

Food Security Problems and Issues in Tea Garden of Dooars: A Case Study of Kathalguri Tea Garden

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Abstract: *Poverty and Hunger are two grave issues of any nation, even most of the first world also suffers from these two grave issues. These two issues give rise to a severe problem of food security. The rising population and its rising demand on food supply has added a challenge in balancing the food supply chain. The paper aims to explore the food -security dimension in one of the tea gardens of Dooars. The garden was closed for years giving rise to hunger and food-security problem and even after the opening of tea gardens the issue hasn't been resolved, though government schemes have provided certain relief to at least sustain their survival but it cannot be considered a permanent solution to the problem of food security. The paper is based on field observation and secondary data analysis and have been interpreted in a qualitative approach.*

Keywords: *Closed, Dooars, Food-Security, Labourers, Tea Garden.*

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Introduction

The concept of food security is a recent phenomenon which emerged after the voyages from Europe started towards the 'southern' world. Before the advent of Capitalism, Imperialism and Colonialism there were many cases of people dying because of food shortage. After the advent of colonialism, these supplies were manipulated to fulfil the selfish desire of colonisers, which resulted in various famines and food crises. It was during the second world war when the world was witnessing the holocaust of Jewish in Germany, a similar silent holocaust also took place in Bengal where nearly 5 million died at Great Bengal Famine of 1943-44, since all the grain produced in Bengal were diverted to British soldiers overseas.¹

Food security exists when 'all people, at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'. Close to 800 million individuals do not have access to enough food, over 23 two billion individuals experience key micronutrient deficiencies and about 60% of individuals 24 in low-income countries are food insecure.²

For a nation like India the issue of food security and nutrition is of great importance. The country's 60% of the population is still resides in rural areas and problems of poverty, under-nourishment, hunger and malnutrition still prevails at great extent. India's position in World Hunger Index stands 94 with respect to all such issues and problems achieving a sustainable food production and distribution stands out as a major challenge for the nation. The financial requirement for India to meet its costs for food security is around INR 46 lakh crores (USD 729 billion) from 2015-24. This cost includes the financial requirements for providing access to safe and nutritious food for all. It also includes investments in irrigation, soil and water conservation, wasteland regeneration and rain-fed farming. Of all the finances required for ensuring food security, the financial gap that India is estimated to face is around INR 18.5 lakh crores (USD 293 billion) for access and distribution costs of food and for financing sustainable agricultural production systems.³

Objective of Study

The main objectives of the paper:

- 1) Analyze the impact of closure of tea garden on food security issues among the labors of Kathalguri Tea Garden and cope-up mechanism adopted by the workers.
- 2) The role of government institutions in overcoming the problem.

Methodology

The work is based on qualitative analysis of the problems that has been collected in the forms of interviews and observations from the field and use of secondary data has also been done.

The Study Area and Demographics

Kathalguri tea garden is situated in the northern part of North Bengal. Kathalguri Tea Garden comes under Dhupguri subdivision of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. It is situated 32.1km away from sub-district headquarter Dhupguri (*tehsildar office*) and 66.8km away from district headquarter Jalpaiguri. Kathalguri tea garden comes under the Banarhat block of Jalpaiguri district. The population mainly consists of tribals such as Oraon, Munda, Lohar, Tamang etc. the second most populated community is of Indian Nepalese of different clans such as Chhetri, Sharma, Biswakarma, etc. other communities like Bengalese and Bihari's who are mostly traders or administrators are also forms a part of demography of the tea garden. Average Sex Ratio of Kathalguri Tea Garden is 1011 which is higher than state average of 950. Child Sex Ratio for the Kathalguri Tea Garden as per census is 1103, higher than state average of 956. Kathalguri Tea Garden has a lower literacy rate compared to the state. In 2011, literacy rate of Kathalguri Tea Garden was 60.41 % compared to 76.26 % of the state. Male literacy in the garden stands at 72.54 % while female literacy rate is 48.27 %. There are about 1,462 houses in the Tea Garden.

