

“LIFE IN LAYAM WITH ENDLESS LAMENTATIONS”-A STUDY ON CRISIS IN TEA PLANTATION AND LIVELIHOOD ISSUES OF THE WORKERS

Abstract

In Kerala, the tea plantation industry is a significant part of the economy. Both directly and indirectly, it is essential for generating income, earning foreign currency, and creating jobs. However, this sector's overall performance is deemed to be underwhelming. Since tea is a commodity that is traded all over the world, trade liberalisation has had a considerable negative impact on the sector's success. The unfettered import of tea, the import of tea of inferior quality, and the re-export of that tea combined with the traditional product have all caused problems for both home and international markets. Due to the expansion of the tea market, there is competition among tea producers on a global scale. When their manufacturing costs are greater than the average price across the globe, those units find it challenging to continue operating. Consider Kerala's situation as a proof. As a result, many of Kerala tea factories were forced to close. Following this, the Kerala sector became too fragile to sustain because to high production costs, weak international competitiveness, low price realization, and severe union lobbying. These factors together have brought Kerala's tea industry to a standstill. This study documented the crisis that engulfed the Kerala tea business as well as the growth of the tea industry in India.

Keywords: Plantation, Crisis, Liberalisation, Price Realisation, Competitiveness

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tea was first introduced to India in the early 19th century as a result of the British Empire's pressing need for a different tea grower than China. Tea plantations maintained their profitability through wage suppression for a sizable portion of the colonial period because of rules that permitted workforce indenture. Following the removal of the indenture regulations, the tea industry increased its profits through collaboration in the global tea markets, which artificially raised the price of tea. Tea largely remained an export product throughout these changes. Since the 1960s, domestic demand has only increased significantly during the post-colonial era.

Because of the inherent nature of the plantation sector, the plantation workers have been dealing with a lot of economic and social issues. Since the businesses had such serious financial issues, we have previously seen that they were unable to make timely wage payments. It was exceedingly challenging for the employees to cover their daily expenses. As the workers who work on plantations are typically subjected to unfavourable climatic conditions where the firms are seemed to be oblivious to the physical and environmental risks. The tea plantation industry is experiencing a severe crisis in addition to the deplorable living circumstances of the workers. It was found that there had never been a comprehensive study done to assess how this financial crisis was affecting the living conditions of plantation employees.

II. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF TEA

A series of dramatic events in the past have only rarely resulted in the widespread distribution of things like tea, cotton, and sugar around the globe. Particularly modest-looking consumer items like sugar and tea have over the years played a significant role in the global booms and busts that have been documented. They have also altered capital-labor relations on a worldwide scale. At the beginning of the 19th century, the British Empire felt a pressing need to find a different source of tea than China; this resulted in the introduction of tea to India. When viewed in this light, the tea economy announced its presence into India through research and experimentation and established a firm foundation with a "Tea Mania" in the 1860s. The British turned to worker indenture, which was made possible by strict contractual laws, to handle the problem because it was difficult to keep prices low enough to compete with Chinese tea and maintain profitability. The laws had a significant impact on the lives of several generations of tea industry workers. Trade union rallies and labour opposition during the colonial era helped to overturn the indenture rules and bring about later labour reforms. The Great Depression followed the labour adjustments with another crisis that forced the tea plantation sector to take strategic action. Tea prices grew as a result of the international cooperation of tea growers to maintain profitability. Additionally, it laid the foundations for the growth of small tea growers and the exploration of India's domestic tea market. Since independence, these actions have had a big impact on the growth of the tea sector.

III. LABOUR IN THE PLANTATIONS

By the middle of the nineteenth century, slavery had been declared illegal; theoretically speaking, soil slaves were now "free men." However, neither this nor the employment of these former slaves on the estates resulted in the emergence of a free labour

market. A new labour market—a market for wage labor—was thus opened up from which the metropolitan capital began to source affordable labour for their investments in the colonies around the world. A number of them remained tied to the land and entered a new era of slavery in indentured form with their old masters, with little variation from the previous adima relations; the remaining were mostly recruited for work on the plantations.

