



PANDEMIC AND THE TEA GARDEN WORKERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN JORHAT, ASSAM

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Abstract:

COVID-19 pandemic has posed grave threat to many. The tea garden workers in Assam affected the most in terms of their health and livelihoods. The workers engaged in tea plucking are in fear and risk of Corona. The poor public health infrastructure is evident by government's own admission in the National Health Profile 2019. The public spending on health is just 1.17 per cent of the GDP. Despite the WHO's recommendation for availing the PPE kits and other preventive aids for the workers, the tea garden workers remained exposed to the risk, as they continued to work without adequate gears to keep them safe. They plucked tea leaves within a distance of less than three feet. The workers were vulnerable as they did not have safety gear such as masks, gloves and sanitizers- both because of lack of awareness and the provision from the employers. It caused distress to the tea garden workers to visit health centre to avail the basic health care. They are in fear of forceful COVID test and detained in isolation in case of simply cold fever or minor illnesses. The present paper examined the distress caused by the pandemic to the tea garden workers in Assam, their experience and ways to overcome by them. The present study is descriptive in nature. Published data through newspapers, periodic and government sources have been analysed. Qualitative and in-depth interviews of the selective respondents have been administered to make it more robust in drawing the inference.

Key Words: COVID-19, Tea Garden Workers, Health, Livelihoods, Assam.

INTRODUCTION

Pandemic is defined as "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people".

The pandemic that has made total devastation in the world is Covid 19, from North Pole to South Pole, from western country to eastern country no one get relief from the furiousness of Covid 19 pandemic. As a specific family of viruses, corona virus or COVID-19, which is said to have first originated in China's Wuhan, was declared

a pandemic on March 11 by World Health Organisation. As per Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the **infection** might have started from an animal source but spreads through human to human contact (Indian Express). Till now India has 11111947 confirmed cases and total death due to Covid 19 is 158517 in India (The Hindu). Worldwide the ratio of death and increased cases are also different and devastating. Total death cases registered as Covid 19 victim are total 2542556 cases and total 114674343 cases worldwide.

Covid 19 has affected more than 200 countries worldwide. Due to Covid 19 different distresses occurred in forms of psychological distress, physical distress, socio cultural distress to the individuals and masses. With the spread of virus infection, the psychological distresses start occurring very rapidly. Psychological distresses like anxiety, sleeplessness, fear of contracting the virus, frustration are some effects of long term lockdown during the time of pandemic. Also spreading of news related to death and homelessness along with other fake news on electronic media and social media also created terror in the minds of the people. Some people didn't have the idea on how to manage and spend time properly even after having plenty of time because of lockdown. People got bored as well as frustrated by following the same daily routine at home. Some of them failed to utilize their time effectively which at times led to over thinking and losing hope for life, some also choose the path of suicide. The Covid-19 period also saw major crises in the sectors of food security as well as, public health, employment and livelihood etc. Many people have become jobless in both private and government sectors, also millions of agricultural workers (especially from the unorganized sectors) faced difficulties to earn due to closed markets. The pandemic has made the entire food system frigid because of all the trade restrictions imposed, markets were closed for longer time period, so farmers failed to access any market facilities for buying and selling of their products. The pandemic has decimated jobs and placed livelihoods of millions at risk. The food security of women, men and children were in threat, marginalized populace, small scale farmers and workers, cottage industries, indigenous people went through a tough time.

During the time of hash pash of lockdown and Covid-19, most of the marginalized population faced extreme challenges. Somewhere middle of the line one section of group got vanished from the limelight of the busy world, they are the tea garden workers in Assam. Most of the people start their morning with a cup of tea. Basically tea is the most popular drink in the planet after the consumption of water. But less amount of people know about the hard work behind that production of tea. From plantation to plucking, it needs tremendous hard work and effort. The origin of tea might be China, but the tea industries in Assam are more than 180 years old by now. The modern term 'Tea' has been derived from the early Chinese dialect words, such as Tchai, Cha, Thea and Tay, used to describe both the beverage and the leaf. The tea gardens of Assam have usually been presented as an icon of Assam with the ubiquitous photographs of tea plucking women. In the first quarter of the 19th century, tea industry entered India with the Britishers, which was indeed a remarkable era in respect of establishment of industries and factories of India.

HISTORY OF TEA IN ASSAM

Tea was discovered in China sometime in 2737 BC. China continues to be the most significant producer and followed by India. Scottish adventurer Robert Bruce went on an expedition into Assam, in 1823. While in Assam, Bruce met up with an Assamese nobleman Maniram Dewan. After death of Robert Bruce, in 1836, Charles Bruce, Robert's brother on his initiative set up a tract of land in Sadiya, Assam as a nursery and planted it with indigenous tea seed plants. In 1839, the Assam Tea Company was the first company established to grow and make tea. By 1862 the company had over 160 tea gardens, some of which are still operating under the same banner. Now, Assam is the world's single largest tea growing region, collectively produces over 700 million kg of tea per year.

