

Chakraborty
Principal

Kalpada Ghosh Tarai Mahavidyalaya

PRINCIPAL
Kalpada Ghosh Tarai
Mahavidyalaya
Bagdogra

Eastern HIMALAYAS CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Bedika Rai

Dr. Basudeo Thapa

Dr. Minakshi Chakraborty



Chakraborty
Principal

Kalpada Ghosh Tarai Mahavidyalaya

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Eastern Himalayas: Cultural Diversity

First Volume

Editors

Bedika Rai
Dr. Basudeo Thapa
Dr. Minakshi Chakraborty



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Editors

Bedika Rai, Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Kalipada Ghosh Tarai Mahavidyalaya, Bagdogra, Dist. Darjeeling, West Bengal.

Dr. Basudeo Thapa, Assistant Professor in the Department of Nepali, Kalipada Ghosh Tarai Mahavidyalaya, Bagdogra, Dist. Darjeeling, West Bengal.

Dr. Minakshi Chakraborty, Principal, Kalipada Ghosh Tarai Mahavidyalaya, Bagdogra, Dist. Darjeeling, West Bengal.

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Livelihood Pattern of the Tea Garden Workers in Western Dooars of Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal

Chakrabarty
Principal
Kalipada Ghosh Tarai Mahavidyalaya
PRINCIPAL
Kalipada Ghosh Tarai
Mahavidyalaya
Bagdogra

Dr. Suraj Tamang
Assistant Professor
Department of Geography
Kalipada Ghosh Tarai Mahavidyalaya
suraj.tamang46@yahoo.com

Abstract

The tea industry that has prospered throughout the Dooars area has a long history starting from the second half of the 19th century. The English traders found this part of the region very ideal for tea plantation. The people were brought to work in the gardens from the hills and from several parts of Bihar, Chhotanagpur area and southern parts of West Bengal. The tea gardens in this part observe "People of mixed community". Their life pattern, including culture and livelihood changed markedly over the last 150 year. This paper is the documentation of a systematic study upon the present scenario of livelihood pattern of the tea garden workers of the Western Dooars. The study was conducted on three tea gardens, namely Ranicherra, Washabarie and Leesh River Tea Gardens.

Keywords: Livelihood, Tea-garden, Culture, Economy, development.

I. Introduction

Tea (*Camellia Sinensis*) is considered as the most popular non-alcoholic beverage in the world. It is known that the tea, as a beverage was discovered long before the beginning of the Christian era. It is also known that by the end of the sixth century the Chinese began to take tea as a regular drink. In India tea bushes were explored in the north-eastern part of Assam in the early part of the 18th century. However, tea became the most valuable commercial commodity during the British Colonial period. Tea has now become the world's cheapest and most widely taken as soft drink other than water. Also, India is the largest producer and consumer of the tea in the world. As of 2013 the consumption of green tea in India was growing by over 50% a year. The major tea-producing states in India are: Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Sikkim Nagaland, Uttarakhand, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Bihar, Orissa. The financial year 2015-16 saw record tea production at 1,233 million kg and exports crossing 230 million kg after 35 years. The country exported 232.9 million kg valued at Rs.

4,493 crores. In 1980-81, export was 231.7 m kg; it had since level. Today India accounts for nearly 36 per cent of global production of tea. The major percent of Indian tea is mainly produced in the highland and lower land of Assam and west Bengal. South India also contributed for the percentage of the Indian tea. India is not only the largest producer of tea; she is also the largest consumer of this beverage. Our country contributes to 15.6 percent of the world tea export and it is 23.43 per cent of the total production of the country (Shah, 2013).

Total Production of Tea in West Bengal during 2007 – 2017 (million Kg)

Name of the Region	Category (Tea)	
	Orthodox	CTC
Darjeeling	107	
Terrai	-	312
Dooars	06	1328

Source: Tea board of India

II. History of the Development of Tea Industry in the Region

In the northern districts of West Bengal, the Tea producing areas including the district of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Kishanganj and North Dinajpur. North Bengal has about 450 tea gardens spread out in the Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars region that are registered as sellers in the Siliguri Tea Auction Centre Economy. It is rightly said that the economy of Dooars is based on three "T"s – Tea, Tourism and Timber. The main industry of the Dooars region is the tea industry. Thousands of people are engaged in the *tea estates* and factories.

