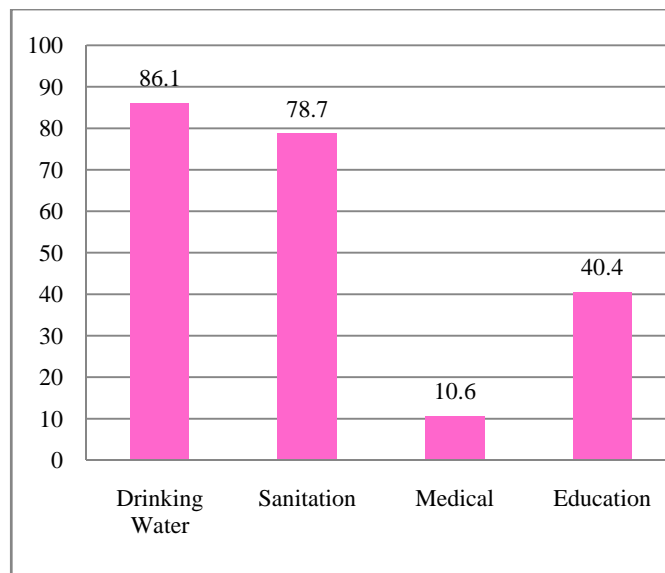


Fig. 2: % of units providing the facilities in all the tea plantations in India 2008-09. Source: Compiled from GOI (2008-09)

The above Fig. captures the percentage of units that provide the basic facilities to its workers. The fact that only 10.6% of the units provide medical facilities explains the massive rise in the death rate of the workers.

3.1 Wages

“The wages of tea workers are the lowest among the so – called organised sectors.”

–Gothoskar (2012).

The wages of the tea garden labourers has been an ongoing debate for a long time now. While the employees on one hand express their dissatisfaction about their dimly low wages, employers on the other hand argue that the wages are already high and make up for a large part of the production cost. Usually, it is the ‘legacy of colonial administration’ along with the ‘colonial mentality of the tea sector’ which are blamed and used as an excuse for the poor state of the tea industry. On similar lines one can say that it is because of the kind of relationship between the employers and the various tea industry organisations like the Indian Tea Association and the United Planters’ Association of Southern India (UPASI) which has always resulted in the ‘continual disadvantage of the workers in the plantations’ (Gothoskar 2012). All the settlements between the trade unions and the employers/government, in a way, act as a barrier when it comes to the minimum improvement of the situation of the workers. A history of all the tripartite agreements clearly shows that the employers and the state have been effectively arm-twisting the unions after which the agreement which is made after every three years is treated like a ‘holy document’. Not much intervention of the state is seen in this regard which

is evident from the fact that the tea industry has not even been included in the schedule of employment in the Minimum Wages Act till now. Numerous times the workers have agitated against the low wages by carrying out protest rallies and strikes but the state government somehow manages to get them back to work without even fulfilling one percent of their demands.

Initially, there was a great deal of family labour. It was decided in the 15th session of the Indian Labour Conference in 1957 that the formula to fix the minimum wages for an adult worker should be based on the costs of three units of consumption. The employers in the tea industry argued that since employment was family based, the ratio of 1:3 was too high and only 1.5 units of consumption should be taken into account for fixing minimum wages Bhowmik (1997). The Royal Commission of Labour in India soon noted that the employment of family members did not justify the extent of low wages in the tea industry. In addition, in 1966, the Central Wage Board for the Tea Plantation Industry found the employers' argument baseless as the extent of family employment was not as much as in the earlier days (Ibid).

At present India still follows the "need-based minimum wage" according to which the wage of an earner should be sufficient to support atleast two adults and two children. Yet again the planters have continued to half this amount only in the tea sector on the simple basis that in case of the tea sector it is both, the men and the women from the same family who work and therefore all the households have two earners. There is an absence of wage competition within or among the plantations.

Among all the occupations involved in the tea industry, plantation labourers are the least paid and women form the majority of it. It was infact believed that this occupation was especially paid low only because it was the women who were engaged. The planters were so successful in exploiting them that sometimes their wages were even lower than what children earned.

Throughout the years, the planters along with the unions and the government have been fixing the wages of the workers according to their whims and fancies. This can be seen in the fluctuations of the real wage rate in Fig. 3.1. In 1974 there was a huge drop in the percentage change in the real wage rate from 0.22% to -37.69% which increased to 27.05% in 1985. Unfortunately, in 1992 the percentage change in the real wage rate once again fell to -7.1% after which it increased to just 4.88% in 2004. This trend makes wages the single most concern in the study of the tea garden labourers.