Even after slavery was banned, tribes and the territories they inhabited were still exchanged. Plantation development hastened the process of pauperization, resulting in the eviction of tribal people from their ancestral lands and the collapse of the small peasantry under the stress of adverse government restrictions, such as an increase in land revenue. These people were driven to migrate to the plantations because they appeared to provide a better standard of living.

The estates were in the hands of upper-caste Hindus as a consequence of caste hierarchy and their economic power. Dalits and other low-caste workers in these fields were almost always threatened with eviction. Tenant evictions in Malabar grew drastically between 1860 and 1869. The average yearly number of eviction cases climbed from 2,039 on average during the five-year period ending in 1866 to 4,983 in the four-year period ending in 1880.

Another important source of labour for plantations was migration, which has been called "the light infantry of industrial capital" and comes from famine- and disaster-affected areas. Depressed-caste migration, which started in the middle of the nineteenth century from the "labour catchment areas" in various regions of Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, and the Konkan Coast, was primarily motivated by the danger to sustenance.

The Planters' Inquiry Committee's summary of the workforce recruitment situation in southern India at the end of the nineteenth century can be obtained from the table below.

Table 1: Labour recruitment position (southern India, 1896 (in percentage))

Planting Region	Local Labour	Labour From British India	Labour from Mysore	Total
Wayanad	20	54	26	100
Nilgiris	17	45	38	100
Madurai	86	14	-	100
Thirunelveli	80	20	-	100
Kodagu	20	53	27	100
Mysore	37	63	-	100
Travancore	20	60	20	100
Kochi	4	96	-	100

Source: Data from Report of the Southern India Planter’s Inquiry Committee, Appendix IX, p. 94. (For Nilgiris and Mysore, the figures have been rounded off to the nearest per cent.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sen and George (1992) and George (1982, 1984) have both examined the issues facing South Indian tea estates, particularly the 1970s tea industry crises. The issues have been classified as developmental and financial. These research concentrated on the causes of the increase in the price of factors affecting the amount of production, price, and profitability of the tea industry of long-term financing, investment, and development strategy

S. Senthil Kumar & Dr. C. Vellaichamy (2020), The study's research focuses on the health, safety, and welfare measures offered and also seeks to recognise the extent of advantages supplied to tea plantation employees by tea plantation estates. Tea plantation workers play a key role in the production of tea, hence this study examines the issues they face in the Nilgiris District.

Wagh (2014). This study aims to provide an explanation of the present and potential future of the Indian tea business. The study discovered that while Sri Lanka and Kenya were boosting their tea exports, India's proportion of the global tea export market was declining. This is because domestic tea consumption in these nations is low, and they are focusing on tea exports, but domestic tea consumption in India is very large; more than 80% of the tea produced in India is consumed domestically.

According to Sumitha (2012), the ASEAN and other free trade agreements had a negative impact on the Indian plantations sector's ability to compete as well as the living and working conditions of plantation employees, particularly women workers. Every tea plantation industry in India has benefited from the implementation of PLA 1951. However, estate management is hesitant to adhere to the PLA's guidelines. South Indian tea plantation estates often meet the PLA requirements better than North Indian tea plantation plantations do.

According to Bhowmik (1991), the tea board has a significant impact on the growth of the Indian tea plantation business. The tea board places little emphasis on the growth of small growers; instead, they are primarily focused on the development of the big plantation. The study's major argument is that India's small producers play a crucial part in the country's tea industry. Tea quality and India's tea export performance will improve if the tea board and UPASI take the initiative to attract smallholders to the area of tea cultivation.

V. TEA PLANTATION INDUSTRY IN KERALA

In Kerala, plantation estates first appeared in the former Travancore state in the late 1860s. When plantation estates first began, the primary crops grown there were tea and coffee. The planters, most of whom were British, used their influence within the imperial government to exert constant political pressure on the princely state of Travancore in order to get the cheap land, labour, and capital necessary for establishing plantations. The number of local planters was quite small in comparison to British planters, and they only owned a small area of land. The growth of the state's plantation sector was significantly influenced by family, caste, and governmental organisations.

