

North Bengal -The Valley of Starvation Deaths

Palash Chandra Modak*

Abstract : The North Bengal Districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, situated at the foot of the Himalayas in a submontane region, are famous for "Tea". But this tea Plantations of North Bengal is witnessing an unprecedented human tragedy. One after another medium sized tea plantations are closing its production. Lakhs of workers are losing their job. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse the main causes of the adverse condition of this tea belt area which convert this place into a death valley. A great crisis has been made in the tea estate of this region from early times and now it has crossed its all limits. So different kinds of movements are organized by them (tea labours) and all these movements are being larger & stronger day by day. Because the tea workers are completely dependent on the plantation management for food, water, shelter, education, health and sanitation and they are restricted by a lack of skills from joining other income earning activities. According to the news paper reports if no necessary steps are taken to improve the tea worker's socio-economic condition, in near future the rally of death of the tea labours will cross its all limits.

Keywords: Tea, North Bengal, Terai, Dooars, Adivasis, Plantation, PLA,

Unfavourable conditions of the Labours: Tea is one of the most important beverage in Indian states contribute significantly to the overall tea production in country and West Bengal, mainly North Bengal is one of them. The West Bengal tea industry is the second largest in the country. There are around 343 tea gardens spread across the Dooars, Terai and Darjeeling hills. The majority of them are being in the Dooars. Jalpaiguri forms a part of what is well known in literature as the "Terai" or "Dooars". The tea workers are completely dependent on the plantation management for food, water, shelter, education, health and sanitation. They are mostly Adivasis and lower castes (ST/SC) are the backbone of the industry in North Bengal. There are literatures abound depicting the inhuman living and working conditions of the tea workers during

* Research Scholar on regional history under Evolution Foundation (REF).

the Colonial period. However, at present these workers in the abandoned tea estates are living in conditions worst than the colonial period. Moreover, most of the regular workers in the tea plantations are women. As the main wage corners, women workers are under tremendous pressure. They are restricted by a lack of skills from joining other income earning activities, an absence of alternative employment opportunities and unfavourable conditions are for migrating long distance in search of alternate opportunities of work. Some workers complained that they do not get adequate wages because they are not politically affiliated to the ruling party union. In the closed gardens, workers were receiving benefits from the Government but in an irregular manner. Workers were however very keen that their gardens should re-open and saw this as the only viable long term solution. In the case of closed tea gardens due to submission of a report in the Supreme Court by the West Bengal Advisor, the state government began talking relief measures in closed gardens to provide people with food and work. In spite of this the number of persons in closed gardens had not been enlisted for the unemployment allowance in spite of being permanent workers of the tea gardens. Actually the tea garden owners are not interested to invest their capital for sake of the upliftment of the productivity of their gardens. They are only interested to get much more profit within a very short period and its consequence is labours' death due to starvation.

The tea plantations of North Bengal are witnessing an unprecedented human tragedy. One after another, medium sized tea plantations are closing production. Tea estates are being enclave economic; thousands of tea workers are losing their jobs. They are denied their wages, they do not have food to eat, and do not have dress to cover their nakedness. Their children have stopped going to school and begun working by the side of their parents to augment the family income. The workers are denied medical care and dying unnaturally in scores. Alarming this is happening in the terrain of one of the called so called organised sector industries, where the workers are supposedly covered by social security provisions. In re-opened gardens, people who managed to stay alive in spite of hunger during closure are still suffering from the after effects of the closure period. According to the labours of the re-opened gardens the management does not give them full wages or other benefits since they cannot meet the production requirement set by the management. The practice of "badli" or replacement has been stopped by the management. As the main earning member had

died during closure or was too weak now, their families were facing starvation even after re-opened as no badly was being allowed.

In the year 2003, a fact finding team under Centre of Education and Communication (CEC) and United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) made visits to the following tea plantations in the West Bengal: (1) Gaya Ganga Tea Estate (Siliguri), (2)Mujnai Tae Estate (Birpara, Dooars), (3)Ramjhora Tea Estate (Birpara, Dooars), (4)Dheklapara Tea Estate(Birpara, Dooars), (5)Kathalguri Tea Estate (Birpara, Dooars). During that time the fact finding team observed that the workers and labours are living in a unbelievable bad conditions. The workers reported that all facilities had stopped and surviving by crushing stones in the dry river beds. Children has stopped going to school and crushing stone with their families. Workers cite mismanagement as the main reason for the present crisis in the plantations. They alleged that the managements of the closed or abandoned tea plantations had not nurtured the plants for a long time. The management wanted to earn a quick profits and that's why they are plundering the tea gardens. No efforts were made to replant bushes over 50 years old.

As hunger emerged as a major problem tea workers are facing, an enquiry team with the Advisor to the Supreme Court in writ petition 196/2001 decided to take a very close look at the situation. This team has observed the major problems were starvation and malnutrition that has ensured from the stopping of work and non-availability of other employment. But till now no necessary steps are taken to make their conditions good.

Workers and members of their families have been dying like flies. Government Of state and central are not ready to agree that any of the deaths are due to starvation. But this is hundred percent truths. Workers of the tea plantations reported a huge rise in the consumption of tea flowers, wild leaves, wild tube and bamboo shoots. There are no snakes or rats left in the garden as all of these have been caught and eaten by the hungry workers and their families.

