

Labour Migration in the Tea Plantations: Colonial and Neo-Liberal Trajectories of Plantation Labour in the Dooars Tea Belt of West Bengal

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Introduction

Tea plantations in North Bengal, as elsewhere in India, share a colonial root. More often than not, tea plantations were developed in regions that were sparsely populated, to ensure that sufficient land was available for the propagation of plantations in the first place. What distinguishes tea plantation from other industries is the fact that the production process is heavily dependent on human labour for both on-field and factory operations. Built upon the initiatives of colonial capitalists in the mid-nineteenth century, the tea industry had to be set up in areas where land was available in plenty but labour availability was scarce: this created a dependency on migrant labour. As a matter of fact, this dependency of the colonial capitalists on migrant labour was basically a response to the political economy of tea plantations. It is no wonder that the colonial capitalists setting up tea plantations— one after another — in Assam, Darjeeling or in Dooars-Terai zone of North Bengal, were heavily influenced by the experiences of cotton plantations in North America and the sugar plantations of British Guyana and the Caribbean Islands. It would not be too naïve to claim that the history of tea plantations in North Bengal, as elsewhere in India, can be broadly read as the history of labour migration. As we move further, it would be shown how in contemporary times the third generation descendants of the erstwhile migrant labourers are again migrating to other places and how this course of labour outmigration cannot be attributed to the self-evident laws of nature. There are reasons to ponder over this rampant outmigration currently taking place all over the tea belt of North Bengal, and it is also necessary to understand whether this outmigration is a problem in itself or a solution to a problem that has plagued the tea plantation industry as a whole. In the later subsections of the paper, we would also attempt to explore the significance and implications of this undeniable outmigration of the labour force from the tea plantations to elsewhere. What will happen to the ‘class question’ of the plantation labour? Will plantation labour survive in this changed dynamics of capital-labour relations? What are the modes of their servitude and what about their aspirations? What role has the State played in this regard? How are the trade unions coping with these challenges?

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Based on field experience gleaned out of several visits to the different tea estates of North Bengal and conversations with the various stakeholders of the tea industry over a period of more than two years, this paper attempts to examine the grave questions raised above regarding plantation labour outmigration.

Nature and Consequences of Early Migration in Tea Plantations of North Bengal

West Bengal is the second largest tea producing state in India, next only to Assam. It produces about 24% of the total tea produced in India. Spread over 1,15,095 hectares of land, the tea producing belt of West Bengal – popularly known Dooars-Terai-hill tract – comprises 330 tea estates located in the three districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, and employs more than 2.5 lakh workers. It is to be noted that the tea industry is the only organized sector in North Bengal having such a huge workforce as permanent labour. If we consider the number of *bona fide* dependents of the workers alone (there are staff and sub staff as well), the head count will further increase to an additional figure of 3,64,643 persons (*Report of Govt. of WB 2012, 2*). The forefathers of these more than six lakh workers and their dependents had all immigrated either from the Chhota Nagpur region (now in Jharkhand) or from neighbouring Nepal. Ethnically, the plantation labourers of the Dooars Terai region mostly belong to the central Indian tribal belt stock while in the hills they belong mostly to Nepali-speaking communities. The tribes and communities, whether from Chhota Nagpur or Nepal, were all recruited permanently to work in the isolated, malaria-prone, bushy tracts that had to be cleared up for the plantation to come up.

Table No. 1: Tea Plantations and Plantation Labour in North Bengal

Plantation Districts	Number of Tea Estates	Area in Ha.	Production in Ml. Kg.	Number of Workers
Darjeeling Hills	85	17818	8.62	54202
Dooars (Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts)	163	72918	144.80	168867
Terai (Darjeeling plains)	82	24359	76.35	39680
Total	330*	115095**	229.78***	262749

* *In addition there are more than 22000 small holdings whose sizes vary from 0.5 ha. to 10 ha.*

** *includes an area of 36000 ha. owned by small growers.*

*** *includes 76 million kg. produced by 94 Bought leaf factories (BLF).*

Source: ITA 2012

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It is significant that the colonial capitalists were interested not in individual but in family migration as this would ensure a reproduction of cheap labour; it would continue the supply of the beasts of burden whom they could easily discipline and push to the limits in order to achieve a greater capital accumulation. In the absence of any alternative economic vocation, and being stuck in a coercive legal arrangement, the uprooted migrant workers had no choice but to live a penurious and subjugated life facing atrocities, exploitation and denial. The migrant labour of the tea plantations of North Bengal during colonial times were, however, 'free' in the sense that they were not indentured and subject to penal measures as was the case in Assam. This, however, did not mean that the plantation labour in North Bengal were free from coercive methods of labour control. The point that we are trying to make is that plantation labour has historically been put under oppressive labour regimes that were armed with substantial powers – legal and extra-legal – to discipline the migrant labour in such a manner that their mobility and even their out-garden sociability could be thoroughly restricted. Hence the migrant labour force turned into a labour 'held in bondage in free market' (Das Gupta 1992, 66). In other words, the tea plantation sector, though capitalist, was maintained through an unfree wage-labour system. A multitude of restrictions continue to influence labour relations to this day. In addition, the isolated territorial location of the plantations, coupled with the restricted mobility of the workers throughout the colonial period, have impeded the growth of a free labour market for those who were historically drawn to the capitalist world.