For its contribution to economic development, employment, and foreign exchange revenues, Kerala's tea plantation business has been recognised. However, the tea business has faced challenges alongside other sectors and industries since India's economy was opened up with the onset of globalisation and trade liberalisation. The issue has become worse every year to the point where it is now considered a crisis. This critical condition is currently affecting the tea sector.

Effective factor utilisation can only be seen in the short term in the Kerala tea plantation industry. The use of outdated technology, a lack of product variety, and a lack of professional management all point to inefficient long-term factor utilisation. Capital investments must be made using short-term surpluses in order to achieve long-term growth. However, it appears that the Kerala tea plantation failed to reinvest the short-term revenues for capital expenditures. In terms of its backward and forward connections, tea's contribution to Kerala's economic prosperity is outstanding.

Huge tracts of arable land and a huge labour force were two fundamental requirements for the growth of plantations. A severe workforce shortage plagued plantations during their initial years. They had to rely on migrant labourers, whose movement the planters had to encourage. This led to widespread migration of labourers from distant regions who were drawn in by the planters' alluring pay and better living standards. The movement of employees to the plantations at that time was clearly influenced by the push and pull factors. The majority of plantation labourers originated from very impoverished regions. Working on plantations provided low caste Indian employees with a path out of their caste's oppressive surroundings.

As a result, both push and pull factors, such as the prevalence of starvation and caste prejudice, as well as pull factors like higher pay and better living conditions, attracted employees to the plantations.

The planters treated the workers brutally, providing them with filthy living and working circumstances, and paying them less than what they had promised, despite the fact that the workers had come from distant places in the hopes of earning a good wage. Labourers' families were compelled to settle permanently because they came from remote areas. Women and children laboured on the plantations with the rest of the family to earn the planters' predetermined wages. This long-term labour settlement opened up the market for low-cost employees. Additionally, family migration ensured that labour could be eliminated, which would solve the problem of future hiring.

Tea is grown on 36762 hectares in Kerala. It displays the area of tea grown in different districts of Kerala from 1951 and 2000. Idukki, which has 26615 hectares cultivated with tea, is Kerala's primary tea-producing district, followed by Wayanad, which has 5454 hectares. Kollam, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram, and Palakkad are further significant tea-producing regions.



Figure 1: Map showing Tea Planting Areas in Kerala

VI. MAJOR CRISIS IN THE PLANTATION

A lot of manpower is needed in the tea plantation sector. Harvesting or plucking tea leaves is the most important task. Hand picking has largely been replaced by mechanical harvesting in businesses. It has been established that manual plucking produces high-quality raw leaves. But due to a scarcity of labour during the busiest season, the majority of firms employ mechanised harvesting. Hand-held manual and hand-held motorised blades are both used for leaf-plucking. For hand plucking, the usual interval is 7 to 10 days, and for shearing, it is 12 to 16 days.

Tea is primarily marketed by auction. Seventy-seven percent of Kerala's total tea production will be auctioned off. The majority of businesses use auctions to sell their products. Direct export, forward contracts, and ex-garden sales are some additional common marketing strategies. In addition, businesses manufacture and sell packet teas. The producers are unable to receive the actual price due to the active participation of intermediaries in the tea auction. It has been discovered that there may be fraud committed throughout the auction process, which would allow the middlemen to profit significantly.

The condition of the workers in the current crisis environment is in many respects a continuation of a history of alienation, which is assumed to be a result of the workers'

"stigmatised" categories of identification, such as being a member of the underclass. This phenomenon is known as categorical oppression, which depicts how the categories of the workers, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy of such categories, make their lives difficult (Mitchell 1956).

In the midst of the crisis, the workforce is stigmatised, undervalued, and exposed to categorical oppression, which refers to the experiences that workers have with various categories of identification, such as caste, class, ethnicity, language, and place of origin. The labourers are kept in the lower social strata as a source of cheap labour and as one of the most stigmatised groups by categorical oppression. The bulk of the workforce is made up of Dalit people, who continue to face discrimination, violence, and untouchability. It is crucial to comprehend how the crisis affected the employees and the new social circumstances it imposed on them in light of India's caste structure. The capitalist plantations made their mark in a casteist society that not only provided a cheaper work force, but also gave it legitimacy. However, it is important to recognise that the caste system has more of an impact than only how it facilitates labour divisions in capitalist society.

