

# Understanding the Economic Lives: The Case of Tea Garden Labourers

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**Abstract:** The tea garden labour societies are distributed in different tea gardens of Assam and India. Tea plantation has long been a major industry in Assam and these are dependent on labourers almost all of whom are the descendants of those who were brought to Assam by the British East India Company and later by the British rulers and entrepreneurs. Their main source of livelihood is wage earning in different tea industries through field and factory workings followed by agriculture. They are basically daily rated workers and payment is made in every 15 days. Except the minor ones almost all the member of the family are engaged as temporary and permanent labourers by different types of activities throughout the year like weeding, pruning, filling of vacancies, manuring, transplanting, plucking, processing tea, tipping, spraying, hoeing and drawing in their respective tea gardens. In this paper an attempt has been made to present the existing economy of the tea garden workers on the basis of their occupation and existing wage structure.

**Keywords:** tea garden labourer, economy, occupation, wage.

## INTRODUCTION:

Assam is the world's single largest tea growing region. At present Assam produces about 55% of the country's total tea production and about 1/6th of the tea produced in the world. In India Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala account 98% of India's total tea production. Assam's tea industry is dependent on about two million workers almost all of whom are the descendants of those who were brought to Assam as slaves first by the British East India Company and later by the British rulers and entrepreneurs from 1830's through 1920's, mostly from the Santhal Parganas district of Bihar (now in Jharkhand state). The descendants of these slaves are now called tea tribes (Chatterjee and Das Gupta, 1981)<sup>[1]</sup>. The tea tribes form the backbone of the Assamese tea industry. The tea-tribes are found mainly in the districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Tinsukia and almost all the districts of Assam. The economy of the tea garden labourers is basically wage economy since the main source of livelihood is wage employment in different tea industries. They have been doing almost the same activities from one and half centuries back and is continuing generation after generation. Different phases of work throughout the year which is directly connected to growing and processing of tea leaves includes weeding, pruning, filling of vacancies, manuring, transplanting, plucking, processing tea, tipping, spraying, hoeing and drawing. They are daily rated workers and payment is made in every 15 days. Sunday is fixed off and no payment is made for Sundays. Their average daily earning is Rs 95 irrespective of permanent and temporary or male and female with an average monthly earning of Rs 2660/-. The paper tries to present the existing economy of the tea garden labourers on the basis of their occupational structure and existing wages for tea labour population. The study has been made in the "Seajuli Tea Estate". Seajuli Tea Estate is situated in North Lakhimpur, the district headquarter of Lakhimpur district of Assam, India.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD:

Data for the present study were collected at two levels; materials collected from extent literature were collected through library search, reading of news papers, articles, journals, periodicals and internet as in accessing online sources (such as library databases and online journals) etc. Secondly basic ethnographic materials pertaining to the present study were collected through field studies among the labourers of Seajuli Tea Estate. In this second phase of work, both qualitative and quantitative empirical data were collected by employing various methods and techniques like case studies, interviews, observation method, life histories and household census method.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS:

The study was made among 150 labour families out of which number of male is 445 and number of female is 419. Working hours including the rest period is 8 hours for the labourers. They have to report at the working spot 15 minutes earlier i.e. at 7.45 am. From 8 am they start working till 12 pm. One hour i.e. from 12 pm to 1 pm they get their rest hour. Again from 1 pm they have to work till 4 pm.

Table 1: Average Daily Working Hours (IST)

Name of the Tea Estate	Time of Arrival	Rest Hours	Time of Departure	Average Working Hours
Seajuli Tea Estate	8 am	1 hour	4 pm	8 hours

Note: Seajuli Tea Estate' Work Starting Time is 8 am of Indian Standard Time (IST)

**PRIMARY OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE:**

Generally tea industries do not demand skilled labourers. Besides the works related to growing and processing of tea leaves as mentioned earlier, there are other essential services in the plantation that may or may not be directly related with production. For example, each labour line has one line-chowkider who works as the head man in their respective labour lines. Each establishment (office, factory, hospital, bungalows of managerial staff etc.) has a chowkider who works as a caretaker. There are *sardars* who are gang leaders and supervise the work force in respective work places. There are drivers, carpenters and people for preparing and repairing fences in the garden and some labourers are engaged in distributing drinking water and red tea to the labour force. Further, there are sweeper, peons, and bearers etc. in different units of the plantation.