Migration, Labour Regime and Changing Dimensions of Tea Plantations

The marginalized position of labour – a natural outcome of capitalism's foundation that talks about a radical separation between capital and labour – characterises the social system of the plantation even today. The 'margin', a necessary entailment of capitalism, was constituted by the history, sociology and politics of plantation labour, and led to various forms of ineligibility, partial belonging, and disorder – conditions either endorsed by the plantation authority or emanating from within the plantation as a capitalist system. This is, however, not to suggest that plantations are static systems composed of a stagnant labour force. In fact, a plantation is a part of a wider social system and any change in the latter will cause a corresponding change in the prevailing production relations (Bhowmik 1981). This framework helps us understand the nature of the changes that have occurred after independence as the ownership, authority and control of the plantation passed on from the colonial capitalists to the native entrepreneurs of the newly independent nation. It needs to be emphasized that the immediacy of independence did not challenge or obstruct the class basis of the plantation system. Though Government laws (such as the Plantation Labour Act 1951, Employees Provident Funds Act 1952, Payment of Gratuity Act 1972, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986 etc.) were passed and some degree of security was introduced, the

labour still remained at the 'margin'; in contemporary times, the marginalization has taken new shapes and given birth to new problem areas. After independence, plantation labour came under the purview of the organised sector – labourers were allowed to form or participate in associations/labour unions and their concerns were taken care of by the law of the state. Along with these modernizing forces, communication, media, and development initiatives have also penetrated into the so-called isolated captive plantations of North Bengal. All these have influenced the mobility of plantation labour to a significant extent. People moving out of plantations in search of better livelihood options is not an unusual phenomenon in the North Bengal tea belt, nor is it surprising to experience among the younger generation – irrespective of their level of education – an attitude of aversion towards plantation work. There have been isolated cases of plantation workers turning into peasants or becoming self employed or picking up petty business in the nearby urban spaces, or getting a government service and thereby leaving the plantations permanently. The point is that the instances of outmigration of this sort are symptomatic of the fact that the 'captive labour' syndrome possibly no longer applies to plantation labour today. These may be treated as instances of voluntary migration (implying choice on behalf of the incumbent migrant) that varies on a case to case basis. In true sense these sporadic instances can be seen as isolated individual cases that defy the pattern of large scale outmigration – one that has typically characterized the entire tea belt of north Bengal for more than a decade now.

Crisis in Tea Plantation Industry and the Concerns for Labour

Given the facts, one is tempted to argue that even after more than six decades of India's independence there has hardly been any fundamental change in the structural inequality of the plantation system. Historians have noted that the tea industry engaged a large labour force at the lowest level of wages amongst private capitalist enterprises in the history of colonial India (Behal 2006, 4). Even after independence, the wages of tea plantation workers were the lowest in the organized sector (Bhowmik 2002: 150). After several rounds of unsuccessful tripartite meetings amongst the planters, trade unions, and the State government, the state labour department issued a notification on August 29, 2018 announcing that the tea plantation workers will be paid at an enhanced rate. The wage rate has been increased by INR 10 from September 1, 2018 (they were getting INR 159 per day until August 31, 2018) and by INR 7 from October 1, 2018. As per the new wage rate they are now getting INR 176 per day. The government has declared this enhancement as an 'interim measure' to help the workers until the minimum wage rate is finalized; the movement for better minimum wages for the tea plantation workers led by the Joint Forum, a conglomeration of 29 trade unions, is yet to achieve their long-pending demand. It would be interesting to note in this context that the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) wage for unskilled workers in West Bengal at present is INR 191 per day. The implication is

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that a plantation labour can fetch more through their engagement in MGNREGA works (even within the plantations); by being a wage labour in a nearby locality (outside plantation) one can earn at least INR 250, if not more. Unlike Kerala (where the wage stands at INR 310.04) or for that matter neighbouring Sikkim (the minimum wage for plantation workers in Sikkim is INR 300), decent minimum wage for the plantation sector is yet to be a reality in West Bengal. Even the cinchona plantation labour is better paid than their tea plantation counterparts. From July 1 2018, the minimum wage rate for the cinchona plantation labour in West Bengal is INR 243.76.