After Kerala State was founded in 1956, there was a notable transition from foreign ownership to native owners of the plantations. The power structure merely changed from foreign elites to domestic elites (uppercaste Hindus and Syrian Christians), who in turn effectively continued the same practises. In a few cases, such as Harrison Malayalam Plantations, foreign companies retained shares in plantation enterprises through their Indian subsidiary companies.

Plantation system, especially the labour class facing several problems. The main issue associated with this business is high production costs and low price realisation. Workforce costs account for 65 percent of the entire cost of manufacturing. Labour unions are quite powerful in Kerala, and their impact on salary increases is obvious. The auction price fluctuates or falls continuously

In comparison to other Indian states, Kerala offers better pay to its tea plantation employees. Kerala's real wages, however, are pitiful. In Kerala's tea plantations, the daily wage is Rs 301. The previous salary was Rs 216 per day. In 2015, there was a significant protest, and the estate management decided to give Rs 301 each day. The women workers sought 500 rupees per day in wages and a 20 percent bonus during the protest period. The estate management, however, was not willing to boost the pay to Rs. 500. However, in Kerala, Rs. 301 is less than the minimum wage paid to agricultural employees in Kerala.

Since the primary source of income for the families of the plantation employees was their pay and salaries from the industry, the sector's crisis has a significant influence on their socioeconomic circumstances. Their economic situation and purchasing power have declined as a result of the real income falling and frequent irregularities. The family budget became unmanageable due to the ongoing occurrence of price increases for necessities. As a result, they were struggling to pay for both sides of their lives. Their furniture and household items, which they had purchased years before, were now outdated and worn out. They might not be able to afford to buy new ones.

The Layams, the residence where they reside, has a structure that is in the most deplorable state. Each unit in the lines has a small portico, a living room, a kitchen, and a tiny work space with restrooms. There are fewer than ten residential apartments total in the building. With an average age of 80–90 years—exactly the same as the estate's tea plants—the majority of the Layams are in poor condition. The estate plantation firm is required to maintain and repair the building, but they frequently neglected to do so.

Frequent political agitations or strikes are another factor contributing to the issue. In every estate of a tea plantation, there is political agitation. Many estates were either permanently closed down or were closed for a number of days as a result of the on going political unrest and labour unrest. Tea output, export, and employment are all negatively impacted.

Other factors contributing to the rise in production costs in tea plantation estates include high fuel and transportation costs. The majority of the tea estates were situated in remote regions, far from the tea factory. In such remote locations, the infrastructure, particularly the road transport system, is extremely pitiful. Therefore, the estate management needs a lot of money to move the pesticide and other fertilisers to the tea bush field and transport the harvested tea leaf from the hilly location to the factory.

Kerala's tea production and area under cultivation are neither growing nor expanding, and Kerala's contribution to India's total tea production has decreased. Kerala had a lot of large estates closed. Numerous small farmers also started working in the tea industry at the same time. The tea industry's underwhelming performance in India and Kerala can be attributed to a variety of factors. The Indian tea market's inability to compete with the global tea industry is the main reason. For the production of tea and HYV of tea bushes, every other major tea-producing nation in the world uses modern technologies. But in India, where more than 50% of the tea bushes are old.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the crisis affecting Kerala's plantation industry is a complex issue that needs prompt attention and all-encompassing remedies. The industry, which has long served as the foundation of the state's economy, is currently dealing with a number of problems, such as fluctuating commodity prices, labour disputes, and environmental concerns. The government, key players in the industry, and local communities must work together to jointly address these concerns. Sustainable agricultural methods, better working conditions for labourers, and crop variety may be crucial first steps in reviving this important industry. Kerala can protect its economic stability, the welfare of its plantation workers, and the continuation of its illustrious agricultural history for future generations by tackling these issues head-on.

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