

A case study of the livelihood of tea plantation workers in Wayanad, Kerala

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Abstract

The study focuses on tea plantation workers in the Wayanad district of Kerala state. It has three objectives: to assess the workers' socioeconomic characteristics, examine the nature of their employment and experience in the field, and assess the structural changes since they associated with the tea plantation. The study used a descriptive research design, including observation, case studies, focused group interviews, and interviews as data collection methods. The study found that more than half (52.29%) of the plantation job workers belong to the 31-50 age group, and women workers make up 51.27% of the respondents. The study notes that the tea plantation job attracts women in more significant numbers as it comprises various activities. Still, women workers have always been relegated to the bottom strata and considered the most abundant and cheapest workforce.

Keywords: tea, labor, structural changes, health, *Camellia sinensis*

Introduction

Tea is a fragrant drink prepared by pouring hot water over preserved or fresh leaves with the Botanical name is *Camellia sinensis* which is a species of evergreen plant, a kind of tiny tree in the highpoint plant family (Hopley, 2009). After plain water, tea is the most widely consumed drink in the world. The leaves essential for making tea and greenery springs produce energy, stimulation, and enthusiasm to deliver the best. This plant is an immortal bush innate to East Asia, perhaps created on the edges of southwestern China and northern Myanmar (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2011). There are many different types of tea; some have a cooling, slight flavor, while others have vastly different profiles, including sweet, crazy, flowery, and verdant matters. Beyond the culture, tea is served at many events to claim that it is a part and particle of the official meetings to discuss and deliberate the issues. The domain researchers pinpoint that tea might have originated in China, where it was medicinal swill probably in the third century. Approximately after 1,300 years, the plant was whispered introduced to Portuguese traders and has now been sold, served, and consumed, and almost many parts of the globe. Tea has reached the nook and corner of the world, and today, people drink due to the top tea producers in China and India (Waridel, 2002).

Tea Plant Labourers in India – An Overview:

With the above discussion, the top ten nations worldwide contribute their tea production to make people happier and more enjoyable, creating functions aptly. From the conceptualization of the Sociology of Work, work is an art, science, and profession to make the finest one. The study focuses on India, where the research has been conducted. As per the documents from different sources, including ILO, ministries of India, and reports of the concerned states, the researcher identifies that the tea industry is one of the firstborn industries in India. The study identified four leading tea-producing states: Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. Besides, other parts of the country, such as Tripura and Himachal Pradesh,

deliver their best in tea making. There are more than ten lakhs workers in the tea industry in India, including generally Scheduled castes, Schedule Tribes, and traditional subgroups, of which more than half proportion are women, too to be highlighted (Centre for Education, and Communication, 2022). In recent timings, the tea industry has seen a procedure of rearrangement marked by the redefinition of the value chain of tea, declaration of the reign of value added promotion over-generalized manufacture of tea, worldwide brands foremost this procedure, the appearance of trivial tea growers a new-fangled perfect of manufacture regarding large estates, development of accepted leaf industries outdoor plantation construction to cater to the leaf produced by small growers, the growing of plantation work.

Land preparation, planting, pruning, fertilizing, irrigating, harvesting, processing, sorting and packing, transportation, and distribution are the stages of tea production from plantation to harvest. Skilled workers are needed at every stage of this process (Velmourougane & Bhat, 2017). So this study focuses on the objectives (i) to assess the socioeconomic characteristics of respondents in the study area and (ii) to examine the nature of employment of the tea plantation workers and their experience in the field. And (iii) to assess the structural changes associated with the tea plantation.

Literature Review

Problems of tea plantation workers

The author demonstrates how local business owners can compete with global competitors by developing novel and cost-effective tea farming methods, marketing, and administration. They overcame formidable odds by making innovative use of their meager means. Further, the study examined the tiny tea growers of Assam. It concluded that their approach is sustainable, economically feasible, and cost-effective, allowing them to compete with the colossal tea estates Ganguli (2014). the sector has recently seen changing patterns due to longer waiting times and different prices. The Indian tea business faces significant challenges due to aging bushes, increased production costs, and rate changes. This may impact India's tea harvest (Arya, 2013). Changes in the organizational structure were noted by (Hazarika and Borah 2013), Who focused on the development of Bought Leaf Factories (BLFs). Its cultivation is labor-demanding; therefore, it provides significant support to young employment. In his 2012 article, "Some Internal Factors Influencing Assamese Tea Production during the Liberalization Era," Guha examines some of the issues within the industry that impacted productivity. The research demonstrates that insufficient cultivation practices prevented a rise in land and labor productivity. The authors argue that the Assamese tea industry was not revitalized during the liberalization era. The tea industry in Sikkim is the focus of Mishra and Poti's (2012) research, specifically the sector's expansion and the difficulties it has encountered. This study makes an effort to highlight the expansion of tea plantations, related issues, and the government's support of this expansion.

