



# Deteriorating Economic conditions of Tea Garden Labourers post Covid-19

**Rajat Kumar Tirkey**

Junior Research Fellow (UGC)

Department of History

University of North Bengal

Raja Rammohanpur, Siliguri

**ABSTRACT** : This particular work primarily focuses on the problems of the tea estate workers of the North Bengal region which they are facing as a result of the devastating epidemic disease i.e. corona virus and subsequently the undesirable lockdown and the effect it had undergone financially, socially and culturally under the state economy. The lockdown has hit the tea industry of North Bengal, with losses in revenue. In the sectors and regions which are already crippling under poverty, the Corona virus and subsequent lockdowns on work and mobility have seen to be an added curse. One such sector in India is the tea gardens of North Bengal. The Preliminary focus of the investigation is to find out the real condition of the unfortunate labourers who are totally dependent on the tea garden industry.

**KEYWORDS** : Tea Garden, Covid-19, North Bengal, Tea Export, Indian Tea Association.

**INTRODUCTION** : The lockdown has hit the tea industry of West Bengal, with losses in revenue, according to a statement issued by the Indian Tea Association on 3rd June 2020. The region has 287 tea plantations, big and small, but 87 of them are famous for arguably the finest tea in the world for the first and second flush. The annual tea production in north Bengal, mainly in the Hills, is more than 7.5 million kilogram and the first flush contributes nearly 25% of the total production. Due to Covid-19 North Bengal Tea gardens missed the first flush, which contributes nearly 30-35 per cent of the annual revenue of the planters. This is usually harvested in March, but this time, due to the lockdown and the social distancing and other norms that needed to be maintained upon resumption of activity, production has taken a hit. The losses come as a double whammy for the tea business in North Bengal's Darjeeling region particularly, since it had just about started recovering from the losses it sustained due to the violent Gorkhaland agitation and resultant three-month-long shutdown in 2017. <sup>1</sup>

**PRE-COVID 19 SCENARIO** : The North Bengal Tea Industry production areas are in the North Bengal region of West Bengal state, in Eastern India. It includes tea estates and facilities in the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Kishanganj and North Dinajpur in West Bengal.

North Bengal has about 450 tea gardens spread out in the Darjeeling Hills, Terai, and Dooars regions that are registered as sellers in the Siliguri Tea Auction Centre.<sup>2</sup> Tea cultivation in the North Bengal began about 120 to 150 years ago in Dooars region, during the colonial British Raj period. In the year 1840 tea was planted in Darjeeling district and adjacent areas in North Bengal which now reached to a 199 million tea industry.<sup>3</sup>

**DISTRESS DURING PANDEMIC :** The novel coronavirus-induced lockdown has taken its toll on 12,000 workers of 14 closed tea estates in north Bengal as most of them cannot avail themselves of the monthly doles given by the state government because of absence of banking facilities in their vicinity and transport. Besides, the labourers are without other sources of income in the lockdown and want the government to pay the FAWLOI (Financial Assistance to Workers of Locked Out Industries) monthly. Each worker of the shut tea estates receives Rs 1,500 per month, but the amounts are paid together once in a quarter.<sup>4</sup>

*“It is still unclear when the garden will be reopened after the Lockdown, but as per the National Lockdown schedule, it should open from 15th April 2020. There have been already huge revenue losses to the Industry. After the opening of the Garden, longleaf has to removed off, Need quick spraying throughout the Garden, Weeds has competed well with the Crop and need quick intervention to remove the same, it is going to take lots of Mandays input. Moreover, based on my understanding and after reading many articles, below are a few observations done by me.”<sup>5</sup>*

Niraj Mani Chourasia  
Assistant Manager at Goodricke Group Limited  
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The second wave of COVID-19 has hit the urban areas hard, and rural areas even harder. The general awareness and information revolving around COVID-19 have been disappointing, especially, in the rural areas. Lack of proper sanitization, hygiene, and healthcare facilities have been the primary reasons for increased contagion and rising death rates. Absence of solid and reliable scientific knowledge and general information about how to deal with the pandemic, the way false and consecrated information are being circulated in the online world about COVID-19, magnification of social evil such as casteism, sexism, racism in face of the overall crisis, and a general absence of the social impulse of helping the ones in need (in action and not just words) have made things worse, and contributed to this unprecedented state of affairs right now.<sup>6</sup> It must also be mentioned here that it is not possible to maintain ‘physical distancing’ while at work in these gardens, and even after risking their lives in this way, many workers don’t even get ambulances from the management to ferry patients to the nearest government hospitals. As one can imagine, none of these daily workers can even afford to think about private hospitals. All that the management does in most gardens is, provide some chemicals for the sake of sanitization.<sup>7</sup>

**EFFECT ON TEA EXPORT :** The economy of North Bengal and Upper Assam is entirely reliant on tea. Assam contributes half of the country’s total tea production which is 1,300 million kg. Another 25 per cent comes from West Bengal. Meanwhile, the deteriorating global economic conditions, foreign and fiscal exchange constraints has hit the Indian tea industry hard.<sup>8</sup> As per the production in north India, comprising Assam and north Bengal, is down by 40 per cent from January to June as compared to the figures of 2019.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure :** Women labours plucking tea leaves in the tea garden post Covid-19.