The labour's list of dues is tremendous, with huge amounts of PF dues (INR 33,79,11,087.50 as management's contribution to be deposited) and unpaid Gratuity claims to permanent workers (10,60,200 workers were completely denied gratuity benefits), besides dues in wages, bonus, arrears, ration, and other fringe benefits (like firewood, umbrella, chappal, gumboot, blankets etc.). Most tea plantations in present-day North Bengal are lacking proper health care facilities, housing maintenance facilities and even safe drinking water facilities even though these are legal entitlements of the plantation labour as per the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) 1951. The worst situation prevails in the closed and abandoned tea plantations, numbering more than fifteen at present. In fact, we now have categories of closed gardens – some have been closed for more than a decade (Dheklapara, Kathalguri, Ramjhora, Dalmore, Bundapani, Ringtong, Panighatta, Tulsipara and Demdima among others), some closed gardens were taken over by the government but with no discernible improvement (Dharanipur, Surendranagar, Redbank, Hila) and some others are in the process of liquidation (Rungmookh-Cedars, Rangaroon, Pandam and Mohua among others). A lot of sick gardens are under the constant threat of abandonment by the management (Gangaram, Nageswari, Kumlai, Bagrakote, Samsing, Peshoke, Kallej Valley, Kilkott, Garganda, Dhumchipara, Grasmore, Naya Saylee, Shikarpur-Bhandarpur, Rahimabad, Patkapara, Mujnai, Kamala, Denguajhar, and Dalsingpara, to name a few). Besides, almost all sick gardens have to experience a *de facto* closure, although temporary, each year during the months ranging from November to March when there is no harvesting. The point is that the problem of labour in the closed, abandoned and sick tea plantations of North Bengal needs to be responded to through sustained efforts and institutionalized initiatives instead of quick-fix solutions.

Although estate abandonment and lock-outs are not new in North Bengal plantations, the crisis in the industry began to make its ramifications felt ever since the start of the new millennium. In view of the fall in auction prices and export – the fulcrum of the economic crisis as per the planters – many tea gardens of North Bengal were shut down; the ones that were still functional attempted to curtail the overhead cost on labour by deploying casual labour on a large scale. The Ringtong tea estate (787 hectares with 791 permanent workers) of Darjeeling hills was perhaps the first one to shut down (in December 1996) during this

period. This was followed by a series of such closures in the Dooars plantations during 2002-2003. The Kohinoor (880 permanent workers) tea estate was closed down followed by the Rahimabad TE (748 permanent workers), the Jogesh Chandra TE (950 permanent workers), the Mujnai TE (997 permanent workers), the Kathalguri TE (1479 permanent workers), the Ramjhora TE (1103 permanent workers), the Dheklapara TE (607 permanent workers), the Samsing TE (1103 permanent workers) and the Srinathpur TE (192 permanent workers): all were closed down one after another. The situation in Darjeeling hills – world's premium tea producing zone – was no better either. After the Ringtong TE, there was a spate of closures of tea estates in the Darjeeling hills during this period (2002-2003). The Sepoydhura TE (450 permanent workers), the Lower Fagu TE (480 permanent workers), the Jogmaya TE (196 permanent workers), the Ambiok TE (320 permanent workers) and the Glenbum TE (948 permanent workers) were some of them. Within a period of two years more than ten gardens had been closed, rendering more than ten thousand permanent workers absolutely jobless. Considering that on an average each worker had at least three dependent family members, the total population affected by the closures crosses 30,000. While some of these gardens were eventually reopened, usually with a new owner at helm, closures continued to occur until as recently as June 2018 – the Demdima TE, owned by the notorious Duncan group, was closed down in April, 2015, was reopened on March 18, 2018 and was closed down again on 21 June 2018. Since 2004, the closure syndrome rapidly engulfed the Terai and thereby the entire tea zone of North Bengal. The case of the Duncan's group of tea estates was especially notable – seven out of its 12 tea estates spread over the Dooars-Terai region were closed down in 2015. The list of closed tea estates grew longer with the addition of fresh entries like the Bundapani, Jai Birpara, Panighatta, Trihana and Simulbari tea estates, among others. The closure of so many tea estates became a hugely debated issue, not merely because more than 1000 deaths due to starvation and malnutrition occurred during 2004-2009 (official data restricts the death toll to hundreds) but probably also because one assembly and two parliamentary elections took place during the same period. The dire condition of the plantation labour led to an exchange of allegations and counter allegations between the Centre and the state: the entire North Bengal tea zone was flooded with political promises to revive the industry even as life in the coolie lines went on in abject penury.

There was a qualitative difference between the fallouts of closures that occurred during 2000-2004 and those that happened a decade later during 2010-2015. While the former phase was marked by events like malnutrition and starvation deaths – symptomatic of gross failure of the state machinery – among plantation workers, the latter phase was relatively free of such incidents. However, there were no qualitative improvements in the life of the plantation labour: a life of misery had become the new normal in the plantations of North Bengal. With the intervention of the state all plantations were brought under the provisions of National Food Security Act (NFSA), MGNREGA provisions were allowed to merge with plantation works and monthly allowances under the Financial Assistance for Workers of Locked Out Industries (FAWLOI) scheme were distributed among the permanent workers

of a handful of the most vulnerable gardens. While instances of malnutrition and starvation deaths decreased, the denials on other fronts like the PF dues, dues in gratuity payments, dues in bonus and dues in payment of health and housing allowances, besides an abysmally low wage, continued as before. This was the background against which one has to understand why the workers started moving out of plantations in search of employment, livelihood, income and security.