The authors also suggest how the government should promote sustained, steady industrial expansion in this area. In the mid-1980s, tea from South India accounted for more than 80% of all exports to Russia, as Neilson and Pritchard (2011) stated. He also mentioned the increase in Nilgris's tea production in the mid-1990s. It was found in a 2001 survey that of the farmers operating in Nilgris, 86% were dedicated to growing tea exclusively. This means that between 1990 and 2000, small tea growers doubled the land dedicated to tea planting, from 26,237 hectares to 60,427 hectares. The number of small tea growers rose sharply to 60,000, responsible for producing 40% of South India's total tea output. The problems plaguing the tea business are brought into sharp relief in Asopa's (2007) work, including suggestions for fixing those problems. The author claims the tea industry must contend with others regarding production, distribution, and packaging. In addition, the author claims that India's tea industry is poorly organized despite the country's second-place finish in global tea output. The tea industry shouldn't have government handouts if it wants to compete globally. He also suggests that it be set at market rates, that corporate strategies be revised, and that new goods be developed.

Methodology

The researcher has chosen descriptive research to help the study to define the characteristics of the sample workers of tea plantations in the Wayanad district of Kerala state. Wayanad district has 5,306 hectares of tea plantations in the six panchayats: Vaithiri, Pozhuthana, Meppadi, Mooppainad, Tavinjal, Thondarnad, and Mananthavadi. There are minor, medium, and large size tea plantations that accommodate employing the laborers in local areas and attract migrant workers from neighboring states too. The descriptive research method primarily focuses on describing the socioeconomic characteristics of the tea estate workers, which is essential to know about the basic ideas about them and the situations of their families. The subject matter of descriptive design pushes the researcher to include as many details as possible in the study. Yet, the researcher gained a lot when he used this design in connection with the quantitative data about descriptive statistics that attempt to collect quantifiable information to analyze the tea estate workers' sample. It allows the researcher to use the interview schedule tool and data collection methods such as observation, case studies, and interviews. The observation method and cross-sectional study were motivational factors used in this design. In addition, the study used the descriptive research design without a second thought to bringing out the salient features of the tea estate workers precisely to the presentation, analysis, and Interpretation in detail. The study has used observation, case study, focussed group interview, and interview as data collection methods. Each is unique and important for understanding the nature of the working atmosphere, family system, management–workers relations, and role of trade unions. In addition, the researcher administered the interview schedule as the data collection tool for face-to-face contact with the respondents as the primary source of data eliciting. These methods and solitary tools enhanced the tea plantation workers related to his framed objectives. The tables have given details of the respondents included in the present study.

Table 1

Sl. No.	Name of the tea plantation	No. of workers interviewed
1	Chirrakkaara	39
2	Thettamala	35
3	Priyadharshini Tavinjal	53
4	Jessy Pilakkavu	38
5	Kambamala Thalapuzha	60
6	Thalimala Vythri	37
7	Pozhuthana Kurichiyar Mala	40
8	Achoor Estate	49
9	Perumthatta Estate	41
10	Chundale Estate	53
11	Podar Plantations: Rippon	29
Total		474

Results

Socioeconomic characteristics

30.17% of the respondents belong to the age group 41-50, 25.95% represent the age group 51-60, 22.15% come from the age group 31-40 age group, and the rest (21.73%) form the age group less than 30. It shows that the 31-50 age group comprises more than half the proportion (52.29%) of the plantation job. 51.27% of the respondents are females, and the remaining 48.73% are males. The tea plantation job is in a position to attract women in more numbers since this particular job consists of a variety of activities, and the women workers' role in the tea plantations have received relatively limited attention in homestead

literature and women's studies while they rule the tea industry. Women workers are an advantage plays vital in the tea industry. Despite their contributions, women workers have always been relegated to the bottom strata and considered the most abundant and cheapest workforce rather than as a source of specialized workers still earns incomes, suffer from low levels of health care and personal well-being, live trapped in poverty and are cut off from the mainstream. The entire spectrum of elements, which acts as a barrier to the equitable participation of women in development, ranges from education, training, health, and cultural and social considerations. This paper deals with the participation of women in the workforce and the impact on their socioeconomic life. As the data presented, more than one-third (34.60%) are married, 23.63% are widows, and 21.31% are separated and divorced. The remaining 20.46% of the respondents are unmarried. Out of 474 respondents who have been interviewed, 27.64% have a primary level education, 26.80% have gone to middle school for their education, 24.46% to high school and above level of education, and the remaining 21.10% have not gone to school. 41.99% of the respondents are Muslims, 39.45% are Hindus, and the rest (18.56%) are Christians. 42.83% of the respondents belong to Scheduled Castes, and Tribes, 41.35% represent backward communities, and the remaining 15.82% come from forward communities.

51.04% of the respondents joined the tea plantation between the age groups of 15-30, a considerable proportion (37.97%) have become laborers during their childhood, and the remaining 10.97% joined the later state life as 31 years and above. 54.01% of the respondents have more than 16 years of experience in the tea estates, 24.26% have 11-15 years of experience, and the rest (21.73%) have between 5-10 years of experience. 46.00% of the respondents, the present job in a tea plantation is inter-generational, 40.08% have joined in this job due to self-motivation, and the remaining 13.92% could not find any other job except the tea plantation. 63.92% of the respondents earn Rupees between 8,000 and 10,000 as monthly income, and the remaining gets beyond 11,000 rupees as monthly income. 82.91% of the families do plucking work in tea plantations, and the rest, 17.09% involves in fieldwork. Of 474, 83.97% are regular workers, and 16.03% are casual workers.