Worse fully Increased in Death of the Tea Labours: From 2002 to 2008 approximately 400 persons, mainly children, old and women of Dooars tea plantations succumbed to starvation death caused by malnutrition and sickness from contaminated water following the tea plantation closure, thereby; aggravating livelihood complexities of the region. Women workers are dying at the time of delivery. The workers conditions are pathetic. Many people are dying because of drinking contaminated water. The death

rates have significantly increased day by day. In the year 2008, the rally of death of the tea labours in whole Dooars was seen as present days and starvation was pointed as the main reason of those deaths by the National Human Rights Commission and other organisations as present times. During last ten months 55 labours of eight tea gardens of the Dancun group have died. According to the Surindar Singh Aluwalia (M.P. of Darjeeling), from 2002 to 2014 almost 2000 tea labours have died. Now a day this tea belt area of North Bengal is considered as the "Valley of Starvation Deaths" in several foreign newspapers.

Most of the workers had died due to blood dysentery and cardio respiratory failure. Many of these deaths could have been avoided if the estate hospitals were functioning and if ambulances were available to take the workers to the city hospitals. The workers were dying without proper diagnosis and medical treatment. According to the regional news paper (Uttar Banga Sambad) more than 40 tea gardens have closed and almost one lakhs people those who are directly or indirectly depending on the tea garden are jobless. Even the record of the regional newspaper (Uttar Banga Sambad) shows that more than 80 Crore rupees as the provident fund of the labours of 53 tea gardens are not paid. In Kanthalguri Tea Garden a total number of 500 children have died (Anandabazar Patrika, 20th November, 2002). Samir Biswas, the health assistant of Ramjhora Tea Estate, informed that the death of 85 workers has been recorded in his tea estate till Nov, 2003. During more than one decade almost all health centre of the tea estate are broken down and that's why it is not possible to make a list of the increased death rates of this tribal labours, But through the survey of tea estate it is very clear that in present time the death rate of the labours have crossed it's all limits. The workers and members of their families have been dying like flies.

Genesis of the Effective Movement of Tea Labours: Despondence of the tea plantation workers are growing up to a high degree and they have lost their patience and that's why on 22th November 2014, the owner of the Sonali Tea Estate, Rajesh Junjunwala (Agarwal) was killed by his own tea labours. It would not be hyperbole if it is said that the present situation made them bound to occur this kind of massacre. According to the news paper reports, the past govt. was paying Rs.500 per month as unemployment allowance to workers in closed tea plantation but now it is also not available to them.

The 'Plantation Labour Act' (PLA) 1951, Regulates working conditions including maximum working hours, overtime payments, child labours sickness and maternity benefits. However it seems that even though the act has been there for more than 50 years, the majority of workers are deprived of the basic minimum necessities in their lives. There is no doubt that tea workers in India are facing one of the worst forms of exploitation in the modern times.

Discontentment is being increased in the tea belt area of North Bengal bit by bit and is being made several platforms of tea plantation labours movement. Already more than 25 platforms of the tea labours movement have made in North Bengal and gradually they are making their movements so much durable. Even almost 20 thousands of small tea planters of North Bengal are also with them because their (small tea planters) condition is not good than that of the tea labours. Samaresh Majumdar also opined that even fifty years ago this kind of aggressive mentality of tea labours was not seen. Now they are not ready to tolerate any kind of deprive which muck up their lives and that's why several tea labour organizations are going to be united to make their movement very strong. Because the first step (strikes) of their movement were not able to save their minimum demands (i.e. adequate wages, safe drinking water, medical facilities including good hospitalities, good education, adequate food and shelter, safety of women, good ration arrangement and stop labour exploitation). Now all the closed tea belt areas are being made a human trafficking field by the antisocial and it is one of the causes of their agitation. The record says that more than 1000 women and child were trafficking to this area from 2010 to 2014. Even the labours of closed tea gardens have admitted that this starvation have to bound the young bloods to go to the wrong ways.

Even the tea plantation labour movements are now entering into the drawing room of the middle class which help them to get the support of the common peoples. Even the environment of the tea estates is now going so much poisonous due to politics on ration distribution. No doubt it is a very active phase of the tea labours movement. The culmination of the agitations of these subalterns has revealed now-a-day. It is a serious outburst of this class against their exploitation by the tea owners and the other authorities. Several offshoots of their movement are being created to strong their movement all over the India. More deep rooted cause for the rise of "Adivasi Vikas Parisad" was the unbearable exploitation of the adivasi tea workers by the tea planters

and also cheated by the trade unions affiliated to different mainstream political parties. Prasant Lohar(the president of North Bengal's regional committee of All Adivasi Sadri Susar Association) said that it is known to him by the closed tea garden's labours that they (the labours) do not want any kind of help but they only want to live by work. These micro-level peoples' movement are unfolding a new course of development of the working class.

So it is very clear that the owners of the tea estates are living in clover but it is very tough for the labours to live from hand to mouth. The situation in the tea plantations are no less than a calamity with so many starvation related deaths. Therefore an immediate and continuous relief support should be given to all the workers in distress till the return of normalcy. It will not be hyperbole if it is said that this tea labour movement will bore witness to a new and nationwide awakening of Indian labours to their own strength and capacity to organize for the betterment of their living condition and it is the high water mark of their rebellious attitude because they have already tasted the flavour of aggressive movement.

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