Decent Work in Tea Plantations: North Bengal Scenario

Analysing the vulnerability of more than 30,000 labourers of the more-than-twenty closed down tea gardens, and lakhs of others from the abandoned and sick tea gardens of North Bengal (Dutta 2014), it becomes imperative to think of the livelihood options for these deserted plantation workers. Given the structural specificities of the conventional mode of tea production in North Bengal, the livelihood of the workers is solely dependent upon the garden management. Accordingly, the employment, social security and politico-legal entitlements – the essential components of ‘decent work conditions’ – of the workers are destined to be denied as and when the management locks out or abandons a garden. Several studies have shown that the tea estates of North Bengal, barring a few exceptions, have failed to provide ‘decent work conditions’ to the huge number of workers they employed, the majority of them belonging to marginalized and resourceless tribal communities (Prasanneswari 1984; Abhishek Dacholia et al 2006; Bhowmik 2009). More than a thousand deaths were reported to have occurred due to starvation and malnutrition in several shut-down tea estates of Dooars (Kathalguri, Red Bank, Bundapani, Bharnobari, Dheklapara, Lankapara and Surendra Nagar, to name some) during the last decade; this bears testimony to the gross failure on the part of owners to provide good work conditions in the plantations of this region. This is forcing the workers – half of whom are women – to migrate outside in search of livelihood, often ending up falling prey to women traffickers (Biswas et. al. 2005; Chakraborty 2013; Ghosh 2014).

Promoting decent work conditions, and thereby securing the possibilities of inclusive economic growth, in the tea plantations of North Bengal is indeed an uphill task especially when the managements of the defaulting gardens appear to be above the law. Despite a Supreme Court verdict and several fact-finding studies, besides incessant attempts by the trade unions to get the reluctant management to guarantee the workers their dues, tea plantations did register remarkable growth. The government is rather clueless as to how to redress the workers’ plight. Its claim of promoting all the principles of ‘decent work’, in such a situation where the management cannot be persuaded to look after their workers’ life, work, security and dignity, is both ambitious and unrealistic. The vision of a tripartite constituent through which the goal of ‘decent work’ promotion could be achieved is difficult to actualise in the case of closed, abandoned, sick and even in ‘healthy’ tea plantations. Given such a reality,

how can the workers of North Bengal tea plantations aspire for social justice and equality of opportunity in order to claim freely their fair share of the wealth that they have helped generate? We presume that work is not merely a negotiable commodity that fetches the highest profits for the lowest price. Work instead forms the core of one's life world – a crucial component of actualising one's self respect, dignity, wellbeing and livelihood. In this sense, no economic enterprise – whether a tea plantation or any other sector – could be a self-propelling one. The International Labour Standard perspective also reminds us that all economic enterprises are to be undertaken not for their own sake but for the overall improvement of the lives of those whose contributions keep the enterprises rolling (ILO 2014: 10). How then to promote decent work and appropriate International Labour Standards in closed, abandoned, sick and even healthy tea plantations of North Bengal? A modicum of which, we believe, could contribute significantly in ameliorating the conditions of plantation labour and save them from their everyday vulnerabilities. An attempt was made to assess the tea estates in the light of decent work indicators as suggested by the ILO. The check list recommended by the ILO contains forty-nine questions. We put these questions to workers from different types of tea estates and documented their responses. The score sheet revealed alarming conditions. While closed and sick gardens were expected to fare poorly on decent work parameters, it is the score sheet for the running TEs that was really depressing. The running TEs secured twenty-three points, the sick estates scored twenty-two and the closed ones eleven. The country-wise score for India stands at thirty-eight. As per the criteria of decent work and their reflection in the forty-nine questions, the worst situation prevails in the closed gardens, followed very closely by the sick and running ones with almost equal scores, implying that there is ample room for improvement.

In the absence of any viable working strategy to cope with this grave humanitarian crisis affecting plantation labour, the government arranged a financial rehabilitation package as a stop-gap measure. Through FAWLOI, the government of West Bengal has been providing since 2013 a monthly allowance of rupees 1,500.00 (the allowance was only rupees five hundred earlier), only for the permanent workers (numbering 3185) of six (out of more than twenty) closed tea estates of the Dooars region (JLC 2014). Apart from this, Central government legislations like NFSA (National Food Security Act) and MGNREGA were promulgated in all tea plantations of North Bengal as a stop-gap welfare measure. What needs to be remembered is that the idea of decent work conditions is not to be confused with 'welfare supplements'. Enforcing statutory rights and entitlements of the plantation labour is what is really needed. Redressal cannot come from a welfarist approach, development doles or occasional philanthropies – the focus should be on improving the work conditions and ensuring decent wages. If the ILO prescribed Decent Work approach is at all desirable, then it needs to be duly enforced to annihilate the *status quo* rather than simply recommended as a welfare measure.