The revealing picture emerging from the study is that out of 435 persons, 374 persons i.e. 85.97% are engaged as factory and field worker. Other monthly rated workers engaged as *sardar* is 7 (1.60%) while 3 persons (0.68) are found to be as fitter in the factory. Besides, 2 (0.45%) persons are engaged as line in-charge, 1(0.22%) person as *babu*, 1(0.22%) person as electrician, 3(0.68%) persons as driver and 9(2.06%) persons are engaged as chowkider. Agriculture as main occupation is resorted to by only 1 person i.e. (0.22%). Similarly, 1 person (0.22%) is engaged as school teacher at Seajuli Tea Estate and 1(0.22%) person work at Seajuli Tea Estate's office as main occupation. Only 32 (7.35%) persons are engaged in other activities outside the tea estate. The position is shown as the tabular form:

Table 2: Main Occupational Structure of Sampled Labour Families

Main occupation	No. of persons engaged	Percentage
Factory & field worker	374	85.97
Sardar	7	1.60
Fitter	3	0.68
Line in charge	2	0.45
Babu	1	0.22
Electrician	1	0.22
Driver	3	0.68
Chowkider	9	2.06
Agriculture	1	0.22
School teacher	1	0.22
Tea estate office	1	0.22
Others	32	7.35
Total	435	100

**INCOME STRUCTURE: WAGES:**

Wages in the wider sense mean any economic compensation paid by the employer under some contract to the workers for the services rendered by them. Wages therefore include family allowances, relief pay, financial support and other benefits. But in the narrower sense, wages are the price paid for the services of labourers in the process of production and include only the performance wages. They are composed of two parts; the basic wages and the allowances. The basic wages is remuneration, which is payable to any employer in terms of his contract of employment for the work done by him. Allowances, on the other hand, are paid in addition to the basic wages to maintain the value of basic wages over a period of time. Such allowances include holiday pay, overtime pay, bonus, and social security benefits.

Normally in tea plantation, there are two types of workers; daily rated and monthly rated (salaried) workers. Every daily rated worker permanent or temporary, young or old, inexperienced or experienced, receive the same wage for six working days a week. No payment is made on fixed holiday (Sunday in case of Seajuli Tea Estate). The wages vary from time to time. During the pick season, each tea garden employs casual or temporary labourers at wages lower than the actual amount of the minimum wage. Present rate of daily wage for the labourers of Seajuli Tea Estate is Rs 95/- per day if he/she requires the minimum plucking target irrespective of permanent or temporary and male or female (the study was made in July-November 2014 and rate of minimum wage i.e. Rs 95/- per day is subjected to change since several strikes were going on during the study to increase of wage rate) worker.

The tea garden labourers in the dry months from December to February carry out the tasks of light pruning and weeding to receive their daily wages. When the bushes begin to flush freely, beginning from March and lasting

till November-December, the pluckers are encouraged to attempt the maximum plucking. For this period, they specify a fixed task for earning the maximum wages, with an incentive of further payment for extra plucked leaves. A plucker has to bring a minimum of 24 kilograms of tea leaves for earning their basic minimum wage and is paid Rs 95/- per day for those 24 kilograms of plucked leaves. If they pluck extra leaves then they are paid Rs. 3.50/- per day for every kilogram of leaves in excess of the fixed task. In case of the factory worker also, they are entitled to get a daily wage of Rs 95/- per day. If he/she does the extra duty then they will get maximum Rs 7/- in one day. Similarly maximum Rs 7/- for the spraying and the other field works for his extra work.