A number of previous workers and organisations have produced documentation of the tea industry of the Dooars area in Jalpaiguri district (e.g., Dwibedi, 1999, Ghosh, 1970, Ghosh, 1987, Mishra, Tea Board of India, 1995, Karmakar, 2011, Shah, 2013, Tamang, 2014, Tamang and Chattopadhyay, 2014). In the past Tea cultivation was extended to the Western Dooars from the Darjeeling district, where, as a commercial enterprise, the industry was first established in 1856. Tea garden area continued to expand throughout the north of the Jalpaiguri district between Tista and Sankosh rivers in the areas where the land was not occupied by the reserved forest or river-beds. It is known that the first garden in the Terai area of Darjeeling was opened in 1862 at Champta near Khaprail, by Mr. James White (cf. Jalpaiguri District Gazetteer, 1907), who had previously planted single estate near Kurseong (Darjeeling district), and by the end of 1866 several other tea gardens were also opened in the Terai. During the period of 1866 - 1874 the number of the tea gardens in the Darjeeling district increased

rapidly and the area under tea cultivation increased by 82%, while the out was multiplied almost ten times. This inspired the tea planters at the foot hills particularly in the Western part of the Dooars to expand tea cultivation in the open areas and in 1874 a garden was opened in Gazilduba by Mr. Richard Haughton, who became known as the pioneer of the tea industry in the Jalpaiguri district. The Gazilduba tea garden was owned by Dr. Brougham. Fulbari tea garden was the next place to emerge.



Tea Garden Worker Working in the Tea garden

III. Growth of Tea Plantation in Dooars

At the Starting phase the planters were not very optimistic about the prospect of tea gardens in these regions. However, it was seen that the climate and soil of the western of this part was suitable for the growth of tea; government offered land to the investor on the favourable terms and the industry flourished very rapidly. In 1876, two years after the Ghazildupa garden was planted, as many as thirteen more gardens were opened covering an area of 818 acres and a yield of 29,520 lbs (approx. 14,000kg) of tea. By 1881 the number of gardens increased to 55 which observed an increase of more than seven times in five years. At the time of the last settlement in 1892, 182 grants of land was leased for the cultivation of tea, comprising a total area of 139,751 acres, of which 38,583 acres were actually planted with tea. In the present time, tea-gardens extend throughout the tract of Dooars. Some of them obtain their water from springs in Bhutan and fetch it down through pipes; the plantation workers living in these areas prefer these methods as they have no trouble in getting the water. Since

the year 1897 the tea industry in Dooars and Terai went through a period of depression. The high prices and general prosperity, which were the features of the eighteen eighties and early eighteen nineties, led to reckless extension of the cultivation in other parts of British India, Sri Lanka, and Java, with the result that the supply of the tea exceeded the demand. Prices fell sharply and the positions were rendered more acute by the fixing of the standard of exchange and by the dramatic increase in the duty of the tea which was imposed in Great Britain. In the initial years the natural extension of the tea trade, the opening of the new market on the continent, and the success which had followed the effort to supplant Chinese tea in Russia, America, and Australia had resulted in the great increase of demand for Indian tea and the prospect of the industry became more favourable.

Table 1: Details of the three tea gardens of Ranicherra, Washabarie and Leesh River

Villages under Tea Gardens		Increase in two decades during 1991 – 2011 Census years (in %)		Pattern of changes in the last two decades
Increase in land area		Increase in population		Increase in housing
Ranicherra Tea Garden	2.21	66.23	13.38	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negligible increase in garden area • High rate of population increase • Some increase no. of houses
Washabarie Tea Estate	36.52	197.75	28.52	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marked increase in garden are • Very high rate of population increase • Considerable increase no. of houses
Leesh River Tea Garden	8.69	64.04	18.09	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some increase in garden area • High rate of population increase • Limited increase in no. of houses

Source: Collected from the respected tea garden office

IV. Tea Garden Workers and Their Livelihood Pattern

The Tea gardens which were studied are located in the Western part of Dooars in Jalpaiguri district (Tamang, S, 2014, Ph.D. Thesis in preparation, Tamang and Chattopadhyay, 2014). These three gardens were established in the early fifties of the nineteenth century and are functioning till date. They have given large employment opportunities to nearly 15,000 workers directly and indirectly. With the increasing number of tea gardens in Dooars, the number of workers continued to increase. This has resulted in rapid growth of population in the Western Dooars area. According to the record the first tea garden in Dooars was opened in Gazilduba in the Western part (Gunning, 1907). The three tea gardens selected for sample survey are Ranicherra, Washabarie and Leesh River Tea Estates.