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Status Report on Disbursement of Fawloi to the Workers' of Closed Tea Gardens in North Bengal (Report as on 31.10.2014)

Si. No.	Name of the Closed Tea Estate	No. of Workers	Remarks
1.	Bundapani	888	FAWLOI have been disbursed to the workers @ Rs. 1500.00 per head per month up to 31.10.2014 and Ex-gratia have been paid for the Financial Year 2013-2014 @ Rs. 1500.00 per month per head
2.	Surendranagar	245	
3.	Redbank	748	
4.	Raipur	534	
5.	Dharanipur	309	
6.	Dheklapara	461	
Total No. of Workers		3185	

Source: Memo No. 1437 (2)/JLC/SLG, Dated. 3rd day of November, 2014. Office of the JLC, North Bengal Zone, Siliguri, Darjeeling

Problem of Outmigration in Plantations: Nature and Scope

Although there have been few comprehensive studies or quantitative data available on outmigration of the tea plantation labour, the question of outmigration has been generally referred to as a problem leading to scarcity of active labour. Research studies, few as they are, as well as dozens of newspaper clippings of reports regarding the Indian Tea Board and the proceedings of the Parliamentary Committees on Plantations, have referred to the issue of outmigration more as a nuisance than an escapable reality. What came out of the repeated visits made to several of the tea estates of North Bengal, from the several interviews and the formal and informal discussions with the different stakeholders of tea industry – workers, management personnel, trade union leaders and government officials – over the past one and half years, was the fact that outmigration was a common phenomenon in all varieties of tea estates – open, closed, sick or abandoned – of North Bengal, although its nature and scope did vary.

In the field situation, it was observed that in most cases the outmigrating lots were invariably youths (18-30 was the most likely age group for both the sexes). While marriage was no bar for the male outmigrants, the women outmigrants were mostly unmarried. Also, most outmigrants chose to move outside the state, with Kerala being the most preferred destination for the male outmigrants, followed by Bangalore, Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Sikkim, Bhutan and Kashmir. Outmigrating women/girls, on the other hand, preferred Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Pune, and Kolkata. For women, the jobs on offer in the destination states included jobs as governesses and housemaids, with salaries in the range of INR 10,000 per month, besides provisions for accommodation and food. The male outmigrants moving outside the state were mostly engaged in security services, driving, masonry works, construction labour, and

beekeeping. Payment structures varied from ten to fifteen thousand rupees per month. The drivers had opportunities to earn some 'extra' as the case may be. More often than not, instances of outmigration involved individual migrants, although the empty labour quarters noticed during field visits suggest that entire families migrating as a whole was not rare either. In the cases where the whole family outmigrated, most have moved to Kerala and found employment in plantations there. Sick gardens like Raimatang are now open after being shut down for a while but its factory is not in operation as the entire chunk of factory labour has left with their families to work in the plantations of South India. It would not be surprising if a 'little Dooars' gradually becomes visible in the plantations of Kerala or in the Nilgiri districts. Two further observations seem to be significant. Firstly, the cases of individual youth outmigrations, when compared in terms of sex, revealed that male outmigrations were more frequent than female ones. Secondly, when compared ethnically, the Adivasis were more prone to outmigration than their Nepali counterparts. In all cases, however, outmigration never took place unless a labour contractor came up with a deal (that was especially the case with Sikkim and Bhutan-bound outmigrations for construction work), or a kin network assured potential migrants of the availability of work in the destination state where someone from the family relations or from the same tea estate had already been working.

It was on his brother's initiative that Sohan Oraon (M/19 years) of Redbank got a job as a security guard at Mahendra Club in Kerala, with a small shared room to live in and provisions of food. He is on duty for eight hours; the club has three security staffs including him, all of whom live in the same 8×8 'quarters'. Sohan earns 9000/- a month. He returned after six months with some savings (INR 30,000), which he handed over to his father to repair their 'quarter' before their meagre belongings got spoiled in the imminent monsoon. "After all you need money to survive and from where one is to earn that? Our parental work site – the plantation – is closed for years, collecting and selling of green tea leaves to local agents is what my father now does for survival. I could have opted for a petty job in [a] nearby Mall or in Metelli Bazar or in Siliguri but how much that would have fetched? In all likelihood it would have been INR 5000. Thanks to my brother, who has already been there in Kerala for the last three years, to manage [sic] the job of security personnel that fetches INR 9000 per month for me. I would have opted for any petty job in the nearby locality had my brother failed to build up the required 'connection' in Kerala. Now I will go back to Kerala at least after six months as by then I may be procuring the 'needful' that would enable me earn at least INR 15000 per month." Sohan is now looking for occupational mobility in Kerala, which he thinks is possible if he gets the 'needful' (i.e., the driving license) in the coming months. He was back this time basically to procure a driving license and for that purpose he is currently working as a *Khalasi* (helper) for a local truck driver: occasionally driving the loaded truck full of sand or stone (*bajri*) collected by the deserted workers of Redbank from river Diana nearby. For him, working in Kerala is not a compulsion; on the contrary, outmigration opened up the scope for a new lease of life for Sohan.