Payment for all daily rated field and factory workers are made in every 15 days. The drivers, *sardars*, mechanics, electricians, fitter, line in-charge, *babu* etc. are salaried worker and they simply receives their wage every month instead of every 15 days and they occupy more prestige than the other daily rated workers. Their salaries are fixed according to the technical qualification and years of experience.

### ANNUAL INCOME:

The annual income of the labourers is not much encouraging. As mentioned earlier their main source of income is tea garden employment following the agriculture (while it is secondary) and domestication of animals. Their annual earning through garden employment includes bonus and overtime earning. But the income through other sources could not be stated accurately. The scenario of bonus is: all the workers including permanent, temporary and child receives bonus at the rate of 15% of their total guaranteed earnings. Similarly, the labourers receive a subsidized ration at the following rates: Adults (8-16 years): 2.440 kilograms of rice and wheat flour per week. Minor (6-8 years): 1.220 kilograms of rice and wheat flour per week. The tea estate allocates free firewood at 228 cubic feet per year for each family only if they are present above 20 days at their work. Seajuli Tea Estate also provides 900 grams of tea per month to each and every daily rated worker free of cost. The sub staffs also get 1.450 kg of free tea every month. Along with these they are also provided housing, and medical care facilities with low coast.

Table 3: Distribution of Families According to the Number of Earning Members

Sl no	No of earning members	No of families	Percentage (%)	Total earning members
1	-	-	-	-
2	1	11	7.33	11
3	2	54	36	108
4	3	41	27.33	123
5	4	25	16.66	100
6	5	10	6.67	50
7	6	7	4.67	42
8	7	1	0.67	7
9	8	1	0.67	8
Total	-	150	100	449

From the above table it can be said that many families have more than one earning member. The table shows the distribution of families according to the number of earning members. Highest numbers of families have 2 earning members (36%). Other families come with 3 earning members consisting of (27.33%). There are 25(16.66%) families in the category of 4 earning members. Besides there are 11(7.33%) families consisting of 1 income member, 10(6.67%) families with 5 earning members, 7(4.67%) families with 6 earning members, 1(0.67%) family with 7 earning members and 1(0.67%) family with 8 earning members.

### SECONDARY OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE:

As plantation labourers have agricultural background, hence the labourers get some paddy which minimizes their daily expenditure from their small operational holdings. *Sali* paddy is the major crops among them. Almost all the labourers rear some domestic animals like cow, goat, pig, poultry birds etc., a good amount of money comes from selling them. Milk procured from cow is sold in the nearby staff quarters as well as in the nearby market. Thus, livestock make a positive contribution to the overall economy of the labour people. Unemployed members of garden households go outside the garden and works as daily wage earner in villages or in urban areas, public

work department's road work, grocery shops, brick industry, helper in building construction, school bus driver, cooks at hostels outside the tea garden etc. By doing such works the unemployed workers manage some money.

Table 4: Distribution of Cultivable Land

Area (in <i>bighas</i> )	No. of families	Percentage
Landless	54	36
1-2	11	7.33
2-3	38	25.33
3-4	22	14.67
4-5	9	6
5-6	2	1.33
6-7	4	2.67
7-8	3	2
9-10	4	2.67
12-13	2	1.33
15-16	1	0.67
Total	150	100

The above table indicates that 54(36%) families out of 150 sampled households are landless. 11 households (7.33%) possess land between 1-2 *bighas* and 38 households (25.33%) are the owner of majority of land ranging from 2-3 *bighas*. In the range of 3-4 *bighas* as many as 22 households (14.67) are accommodated. 9 households (6%) are the owner of 4-5 *bighas*, 2 households (1.33) are of 5-6 and 12-13 *bighas* respectively, 4 households (2.67) belongs to 6-7 and 9-10 *bighas* respectively, 3 households (2%) belongs to 7-8 *bighas*. Only 1 family (0.67%) possesses 15-16 *bighas* of land.