V. Overall Scenario of Composition And Participation of Workforce

In terms of composition of labour force, in the initial days there were four categories of workers: male, female, adolescents and children. Since the employment of children below the age of 14 years has been outlawed in the industry under the Child Labour (Abolition and Regulation) Act of 1986 now there exist only three categories of workers: male, female and adolescents.

Table given below demonstrates the existence of child labour till 1990 and the figures till that year shows that the number of child labour was much greater than the number of adolescents. Female work participation in the tea industry sector has traditionally been higher than the male participation as is shown by the higher share of female workers in the average number of labours employed compared to the share of male workers. In 2007 proportion of female workers in the total workforce in the tea plantations was greater than 50%. In a country like India where the work participation of women is notably low in most of the industrial sectors, this proportion is remarkably higher than the participation of women in other industrial activities. Hence, it suggests the presence of feminized labour in the tea plantations. Employers also tend to prefer women workers as: a) they are more patient than their male counterparts in picking tea leaves in proper manner (two leaves and a bud) for quality production of tea and also can be easily controlled and supervised at the work place. Another important feature is that the annual compound growth rate of female workers from 1961 to 2007 is 1.19% which is higher than that of the male workers (0.89%).

Year	Category of workers				Average
	Male	Female	Adolescent	Child	
1950	-	-	-	-	9,48,304
1961	3,99,907 (49%)	3,68,464 (45%)	25677 (3%)	22012 (3%)	8,22,834 (100%)
1970	342871 (45)	337364 (44)	23098 (3)	36113 (5)	759686 (100)
1980	372285 (44)	384641 (45)	31351 (4)	58382 (7)	846659 (100)
1990	453001 (46)	458519 (46)	24148 (2)	51113 (5)	986781 (100)
2000	570267 (47)	593571 (49)	46217 (4)	0	1210055 (100)
2007	600549 (48)	634214 (50)	25187 (2)	0	1259950 (100)
CAGR (1950-2007) (%)	0.89	1.19	-0.04	0	0.75

Source: Various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India, 2008

VI. Scenario Composition and Participation of Workforce in the Selected Tea Gardens:

Socio-economic status of the people living under the jurisdiction of any industrial sector depends largely upon the facilities and services provided by the authority to the families of its workers. Bearing this in mind relevant information was collected from the offices of the three tea estates. The variables selected for this purpose were: Housing, drinking water, electricity, medical facilities, education and supply necessary food stuff. The pattern of services thus provided by the Tea Garden authorities to the workers and their families of the three gardens under sample study has been listed in the table given below.

Table.3: Basic Infrastructure facilities given to the tea garden workers

Name of Tea Gardens Facilities provided	Housing	Drinkin g water	Electricit y	Medical facilities	Educatio u	Food supply
Ranicherra Tea Estate	√	√	√	√	√	√
Washabarie Tea Estate	√	√	√	√	√	√
Leesh River Tea Estate	√	√	√	√	√	√

It is evident from the above table that the tea garden management system tries to provide the garden worker whatever they need. Since the late nineteenth century, when tea gardens came to dominate the employment landscape and a sizeable section of the population began working in tea factories and gardens, the tea business has begun to manage people's quality of life. The workers who provided services in the early days of the tea business were compensated with extremely little wages, and the majority of them were employed on a daily basis as temporary laborers. They lived "Hand to Mouth" and had their own cottages near to the tea garden. Up to the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, this situation persisted. Since the 1950s, the tea estates and the living conditions of the workers have ostensibly improved. These changes were particularly noticeable in the gardens that included both tea plantation and tea manufacturing activities.