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The common thread that binds all these narratives is the fact that dependence on outmigration is not a shortcut but perhaps a permanent way to escape poverty, unemployment, below-subsistence-level wages, chronic disease and malnutrition. There are other sides to the coin as well. Life in the cities of South or North India is not particularly bountiful for all. There have been numerous cases of male outmigrants going missing, besides cases of loss of limb in accidents at work site. Kanu Murmu of Demdima TE lost his right leg below the knee by falling down from the construction site of a skyscraper in Kerala where he went to work as a mason. Jiban Lakra of the Panighatta TE lost two fingers while working as a carpenter in Bangalore; he had to return as he could no longer work. With outmigration being a common phenomenon, the risks involved in it are not unknown to these 'foot-lose labour': ready to move outside the state, waiting for a proper network to build up or else awaiting the next round of call for a three-months contract to work as a construction labour from the neighbourhood labour contractor. Despite these risks, the workers are moving out as there is no other option left for them. Pointing out that outmigration is essentially a survival strategy that is not optional, Kishun Mahali of the Kilcott TE asks: "When outmigration brings answer to our immediate crisis then why there cannot be *pakka* (formal) arrangements that would secure the life and living in the destination". He was basically hinting at the missing cases, the cases of loss of limb in accidents and deaths while at work in distant places. He wanted something concrete to be done at the policy level to institutionalize outmigration and to offer a measure of protection to the outmigrants; it should no longer be seen as a problem but as a solution to the existing problem-stricken life in the plantations. Kishun's earthy reasoning is of immense significance: it pinpoints that our attempts to understand the 'root cause' of outmigration in the context of plantations is perhaps misplaced. Perhaps we should quit trying to 'stop outmigration' by analysing its causes, and instead gravitate towards initiating concrete steps that might harness the greater mobility of the labour for the benefit of both, the migrants as well as the places of origin and destination. This is indeed a laudable research agenda and one that deserves far more attention than what Kishun Mahali was hinting at.

Problem of Girl/Women Trafficking in North Bengal Tea Zone

Though the frequency of starvation deaths in the North Bengal plantations has reduced during the last few years, the menace of girl/women trafficking has been on the rise. Historically, women workers have heavily dominated the working population in tea plantations in India, and contemporary trends reveal that the proportion of women workers has actually increased from 49% during 1990-95 to 55% during 2002-2007 (Viswanathan & Shah 2013, 22). This makes the issue of outmigration more pertinent when considered in gender terms. There is no gainsaying the truth that outmigration for girls/women often leads them into the unsafe and insecure life of a sex worker. In the sick, abandoned and closed tea plantations, susceptibility to trafficking increases manifold. The girl/women workers easily fall into the trap of trafficking agents, operating openly as 'placement agents' within and outside the

plantations (Biswas et. al. 2005; Dachoia et. al. 2006). Faced with such crushing poverty, the young girls and women often become ready to move to faraway places with parental consent and support. In other cases, the trafficking agents recruit children and young girls either by luring them to a fancy life in the city or by deceiving their parents by paying a lump sum (ranging between INR 5000 to 10000), as a token against the ‘unmet’ assurance of a monthly flow of emoluments when placement is confirmed. Common destinations of such trafficked girls are mainly the north Indian urban areas like Delhi, Chandigarh, Punjab and Haryana. In many cases, the offer comes with the promise of a placement either as a house maid, cooking staff or care-worker but the woman ultimately ends up as a sex worker. Straight-up sex trafficking is also a common mode and in these cases the trafficked sex workers later work as agents. Brothels in Pune (Budhbar Peti), Kolkata (Sonagachi) and even Siliguri (Khalpara) were the commonest places from where a number of Dooars girls/women were rescued and rehabilitated by Kanchanjangha Uddhar Kendra (KUK), a Siliguri based anti-trafficking NGO working mainly in the district of Darjeeling since 2004. A conversation with Ms. Rangu Soria, an able member of KUK based in Panighatta (a closed tea estate of Terai), was indeed revealing. The experienced Ms. Soria, who has personally led many such rescue operations, particularly from brothels, was of the view that poverty is not always the determining factor; sometimes educated and ambitious girls fall into the trap of traffickers. She also stated that social media has given a boost to trafficking and that tea estates – closed or open – are not unaware of these new eventualities. Rongu shared that her organization had been instrumental in rescuing more than 800 girls/women sex workers directly from brothels, besides hundreds of cases where they saved the girls *en route*. It is difficult to find solid and reliable figures for sex trafficking, whether on a national, continental or worldwide level (de Sousa Santos, Gomes & Duarte 2010, 168). However, there do exist some studies that have focussed on the alarming frequency of trafficking cases in sick, abandoned and closed tea estates of North Bengal. Ghosh, for example, identified 1145 cases of girl/woman trafficking, besides 186 cases of missing girls/women thus trafficked, in ten closed and sick gardens of Dooars tea belt in 2010 alone (Ghosh 2015, 282-283). Our own experience while talking to the trafficked girl/women and their family members in Demdima, a closed garden near Birpara Dooars, revealed that almost every case of a girl/women who was trafficked, was unique in terms of its causality and procedural aspects. Not only did destinations, agents and routes vary, the basic ground as to why they were trafficked involved a multitude of personal issues (besides the known factors of poverty, unemployment, meagre wage, lack of education and awareness and so on) like being tricked into marriage, ill-treatment of orphaned girls by the stepmother, unfaithful and uncaring husband, influence of peer group, curiosity regarding city life and many such issues which are reflective of weak social integration at the societal level. The point is that the situation is going to worsen in sick, abandoned and closed tea gardens, and if not addressed in time, will result in social disorganization, which will be a direct consequence of failing to integrate people meaningfully in what is known as the plantation society.