Tea garden Workers in Assam

To expand their colonial power through tea gardens in Assam, Britishers had begun to accelerate their laborers from the outside of Assam like the states of Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh to meet the demand for labour. The laborers had to live in very unhygienic environment, were paid little and fed too less and the magnitude of human exploitation was beyond imagination. But in due course of time these people from different parts of India forgot their roots and through a process of influence with the Assamese a new unique culture evolved and in time span they became an integral part of greater Assamese Community.

The economic health of the tea tribe community is not well to do; maximum population of tea community leads a life in poor conditions. They are the people living under below poverty line with fewer earnings. Some of them are permanent worker and others are the temporary worker in the tea gardens. Tea garden administration provides houses for the permanent workers but the houses are not in good conditions for living. But those who are temporary worker they have to fight everyday for a roof on their head. They don't have any toilet facilities still they use open space for toilet which is one of the reasons for their poor health conditions. Because of the poor economic condition their health status is also very poor; they failed to get proper nutritional diet as for their low income. Tea garden workers are the section of people who are economically deprived but after the lockdown they became more deprived as they have no work to do. All the tea gardens were closed during the time of lockdown and they didn't have any income source other than that, so it was drastically difficult for the tea garden workers for surviving at lockdown. During the time of lockdown, they fought for their one-time meal.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The present study has been conducted in Jorhat district of Assam. Secondary data through the newspaper clips, journals, periodic and internet sources have been implied. A qualitative enquiry also has been administered to understand the situation of the tea garden workers in the study area. Randomly identified the respondents, who have been engaged as tea garden workers and enquired according to the availability of their time and whoever interested in participations for the study. Five case studies have been taken along with the specific enquiry on the study objectives. Other than the primary data, the present study also used the secondary data. It was important to collect

the information online and from the news publications during the lockdown. The qualitative enquiries and the case studies have been taken post-lock down in order to understand the situation. The information from the newspaper clips and primary sources have been analysed manually in the form of content analysis.

DISCUSSION

Covid-19 pandemic puts an adverse effect on the life of the tea garden workers in Assam. They are the most vulnerable section of people and suffered a lot during the Covid-19 period both mentally and economically. They remained exposed to the risk of Covid-19 and work without adequate gears like masks, gloves and sanitizers. They had to pluck tea leaves without maintaining the physical distance. The lockdown during Covid-19 worsen the issues of workers especially the temporary workers, which comprises of almost 50% of the workforce. It has been found that the tea garden workers had to go through many challenges to survive during the pandemic period.

Some of the tea garden authorities of Jorhat provided sanitizer and masks to the workers before entering gardens for plucking. Monitoring took place during the tea plucking period to observe whether they have followed the physical distancing or not. Some of the tea gardens had allowed only 50% of the workers to work in the tea gardens after lockdown maintaining all the precautionary measures. Some of the tea garden authorities provided free Covid-19 checkup for both the permanent and temporary workers as well as their family members during that time.

In some of the tea gardens the garden authority forcefully engaged the workers in tea plucking and factory work without providing any kind of safety measures. It created fears among the people and anger against the tea garden authority. The workers even failed to earn more than 50 rupees per day. In some tea gardens, payments were only made for three days of work despite the worker worked for six days in a week. This continued after the three months lockdown which pushes them to even more poverty and distress. Due to irregularity in getting wages the workers failed to arrange three-time meals in a day for themselves. It was distressful for them physically and mentally. There were some incidents of self-hurting and rude behaviors towards their family members, relatives and friends.

Case Study 1: Mr X stated that his family faced savvier issues during Covid 19 pandemic. X is a permanent worker of Lohpohia Tea Estate, Jorhat and he informed that the tea garden was closed for one month. During that period, he was not engaged in any other income generating works. It was very difficult for him to run his family. They don't have adequate knowledge about the dos and don'ts during Covid 19 pandemic. He also stated that after reopening of the tea garden, the garden authority took adequate measures such as: providing mask and sanitizer to the workers, maintaining physical gap while plucking tea leaves. He added that they got medical support from garden hospital but those were not sufficient in case of the COVID positive patients. The experiences shared by some of his friends and relatives who received Corona treatment through the government hospitals were not conducive and favorable for the tea garden workers.

Case Study 2: Mr Z is a daily wage earner living in Lohpohia tea estate, Jorhat. His family had faced many difficulties during pandemic. His wife is a temporary worker in that tea garden itself. Although he thought of getting into some bamboo craft works in home, he eventually backed out due to lack of proper market linkage during the period of lockdown. His family got Rice, dal, mustard oil, soap and mask twice as government support during COVID-19 lockdown. According to him, authorities have made the entire situation a bit more intense and serious than it actually is. He also stated that the tea garden authority has provided different protective measures for safety purpose like mask, sanitizer, hand washing material etc. Although this family had not suffered that severely, they had to live without job and uncertainty. They were totally dependent on the help of the local authorities.