The Closure of Tea Garden and the Birth of Food Security Problems

North Bengal being a tea belt of West Bengal has more than 200 tea gardens including hill, terai and Dooars region. As per the latest statistics available from the Tea Board of India, at present there are 15 tea gardens that are permanently closed in the region. Out of the 15 tea gardens 6 tea gardens were operational in the Dooars region of North Bengal.⁴

Name of the Tea Gardens	Area in Hectares	No. of Workers		Date of Closure
		Permanent	Temporary	
Red Bank	369	888	700	19.10.2013
Surendranagar	172	301	150	19.10.2013

Dheklapara	197	604	200	11.03.2006
Dharanaipur	265	357	450	21.10.2013
Bandapani	530	1215	68	13.07.2013
Madhu	323	947	0	23.09.2014

Source: Assessment of MGNREGA as a Sustainable Livelihood Support in Closed Tea Garden of Dooars: A Case Study of Dheklapara Tea Garden. *Athena*.

The Kathalguri Tea Garden faced a closure on July, 2002 which resulted in a calamity on the tea garden workers economically and hampered their food security. After the closure, the garden turned into anarchy as no authority was there to look after. Reasons of closure of the tea gardens are not clear but the transition period of a tea garden from open to closed was painful to the workers of the garden as their source of food and income had crashed down. Prior to the closure of tea garden, tea gardens used to be supplied a subsidized amount of cereals via various schemes, distribution of food grains in Kathalguri TG like most of the other tea gardens was carried out by the tea garden management itself.

The labourers who were trained soldiers of the garden had no other skills to look for other alternatives of livelihood. The nearby river of Thanabarti though supported some of labourers to run their houses for a short period of time, where these labourers started collecting boulders and selling them but the livelihood diversification couldn't stop them from getting them trapped into the clutches of hunger. The food security issue started hovering among the labourers and many new born children. Slowly the death scenario shifted from new born children to adults and total of 525 people died between 2002-2005.

One of the severe problems arised due to scarcity of food was rise in debt. To meet their ends and overcome hunger during the closure of tea garden the labourers started purchasing food grains from traders in due which eventually lead to rise in debt among them. The consumption of food in-take went down form 3 times a day to 2 times a day and in some cases few houses reported of having a meal in a day. The food grains which used to be bought on a very cheap rate by labourers, with the closure of tea garden the labourers had to invest more amount than their earnings to purchase food grains.

The Coping Mechanism and its Impact

The plight of hunger led to aggression and protest against the government and the tea management as the workers blocked the road by putting down a dead body of a child to show their problems which eventually helped them, as administration assured delivery of food grains. This provided a little relief to the labourers, but it was still not adequate to provide them food security. After the grains started to be distributed, every family was provided a BPL card which was the key to the benefits.

- 1) **Selling of their BPL Ration Cards:** The earlier debts of the transition period forced some of the workers to sell their ration cards to repay the debts to some moneylender or trader who provided them grains during the lean period. Some workers sold their cards to quench their alcohol addiction. The grains which they could get at Rs 2 per/kg with BPL card now they had to buy for Rs 15 per/kg this did not only hamper their hard-earned money but also put their families into constant peril of hunger.
- 2) **Working in Dolomite Mines:** The neighbouring country of Bhutan provided a ray of hope to these workers where these workers engaged themselves in the dolomite mines which to some extent helped them to normalise the situation for some period of time.
- 3) **Chopping down of trees in Tea Garden:** The tea garden that was abandoned by its owners in 2002, had left no other options for the workers than to chop down the shade trees which were planted in between the tea bushes. According to Bhado Lohar, secretary of the local union, more than 10,000 shade trees had been felled that way. The contractor paid Rs 500 for each of the trees, many more than 50 years old.
- 4) **Selling up Machinery Parts:** The other way of coping hunger and food security was stripping of the machinery parts of the tea factory and selling them off. The workers had no options but to sell off the machinery parts off the abandoned tea factory.