Historically, it is evident that the issue of wages of the tea garden workers has been neglected and not given much importance. The Committees take so much time to decide the wage rates and in the end increase the wages by an insignificant percentage. For example, The Minimum Wages Advisory Committee for Tea Plantations was appointed in March 1950. The central idea of the Committee was that the

minimum wage should not only be equal to the subsistence wage but a little more than that so that the worker can also afford other facilities like health and education with that wage. It took almost two years for the Committee to think over it and decide the wage rate at Rs.1.19 for males and Rs 1.06 for females in Dooars area in West Bengal. This was followed by an increase of 18 paise in 1955 and another increase of 13 paise in 1959. In 1960, the Central Wage Board for Tea Plantation Industry was appointed by the Central Government which took five years and four months to make its recommendations- the longest time taken by any wage board so far. Finally the Board announced in 1966 that the wages of males would increase by 15 paise and that of females by 13 paise respectively.

This increase in the wages however was not enough to even meet the cost of living. In West Bengal, the increase in the daily wages of the tea garden workers was just 8 paise annually. This was so because Assam and West Bengal did not have a minimum wage rate. The report of the Central Wage Board for Tea Plantation Industry, New Delhi, 1966, p 68 states the following: "The Board was not in a position to recommend wages in keeping with the present cost of living and in terms of the need-based wage formula of the 15th Indian Labour Conference" as this would result in a sudden jump in wages.

The recovery of the real wages in 1985 whose percentage change was now 27% from -37.69% can be attributed to the 1975 boom in tea when prices in the auctions tripled. Coupled with this, the Second Minimum Wages Committee also finalised its recommendations in August 1977 where a few interim increments were granted during its four year term. As already mentioned, the period was followed by the 1975 boom in the tea prices which led to increments in the wages which were higher than any other increment.

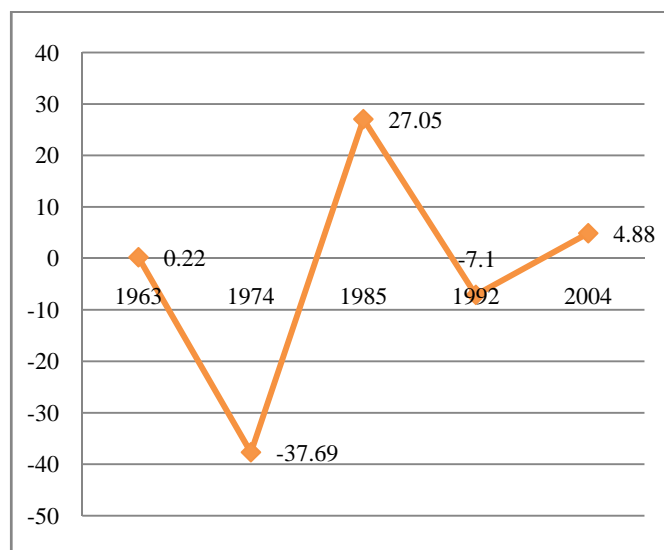


Fig. 3.1: % change in real wage rate

The Committee also recommended that the wages should be increased by a rupee annually for the next two years beginning from 1977. As soon as this agreement expired in 1979, there was a tripartite meeting held which decided to increase the wages by 90 paise annually for the next three years upto 1982. Therefore the recovery of the percentage change in the real wages in 1985 can be explained.

The period after 1985 was characterized by what is known as the “crisis” in the tea industry particularly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the largest importer of Indian Tea. Manifestations of this crisis include decline in exports, closure and abandonment of tea gardens, increasing labour unrest at times leading to violent protests and confrontations, non-payment and curtailment of wages and other statutory benefits of workers, declining living standards and worsening human security in the tea gardens. This led to a tremendous fall in the percentage change in the real wages in 1992 at -7.1% after which it started improving.

Today, in 2014, the tea garden workers earn less than \$2 per day, the official definition of poverty wages. The employers still feel that there should not be any increase in the wages. For example, the planters argue that the labour cost of Kerala Tea Plantation is the highest in the nation where as the productivity is the lowest. They blame trade union leaders for not allowing a cut down in wage.¹ On the contrary, a study by M. Krishnakutty et. al in 1993 showed that the wages of the labourers did not lead to higher costs of production. The finding is based on the study of 248 companies by taking their share of wages to the total costs which shows that the share of wages to the total costs was only 28.8 % in 1987-88 which further declined to 20.1 % in 1991-92. Though the wages had increased twice during this period as a result of two tri-annual wage agreements, the share of wages to the total costs still declined.