Case Study 3: Mrs. A is a permanent worker in Sarucharai Tea Estate, Jorhat. The tea estate was closed for 2 months during COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, she found it difficult to run her family but further she managed anyway. She is a widow and lives with her 14 years old daughter. She got financial support of Rs 500 twice in a month from tea garden management. She added that during lockdown period, her daughter was also suffering from fever but she refused to take her to hospital as authority might declare her as Covid positive. It was a common belief and experienced by some of them that the hospital authority would declare Covid positive even during normal basic visits to the hospital. In fear of that many of the minor illnesses had been taken care of by themselves at their respective homes only.

Case Study 4: Mr B is a daily wage earner living in Lohpohia Tea Estate, Jorhat. While interviewing he stated that he was able to manage his family during Covid 19 pandemic because of the savings he had. He utilized his savings during the lockdown. He is also a farmer and cultivated different vegetables at his place. He sold vegetables in his neighborhood and earned profit from it. He stated that he was not getting any support from government side. According to him, Covid is just another political gimmick by the government. He also pointed out the positive initiatives taken by the garden to fight with COVID-19. But he admitted that most of the tea garden workers who had no alternative sources of income faced the challenge and struggled a lot to survive. He also said that most of the people avoided visiting hospitals in fear of being tested and unanimously getting declared positive.

Case Study 5: Ms C is working in tea garden as a permanent worker. She is a mother of three children and the sole bread earner of the family. During the Covid lockdown she faced challenges in feeding her children due to lack of savings, because of her alcoholic husband. She visited the nearby town in search of job, but no one was ready to give her work because of the Covid fear. After reopening of the gardens, she started her work as a plucker at the garden, but tea garden management failed to take any kind of proper precautionary measure for the safety of the workers. No physical distancing was followed amongst the workers. No health checkups or Covid test were organized for the workers before re-entering to their works. She had the fear and risk of getting affected by the deadly virus because of the loosely handled situation in the worksite.

The tea garden labourers don't have the habit of saving. They are daily wage earners and tend to spend the money on buying the basic household essentials. Moreover, the wage is very low which cannot even meet their minimum needs at times. So, they can't think of saving the money for the future. They somehow managed their lives before the pandemic. But as a result of this pandemic, they face more economic issues. They didn't get their wage and survival became very difficult. In some places, the garden management or the government took initiatives in providing them the basic amenities such as: ration etc. but in some other places the labourers themselves had to think for their survival. In this context, the government and the garden management should ensure that the labourers will get the basic amenities because without these labourers in the tea industry will be a big zero.

The local level non-governmental organizations can play an important role in this context. They can provide helping hands to these labourers to fight with the pandemic. During the case study, researchers observed that some of the tea garden residents have some other source of income such as: few cultivated vegetables in their home, others engaged in making bamboo items in home during lockdown period. The NGOs can work as a bridge in providing them a market platform to sell their products.

The tea garden labourers are very much vulnerable and they don't have adequate knowledge about the Do's and Don'ts during this pandemic. They also had a mindset that the pandemic is not of much danger and it is similar to regular cough-fever. In this context, the NGOs can at least provide them adequate knowledge regarding the COVID-19 virus so that they can take the appropriate precautions. The situation is not so good that that community awareness programme can be organized. But other forms can be adapted such as: Poster, leaflet distribution, awareness through open miking, sharing documentary video etc.

CONCLUSION

The tea garden workers are one of the largest employers in the private sector in Assam. The tea garden plantation Acts (1951) is applicable to all the tea garden workers. As per this Act it is mandatory for the tea garden authority to provide necessary social and economic benefits to all the workers. In spite of having this Act, the tea garden workers failed to get the benefits and security from the relevant stakeholders which is very much peculiar and pathetic. This is the only sector where the government interference is minimal, visibly reflected through the socio-economic status and health outcomes of the tea garden workers.

The poverty and unawareness, and the nature of their engagement lead to many challenges. The hardship during the Covid-19 was extreme for the tea garden workers. People had no savings to spend during the lockdown and they had to depend on others. The lockdown made the workers miserable in terms of both their economic and mental health status.

The age-old tradition of exploitation continues even today amongst them. The political parties make this a point for their election manifesto, but yet to transform it as part of implementation. This is the high time to address the issues of the tea garden workers by the government. Minimum income of the workers needs to be justified as we have minimum wage Act so that this section of the population can accept the challenge like Covid-19. We can only achieve the sustainable development goals by “living no one behind” in the process of social development.

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