**Source :** Business Standard, Kolkata, Published on : 23/03/2020

The strewed COVID-19 has perilously erupted irreversible health and economic disaster at the local, national, and international levels. The outbreak has laid off cross-boundaries transport systems and mutilated global economic activities. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has expressed deep concerns over the steady rise of corona-virus cases and its devastating impact on India's major industrial sectors. The tea industry is among the oldest industries in India stretched over the geographical area of 5.78 lakh hectares.<sup>10</sup> The Darjeeling Board of Tea has expressed concerns over the loss of its 35 percent premium tea production. Besides, the West Bengal's Dooars region is also likely to be affected by a lapse of 11 percent of its total production.<sup>11</sup> For Darjeeling, Covid has come as yet another blow. In 2017, the Gorkhaland agitation cost tea companies a full-year's revenue; it never quite recovered from that crisis. "Since then, demand has fallen as Darjeeling tea was out of the global market for an entire year. "Now the COVID-19 crisis has worsened it," a plantation owner from Darjeeling said.

Even though plucking of leaves with 50 per cent manpower has been allowed by the Centre, West Bengal was reluctant to let the estates restart operation initially and finally settled at a 25 per cent manpower rider to allow manufacturing.<sup>12</sup> The plucking resumed following permission from the state government to use 25 percent workforce, based on an order issued by the Union Home ministry for using 50 percent workforce. In a letter to Mr Shah, Mr Bista has requested him to take cognizance of the urgency of the matter and instruct plantation operations to be suspended till the general lockdown is in place "as these days were crucial in our collective fight against the coronavirus pandemic."<sup>13</sup> However, on 11 April, 2020 the state government finally allowed operations in the industry, following desperate appeals from tea garden owners, but by seriously following the social-distancing and other safety norms.<sup>14</sup> A large number of migrant workers, who left the tea gardens and went to other states in search of livelihood, returned amid the easing of nationwide lockdown restrictions, which were imposed on March 25 2020 to contain the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak.<sup>15</sup> Tea exports from India during January to September declined 4.93 per cent to 157.92 million kg, according to latest Tea Board data. During the first nine months of 2022, exports stood at 166.11 million kg. From North India, primarily the states of Assam and West Bengal, tea exports dropped 6.61 per cent to 96.28 million kg in the reporting period, compared with 103.09 million kg in the corresponding nine months a year ago, the data showed.<sup>16</sup>

**GOVERNMENT'S INITIATIVE TOWARDS THE LABOURERS :** While industries across the country remained shut because of the nationwide lockdown to contain the coronavirus, tea garden employees in eastern India went back to work. On April 3, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued an order granting the tea industry an exemption from the lockdown, provided they followed certain restrictions on the workforce and social distancing measures were strictly enforced.<sup>17</sup> There has been a general welcome from workers concerned, said PK Bhattacharjee, secretary general of Tea Association of India. “In fact a lot of pictures have gone around showing how social distancing has been maintained in the plucking and manufacturing”.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure :** Workers practicing social distancing in the tea gardens.

**Source :** <https://scroll.in/article/960142/one-reason-why-tea-garden-employees-went-back-to-work-despite>

The Tea Board of India on March 26 issued a circular clearing any confusion on the matter. The notification stated: “All tea gardens in the country are under lockdown and are not operational.”<sup>19</sup> The Tea Board of India has come up with a number of Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) guidelines to be followed by tea estates while continuing the tea plucking and production activities. On April 7, 2020, The West Bengal Government allowed a partial relaxation and allowed engagement of 15 per cent workers only for skiffing of tea bushes which was extended to 25 per cent on April 13, 2020. On Monday (May 11, 2020) a fresh relief came from West Bengal Government for the tea industry in tune with Union Home Ministry’s April 3, 2020-order, that operations including plucking in tea gardens will be allowed with deployment up-to 50 per cent of total regular workforce at a time.<sup>20</sup> Advisory has also been given regarding deployment of migrant workers in tea gardens where there is a clear instruction that migrant workers must be screened before they are deployed for the field operations. Their details such as travel history, previous nature of work, general health conditions shall be recorded and shared with the respective district administration.<sup>21</sup> After the lockdown, the meagre compensation of Rs. 1,500 per month that they used to receive from the state government was stopped. The ration disbursement in the Dooars region was done on a per-family basis. The registered monthly ration of 20 kilos rice, 15 kilos flour and 3 kilos of sugar was given to every family, irrespective of its size. Bigger families found it difficult to sustain on this much.<sup>22</sup> Several workers said there were no health check ups, not even

basic thermal screening. Both Central and state governments have issued guidelines stipulating that workers should be paid wages during the lockdown period. Daily wages for tea garden workers in Assam's Brahmaputra Valley and in West Bengal were a paltry Rs 167. But companies struggled to pay even these wages for the period when the gardens were shut because of the lockdown.<sup>23</sup> The West Bengal government had launched schemes relevant for tea workers for example *Chai Sundari* and providing benefits for returning migrants. The Alipurduar District Administration launched '*Apnar Baagane proshason*' for the welfare of the tea garden workers.

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