The Present Conditions and Challenges

Kathalguri is also among the 14 gardens that reopened between 2009 and 2013. The re-opening provided some relief to the workers and the state government continued to provide subsidised rations to the workers under Antyodaya Anna Yojana, a Central government scheme for the poorest of poor families. While it is imperative on part of the state to run employment guarantee and food subsidy schemes in closed gardens.

The hundred-day work scheme MGNREGA has been one of source of earning

income in the tea garden, though the labourers also have diversified the source of earning in different forms, it can be said that the tea garden even after opening are unable to provide the benefits to their workers. The partial operation of tea garden isn't a sustainable form of livelihood option and migration of young generations to different parts of the country in search of livelihood is increasing in the garden.

NFSA 2013 came as a saviour for the workers of closed and partially open tea gardens like Kathalguri. After the application of NFSA workers are now guaranteed their share of food. The irregularities of the earlier system are dealt with properly. The dealers earlier used to gain margin by using the loopholes of the PDS system but now those loopholes have been properly dealt with by the NFSA 2013

The earlier system of distribution of PDS suffered from various problem of irregularity and non-guarantee, but after NFSA the food is guaranteed to the families, earlier if one failed to pick his ration for a particular month dealer used to sell it in a much higher price at the market As NFSA has the clear system of inspections and dealers have to keep records of every kilo, which has helped the workers to at-least avail the food grains at any particular moment and time.⁵

One of the major problems among the tea garden labourers is alcohol addiction, they are so addicted to alcohol that they sell their ration cards to the *Mahajan's* for little money and when they want to claim their cards back, those *sahukars* use fraudulent means to keep the cards. The digitization of ration cards has helped to stop such mal-practices and is instrumental to stop such illegal practices. But even after the application of digital technology, *sahukars* buy the cards and people give their thumb impressions to the dealer so that he could supply their share of grains to the *sahukars*.



Image1: Use Of ICT Devices in PDS System at KATHALGURI TEA GARDEN

The wave of COVID-19 had a big impact in Kathalguri tea garden. People were out of work for several weeks and were dependent on the money sent by migrant labourers. The question of food security again came into play but the central government launched scheme PMGKAY. for providing free ration that helped the workers to overcome the food security issues in the tea garden during covi-19. The Daure Ration Scheme launched by the West Bengal Government on 15th September 2021 has also been very much instrumental in overcoming the problem of food security in the tea garden. This scheme has proved to be very beneficial for them as the labourers had to go to the garden for their works and it was very much difficult for them to collect food grains from ration. The scheme with the help of new technological tools empowers any one of the family members to collect the food gains from the dealer. The scheme has thus been instrumental in providing food security to the workers.



Image 2: People Collecting Government From “Duare Sarkar Ration Camp” at Kathalguri Tea Garden

Conclusion

The status of some of the tea gardens in Dooars are not up to the level to sustain its labour force. Kathalguri though at present is operating but on a partial basis. Certain facilities which were provided earlier when the garden was operating in a full sway at present have been cut down. The labourers till now have been managing themselves even under such circumstances but it can't be called a sustainable source of livelihood option for them, since the owners are paying a portion of the daily wage through the centrally sponsored Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). where during the lean season when plucking of tea leaves comes to a halt, many tea estate owners use MGNREGA to pay workers for pruning of tea bushes and digging drainage channels which is indirectly a government sponsored source of income rather than from the tea garden.

Some tea gardens of Dooars today suffers from many problems and loop holes, declining production, administrative conflicts with labourers, delay in payment of wages, cutting down the subsidies and conflicts been a major cause of sudden closure of tea gardens leaving hundreds of workers jobless. Such closure leaves a big impact on the food -security issues of the workers and adds up to vulnerabilities. The government sponsored schemes though have been efficiently working in the areas but still a permanent solution of this severe problem needs to be searched for saving the workers form hunger and starvation.

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