The well-known tea companies such as Goodricke, Washabarie, Diana Tea, Duncan's and Manabarie Tea Company in the Dooars area have made efforts to improve the living conditions of their workers. Tea garden workers are provided with the following essential equipment: Basic Health care, drinking water, and education for workers' children. In addition, workers are also given a small quarter. The selected tea gardens we considered are also equipped with all these facilities. Apart from the established tea estates, there are also tea plantations that only grow tea without providing tea processing services, and the living conditions of the workers in these plantations are not at the level expected compared to flourishing tea plantations.

About 200,000 workers work in the Jalpaiguri tea estates (Chakravorty, 1997). Their living conditions are very different from other workers, they are mainly employed on the tea plantation and have few opportunities to work outside the plantation. They are busy in the tea plantation from early morning to evening, from 7am to 3pm, and have little time for other work. The work on the tea garden is monotonous, dealing with the same fields every year. The tea plantation's peak season is from March to November, when a large number of workers are employed, as well as additional workers from outside the tea plantation for similar work. Regarding the tea composition or gender status of tea garden workers, a unique and important feature of the workforce is that more than 60% of the workers are women and employment is family-based (Khawas, 2006). While most of the workers in the garden (tea leaf picking) are women, the situation in the factory is quite the opposite, where the majority of the workers are men. Since the work is family-based, the tea plantation dependency rate is much higher than other sectors. See the table below for details on dependencies for each tea plantation.

Table: 4: Family structure, occupation and dependency pattern of the tea gardens

Tea Garden	No. of heads			Average Family size (No. of persons)	Nos. workers	Service sectors			FDP
	Male	Female	Total			Garden & factory	Business	Others	
Ranicherra	156 (52.35%)	142 (47.65%)	298	5.96	74 (25.00%)	50 (67.67%)	10 (13.47%)	14 (19.00%)	1:4.03
Washabarie	137 (54.37%)	115 (46.63)	252	5.04	63 (25.00%)	51 (80.95%)	2 (3.15%)	10 (15.87%)	1:5.04
Leesh River	151 (54.71%)	125 (45.29%)	276	5.52	81 (29.37%)	53 (65.43%)	10 (12.35%)	18 (22.22%)	1:3.6

Source: Tamang & Chattopadhyay, 2014

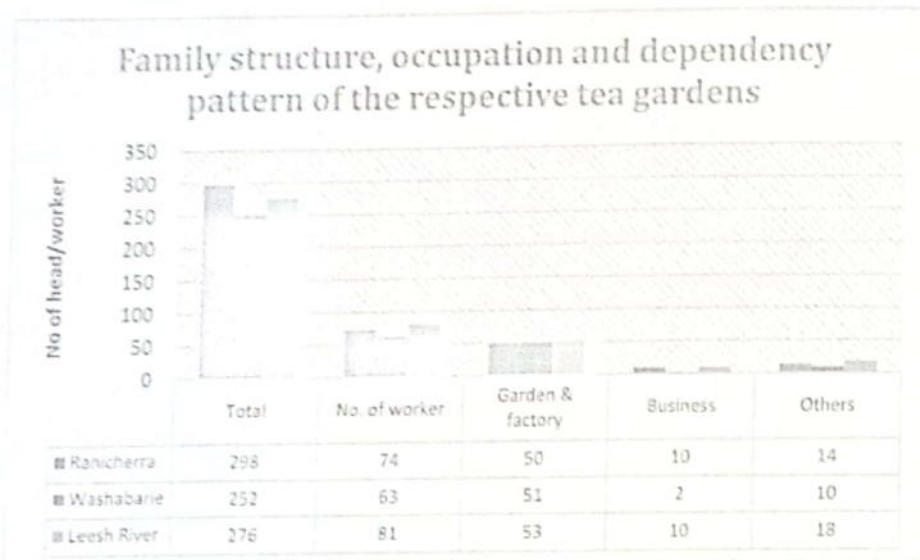


Figure: Family structure, occupation structure of the respective tea gardens

VII. Overall Assessment

Like the Darjeeling Hills, the Dooars region of North Bengal has a traditional character for growing high-quality tea, with a large proportion of the population of this geographical region making a living as part of this industry. Directly and indirectly, it provides employment opportunities for nearly 15,000 workers. As the number of tea estates in the region has increased, so the number of workers in recent decades has also increased. This led to rapid population growth in the Western Doors region. A thorough and detailed survey of the socio-economic life of tea garden workers on selected tea estates (Ranicherra, Washabarie,

River Leesh) which was established in the early 1850 and is still operating today. The assessment and facts are as follows.