Implications of Outmigration: From Labour Scarcity to Disposability

One of the obvious implications of the continuous outmigration of the active labour force, from the tea plantations of North Bengal to elsewhere, is the problem of labour shortage in the majority of tea estates in North Bengal. Discussions with the management of respective gardens, officials of the Tea Research Association and trade union leaders, yielded the impression that healthy gardens (like Songachi in Malbazar, Dooars) have moderately high levels of absenteeism (as per the Songachi TE office records it is 25%), while sick gardens are plagued with higher quantum of absentee labour (as per office records absenteeism in the Kilcott TE is as high as 55%). Trade union (TU) sources mention that outmigration from some Terai estates like Gangaram, Panighatta and Gayaganga is close to 70%. More often than not, the labour scarcity in North Bengal plantations is attributed to the growing instances of outmigration that have engulfed the entire tea belt. The management is happily propagating this 'labour scarcity' theory as this helps them in casualising the workforce, thereby reducing the overhead cost per labour and eventually further depressing the wage structure to their benefit. The TUs have succumbed to this situation by accepting the pragmatist stand of the management on 'labour scarcity', although they have been firm in their demand and mobilization to secure the long overdue Minimum Wages (MW) for the plantation labour. It seems that the TU firebrands are convinced that the absence of MW and other benefits as per PLA 1951 are the 'push factors' that forces the labour to outmigrate; they are unable/disinclined to consider the issue with the required political acumen. In fact, with each fresh batch of outmigrating labour they are losing out the agitating youths who could have consolidated the struggle that the TUs are waging. The more dispersed the labour is, the weaker would be its capacity for resistance. The prevalence of the idea of scarce labour has also led the labour management of North Bengal tea plantations towards a potentially incapacitating direction. The Deputy Director of the Nagrakata Tea Research Association of Dooars gave us a clue to ponder over. In his words: "In the absence of labour, the management has no choice but to welcome plucking machines. Given the reality of rampant outmigration from tea gardens, harvesters are increasingly becoming a need of the hour and machine plucking would become the trend throughout the Dooars tea belt in very short span [sic]." The Deputy Director was basically reiterating the stand that the Government and the Tea Board had already taken on the issue. The 102nd Report of the Parliamentary Committee on Performance of Plantation Sector (2012) endorsed the beginning of mechanization in tea plantations, on the grounds of labour shortage in the following manner: "There has been an increasing complaint about non-availability and acuter (sic) shortage of labour particularly for carrying out the field operations like plucking, pruning and spraying and the plantation sector being highly labour intensive (sic). The shortage of workers has severely hampered the routine activities that are carried out which adversely affect the crop productivity..... The Committee also feels that mechanization of all operations of tea is imperative for the growth of tea industry in the light of scarcity of labour and increasing cost of labour which accounts for about 60% of the total cost of production (sic) (2012, 34-35)."

The problem of outmigration vis-à-vis labour shortage in the plantations needs to be examined in the light of empirical understanding of the issues in which the dynamics of plantation labour often manifests itself as a competitive and mobile system of labour but paradoxically it provides labour little or no choice and freedom. The systemic results of outmigration – labour scarcity, for example – help plantation managements rationalise mass-scale casualisation and outsourcing (which cause a reduction in overhead cost on labour); they also provide them with an a rationale for mechanization and wage structure depression. The government finds in outmigration an opportunity to initiate large scale mechanization in the so-called labour intensive tea industry: a ‘doubly beneficial’ strategy to enhance production on the one hand and set free the remaining workers from their vulnerabilities, paradoxically by disaggregating the existing labour, on the other. The TUs are using outmigration and the consequent labour scarcity to their benefit, as a bargaining chip in their ongoing struggle for Minimum Wages for the plantation labour. For the workers, outmigration means a chance to escape poverty and defenselessness; a chance to lead a decent life. It’s a win-win situation for all the players involved in the process – directly or indirectly. Outmigration therefore appears to be benefitting all the stakeholders of tea industry but upon the debris of a seemingly lost battle.