4. WHICH WAY TO GO?

After an analysis of the scenario of the Indian tea industry in the above sections, one can summarize it by saying that the industry did go through a crisis from 1991 to 2002 but started recovering from 2003 onwards due to the various developmental schemes adopted. This growth in the industry however is still not adequate for India to once again earn the status of being the largest producer in the world. It was in 2005 that China took over India and has been successful in being the largest producer in the world. On the other hand the condition of the labourers have been worse ever since. The crisis in the tea industry has had a direct impact on the labourers and has worsened the situation. Therefore the need of the hour is an all round development of the industry and not just the production frontier. Following are the suggestive measures:

¹ The Draft of white paper, The Association of Planters of Kerala,,January 2003.

(i) *Incentives for the workers:* The workers find no incentive to work as their wages are already so low and the facilities that should be provided to them are absent. The wages should be definitely increased not only to the subsistence wage but more than that. Better housing, sanitation, education, health and water facilities should be provided to each and every family. Bonuses should be given on time and the minimum amount of leaves that they have to pluck per day should be decreased. At present they have to pluck 25 kgs of tea leaves per day on an average. This kind of exploitation leads them to suffer from various health problems such as back pain and lung infection due to the utilization of various pesticides. Each and every plucker should be provided with face masks, gumboots and umbrellas.

(ii) *Integration of the tea estate labourers with the rest of the town/city and Ecotourism:* Tea estate workers are a community of their own and are totally cut off from the rest of the town/city. Consequently, they are unaware of their rights, duties, government schemes that they are entitled to and other career opportunities. An integration of their community with the rest of the town/city is what is required to spread awareness and educate them. This can be done by holding frequent awareness camps in the tea estates and encouraging them to visit the towns/cities.

Ecotourism can play a big role not only in this integration but also in providing other sources of income by building eco huts on the infertile areas. Its purpose can be to educate the travelers and the workers, promote ideas of water conservation and energy efficiency where the local community of both the tea estates and the cities can be involved leading to an overall economic development keeping in mind the possibilities of conflicts between the use of resources for ecotourism and the livelihood of the workers and ways to minimize them. In other words, the way in which eco-tourism is developed should be compatible enough with the environment and the socio cultural characteristics of the local community.

(iii) *Infilling:* Since majority of the bushes in India are above the age of 50 years it is very important to find ways to rejuvenate them. The Government made it mandatory that 2% of the bushes would be replanted every year. The planters are not very keen in replanting or replacing because of the high costs incurred in doing so. Given the high costs involved and the long gestation gap infilling is a concept that if carried out can make up for atleast 25% of fall in production. Unlike replacing and replanting, infilling does not involve uprooting the existing bushes and hence reduces the cost. The gaps between the existing old bushes is so much that new bushes can be planted to fill the gaps. This is a cost effective way to improve the yield of the bushes.

5. CONCLUSION

Tea industry is the most important industry for the Indian economy. Though it has started recovering from its crisis the growth needs to be steady. This crisis has a direct impact on

the lives of thousands of workers who depend on the industry for their livelihood. It can be seen that though the crisis in the production sector has improved, crisis among the workers have worsened. The condition has deteriorated with every act of legislation. The workers live below the poverty line as they do not even get \$2 a day. One cannot expect for the labour productivity to improve when on the other hand they are not even provided food, clothing and shelter. The industry being a labour intensive one should realize that it is the labourers who can increase the productivity of the gardens and if neglected can lead to huge losses to the producers. Therefore, the labourers should be given incentives to work harder. These would include increasing wages and providing basic facilities.

It has been observed that to some extent it is the lack of education among the workers which has lead them to be suppressed by the employers and exploited. This lack of education and awareness can be met with by integrating them into the local mainstream through means of ecotourism. The employers often argue that it is very expensive for them to replant or replace the tea bushes. What they fail to understand is the quality that is being compromised because of which the Indian tea has already started losing its competitiveness in the international market. Infilling is a cost effective method to fill the existing gaps which would result in increasing the yield. It is high time that employers started caring more about the future of the industry than their own profits.

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