Structural changes

Many unmarried workers continue as the same without any changes, which is the most prominent in the list. More than three-fourths of the respondents who joined the plantation live in rental houses without any changes. But a slight change occurs as 14.98% of the respondents finds their own houses shifted from rental ones. More than three-fourths of the families are now indebted to the informal banking system. Earlier, at the time of joining the tea plantation, they were not indebted. Children's education is a compact machine that can be done with the help of parental income-generation activities. But the expected results are denied by the collected data. The tea plantation job in the study region could not provide this relevance of physical fitness, an essential aspect of the workers' life. The working conditions and the labor-management relations are key factors related to trade unions.

After experiencing the workers, the relevance and importance of trade unions are evident from the table. Many respondents could possess mobile phones, televisions, and the remaining items such as two-wheelers, cars, washing machines, cultivable lands, and poultry, could not get impressive marks. The respondents are members of trade unions, believing that they may be able to solve their problems. Out of 422 respondents who are members of trade unions, 51.66% associated themselves with the CITU, followed by STU, with 33.65% of the workers who joined this union. The remaining three trade unions, BMS, HMS, and INTUC, have fewer number workers. Among the 422 members in the trade unions, 39.34% have 11-20 years of experience in the unions, which is the topmost in experience. 27.01% have 21-30 years of experience, 16.82% have 6-10 years, 10. have 31 years more, and the remaining 6.64% have less than five years of experience in trade unions. Out of 422 workers who are members of the trade unions, an overwhelming proportion has changed their membership from one union to another. Out of 389 workers who have changed their trade union membership, 43.19% find the primary reason for the

change is stability and security, which is missing, 29.82% have unsolved grievances, 18.77% changed because of workers' demands never fulfilled, and the rest 8.22% describes that negotiation is not being done as desired. Among the 422 respondents who are members of the trade unions, they occasionally help their respective trade unions to increase their membership. But the remaining 6.64% do it regularly. 68.78% of the workers in tea plantations are never satisfied with their jobs, and the remaining 31.22% are happy with their job. Among the 474 workers studied, 89.24% are local workers, and the remaining 10.76% have migrated from neighboring states and joined to render their labor here. 45.57% of the respondents rear the children without having any idea to shape their careers, 38.61% wish to send their children to government jobs, and the remaining 15.82% visualize miscellaneous options by the respondents.

Conclusion and suggestions

The tea estate workers contribute significantly their best irrespective of their education and other social affiliations. More female workers deliver their best apart from their household chores. The lesser income, poor working conditions, low payments, and non-availability of other jobs force them to do their work. Many of them think that the trade unions may be able to help them, but that's also not on good terms. In this regard, the workers often try to change their membership, but the net results are not up to the mark. The structural changes in the workers worked out since material possessions were added. The need of the hour is the workers have to identify their strengths and have to improve their lifestyles.

Tea is a labor-intensive product, and labor is one of the main factors of manufacture besides land and capital. Workers in tea plantations usually reside within plantation premises. The existing structure of the tea industry is unfair and evocative of the British colonial system. Though the Plantation Labour Act (1951) and other Acts make it obligatory for the plantation management to provide workers with various economic and social entitlements such as minimum wage, bonuses, rations, provident funds, education, and healthcare facilities, on the contrary, several studies exemplify that the workers in tea plantations are subjected to exploitative work patterns, controller mechanisms, low wage payments, deplorable housing, and living conditions, with no supplies of shared bargaining.

With this backdrop, the study finds as many tea plantations to meet the owners, office bearers, officials of the plantations, leaders of trade unions, experienced workers who have been working in the tea plantation for some years, and the Non-Governmental Organizations to get the supports from them to elicit the data from the workers. However, there was no positive sign from the plantation owners or office bearers, and he decided to meet the workers in their dwelling houses near the tea plantations and the offices of the trade unions. This method has helped him contact the respondents freely without compulsions to share their experiences, working conditions, nature of work, etc.

In the 'structural change,' no such changes have occurred, as the nature of the job remains the same, and the norms and values mores are the same as before. Most of them have no owned houses. Very few have a college education, and most have no idea about children's education. Three of the fourth respondents are Indebted to the informal banking system. Though most of them pose mobile phones, TV, two-wheelers, car, washing machine, cultivable land, and poultry are out of access.

Action Plans should now be written out for workers to face the challenges of the millennium in the plantations. Continuous and periodically-held counseling regarding absenteeism, alcoholism, productivity, and presentation, and educating women folk about small families, child care, good housekeeping, and health care. Financial optimism through savings accounts at the post office, credit unions, and government-owned banks. A self-awareness program may also include the presentation of a life insurance policy. Government assistance in plantation settings for establishing Training and Motivational Centres should be strengthened. Studies in ergonomics should be undertaken to reduce worker weariness and maximize output.

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