- Out of these three tea gardens Ranicherra has experienced a) a negligible increase of land in the garden area, b) high rate of population increase and c) some increase in the number of houses of the workers with increase in households. In the case of Washabarie there has been a) a marked increase in the garden area, b) very high rate of population increase and c) considerable increase in the number of houses; and in Leesh River tea garden a) some increase in the garden area, b) high rate of population increase, and c) limited increase in the of houses of the workers have been observed.
- In regards to the composition of labour force, in the initial days there were four category of workers: male, female, adolescents and children. Since the employment of children below the age of 14 years has been outlawed in the industry under the Child Labour (Abolition and Regulation) Act of 1986 now there exist only three categories of workers: male, female and adolescents.
- Female work participation in the tea industry sector has traditionally been higher than the male participation as is shown by the higher share of female workers in the average number of labour employed compared to the share of male workers. This suggests the presence of feminized labour in the tea plantations
- Employers of the tea estates tend to prefer women workers because of the fact that a) they are more efficient than their male counterparts in picking tea leaves in proper manner (two leaves and a bud) for quality production of tea and also b) can be easily controlled and supervised at the work place.
- Although the tea industry is virtually run by the participation of both male and female workers, the pattern of participation varies from garden to garden. In Ranicherra Tea Estate proportion of male workers in the garden continued to be greater (>50%) than the female contingent. In this estate all workers working in the factory are male. A significantly different scenario is obtained in the cases of the two other estates, i.e., Washabarie and Leesh River where during the given years (2007 – 2014) the number of female workers dominate (>50%) over the number of the male contingent. Conversely in the Factory higher proportion (>80%) of the workers are male persons. This pattern continued all through the years of investigation, i.e., 2007-2014.

- Among the workers male-female ratio also varies from garden to garden. For the survey years (2007 – 2014) the male-female ratio in Ranicherra is 1.8+:1, in Washabarie it is 2+:1 and in Leesh River Tea Estate it ranges from 1.8+:1 to 2+:1. This reveals that the female contingent among the workers is markedly higher in the Washabarie and Leesh River Tea Estates.
- As far as the change in number of the garden workers is concerned there has been only marginal increase in the number of employed persons in the cases of Ranicherra and Washabarie while the number in the Leesh River Tea Estate shows a slightly decreasing trend.
- The average number of members in the garden families remains around five, showing an example of moderate family size. Certain variations in the dependency pattern (number of person in the family / earning member) have been found among the worker families of the three gardens, where maximum value (1:5.04) is found for Washabarie and the minimum value (1:3.6) for the Leesh tea garden.
- The pattern of services provided by the Tea Garden authorities of the three gardens under study shows that the workers and the members of their family receive standard infrastructural facilities of housing, drinking water, electricity, medicare, education (schooling) and supply of food through rationing system.
- The trend of village residents working in the sectors other than tea industry has become quite noticeable particularly over the last 2-3 decades as the new generation workable population is increasing getting attracted to works outside the tea industry. Some families have been found where the wards of the parents have left home and the area as well in search of better jobs other than that of the tea industry.
- Literacy pattern varies markedly across the three tea gardens studied. Percentage of illiterate persons is lowest (21.24%) in Washabarie and highest (37.25%) in Ranicherra. In the case of the Leesh River tea garden the illiterate proportion of the residents remains moderately high (31.88).
- Most of the gardens in the Dooars area have dispensaries and common medicines and basic treatment facilities for their labour. There is, however, a distinct absence of adequately qualified doctors.

- The most common diseases among the tea garden workers are Viral fever and Diarrhoea. Some sporadic cases of Jaundice, Malaria and Typhoid have also been found from medical records of the last eight years.
- The society formed by the tea garden worker is by and large a mixed society. They arrange traditional festivals as well as take part in the festivals arranged by the local Bengali people.

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