Besides, the labourers grow betel nut and betel leaf within their quarter campus. Though these are not regarded as cash crops, yet they occasionally sell these commodities to supplement their family income. Almost all the labour families produce some seasonal vegetables at home yards like cabbage, gourd, tomato, bean, drumstick, potato, radish, brinjal, cauliflower, papaya, pea, chili, lemon and other leafy vegetables.

#### EXPENDITURE PATTERN:

To completely understand the economic profile of the tea garden labourers the knowledge of pattern of expenditure is equally important. It is very difficult to collect the accurate data regarding the expenditure pattern of their day to day life. Efforts have been made to collect all possible data of their expenditure pattern. Moreover, the idea of collecting numerical data on the amount of expenditure is very difficult. Therefore, a close observation of their daily life and habit is made to have an idea that how expenditure is made in various sphere of their life.

Almost all the families spend whatever they earn in meeting the basic needs of their day-to-day life. Many of them spend a lot of their earning in *haria* consuming. Those who can afford resort the habit of regular or occasional savings with some organization like Bank, Post Office, Life Insurance Corporation of India and saving account under *Dhan Jon Yojona*.

Along with the savings in one side, there seems to be the tragic picture of indebtedness on another side, which indirectly exploited them to some extent. Total amount of money including the debt and interest will be a lot, may be more than the original amount which is very difficult for them to return the due. Sometimes, they give money lenders goat, duck, chicken etc. instead of the interest. In most cases major part of their cash repayment are done when they get bonus during the *Durga puja* and *diwali* time. Savings from the bonus is seen only among few families.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Indian tea industries can be considered as an important source of foreign exchange. Hence, for the development of tea industries quality of labour productivity and the steady increase in wages and other related cost of production need to be improved.

2. It is astonishing that the labourers are still being deprived of weekly holiday wages. The government should initiate some provisions to incorporate seven days wages including other holidays. Compensation packages, pension and other retirement benefits should be increased for the socio-economic development of the labourers.
3. The government and tea garden authorities should come forward to provide basic amenities for the labour colonies which include housing, safe drinking water facilities, sanitation etc.
4. Lack of saving habit is another cause to make them poor. So it is essential to make them aware about the family budget and motivate them to save a part of their income and if possible the government and tea garden authorities should initiate some provisions or introduce new schemes which make them compulsory to save their salary/wage with some organization.
5. Government and tea garden authorities should give some importance regarding the education of tea labour population and their future generation which will help them to be aware of their right and also to sustain a stable economic condition.

## CONCLUSION:

Thus the study shows that the migrant tea labourers have been working the same works related to growing and processing of tea since their migration to Assam. Working in tea industries seems to be like a family based employment whereas after retirement of one member of the family, another member of same family got promoted as permanent worker and an unemployed is employed as temporary worker. Moreover residential quarters are allotted to a permanent worker after retirement of one of his/her family which is continuing generation to generation. Tea plantation labourers are still paid very low wages. Although the labourers are generally given a chance to earn extra income by doing overtime work, but it generally does not exceed more than 7 rupees in one day. Moreover, they are not paid for Sundays. Daily minimum wage of Rs 95/- per day is the guaranteed factor in a workers wage and in the flushing season the 'output factor' comprising of Rs 3.50/- for extra one kg of plucked leaves is the pluckers extra earning. For nearly nine months in a year, a plucker is paid in accordance with both the guaranteed and output factors; their maximum earning occurs in the month of September-October and minimum in March. Between December and February they get only the guaranteed factor. The migrant labourers have very little in possession of cultivable land. Although it reduces family's economic pressure, in most cases the produced crops meet the monthly requirements only. Similarly seasonal vegetables in the home yards and livestock despite making a positive contribution to the overall economy of the tea garden labourers cannot be regarded sufficient at all for the whole family.

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