The problem of outmigration actually illustrates the dialectics of capital and labour through a constant transformation of the working class, and the forms of labour-capital conflict. It is significant to note that in this overall dynamics, the idea of working class – the gravediggers of capitalism – has been greatly transformed. The unusual, though unavoidable, transformation – with the so-called ‘organised sector labour’ increasingly becoming ‘informalised’ – along with the problem of outmigration are just the tip of the iceberg. Interestingly, this transformation is taking place at a juncture when the tea plantation industry, although standing on the threshold of mechanization, cannot claim to have shed off its labour-intensive qualification. In fact, plantation labour regimes are not merely responding to but actually appropriating all the vices that neo-liberal labour reform discourses could afford to offer. Apart from making frontal attacks on labour rights and entitlements, plantation management regimes throughout India are putting forth arguments on the virtues of perpetually low labour costs (through adopting policies like casualisation, outsourcing of labour and partly also production, and restriction on fresh recruitment of permanent labour) and redefining formal employment [by promoting the ideas of self employment via a parallel discourse of celebrating the STG model (Small Tea Grower) as the sphere of vibrancy, entrepreneurship and capital accumulation]. Policies like promotion of entrepreneurial vision among the workers by including them as shareholders are carried out in an effort to sidetrack the workers from the labour-exploitation and labour-rights framework, since in such a framework the workers are seen as potential partners of the enterprise (this is what is happening in the tea estates operating under the Tata Global Beverages Ltd.). The disjunction between labour and the processes and politics of capital accumulation has become visible in the entire North Bengal tea belt with the campaign for a new ‘ethical’ tea trade, that brought in its trail politically non-specific notions of civil society,

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human rights, redemocratisation and an increasing emphasis on the role to be played by NGOs, Self Help Groups and Small Producers Organisations (SPOs), in creating and confirming a suitable labour regime discourse (implying a ‘resocialised labour’ attuned to contemporary capitalism) that could endorse the highly competitive ‘ethical trade’ of the agribusiness enterprises. To no one’s surprise, the various agencies propagating these global commodity chains and global value chains through different forms of certification or agreements (Fair Trade, Ethical Tea Partnership and TRUSTEA among others), are talking about ethics, about a worker-friendly production system and about benefitting the workers directly by minimizing the gap between the producers of the global South and the consumers of the Global North. All these new ‘ethical’ alliances of global tea trade make specific references to labour but with little focus on the class dynamics of labour. The reference to labour in these new arrangements is basically made to a depoliticized group that is animated by the assumption that increasing firm-level competitiveness will result in a win-win situation of higher profits for capital and better remuneration for labour. It would be interesting to note that many tea estates of North Bengal, despite having certification from these new frameworks of global commodity chains, still keep an abysmally low wage structure for the tea plantations workers and on this the so-called ‘labour friendly’ global value chain networks have nothing concrete on their agenda.

Confronting these transformations taking place in the overall tea plantation industry, the grossly underpaid plantation labour has to bear the brunt of a flexible labour regime that characterizes the plantations of North Bengal in contemporary terms. Low wages keep this flexibility intact as it places the labour in a state of vulnerable neediness, and in the absence of a strong working class movement to bring forth changes in the labour regime, the plantation labour is always ready to opt for a compromise, howsoever precarious it may be. The plantation labour, in this whole process, therefore become disposable lots, many of whom have already left (read outmigrated) to escape this hopeless situation. The lot that stayed back conform to four distinct forms of populations: floating, latent, stagnant and pauperized. In other words, forms of precarious work are operating even in the plantations – part of the so-called organized sector. The working population in the North Bengal plantations is in a constant flux – not only because of an unceasing campaign by the capital to reduce its labour requirements, but also because the consumption of labour is so rapid (particularly in peak harvesting times) that management requires more than double of its existing labouring population to work for a short time to harvest the tender two leaves with a bud before they turn into the unsuitable *Banji patti* (grown up tea leaves). This manic relation to labour is typical of tea plantations: the attraction of new labour at one moment, during peak plucking seasons, is matched by an equally strong repulsion in the next moment, as soon as the time-bound plucking is over. The floating population of workers has a definite correlation – even though a precarious one – with the permanently existing labour. In a situation where absenteeism in the existing labour force appears to be a rising phenomenon, the indispensability of this floating population increases manifold. *Cash pluckers, kg pluckers, bastiyar labour* are

some of the categories of people/labour that form a part of this floating population: people who are destined to earn as little as INR 5 per kg of plucked tea leaves and nothing else. Interestingly, this floating population moves from one garden to another and even the permanent workers of sick tea plantations prefer to become a part of it as it offers them at least direct cash at the end of the day, while in their own garden their wages are due for the last two months or so. The point is that outmigration in a different form takes place very commonly in the plantations of North Bengal and in this form even the permanent labour quite often turns itself into a member of this floating population.

The latent population or the second layer refers to the vast labour reserve populating the sick estates and also estates that are susceptible to closure-opening gimmicks. These are workers that are at the beck and call of the plantation industry. So precarious is the condition of the sick-garden labourers that they readily accept the chance to work at other plantations when needed only to be unceremoniously discarded the moment they are no longer of direct use for capital accumulation. Groups of potential workers moving out in groups from Panighatta (in Terai) or from Nageswari (in Dooars), in vehicles (leaf carriers basically) arranged by the labour contractor, to work for the whole day in Trihana (in Terai) or Juranti tea estate (in Dooars) as *out bigha* workers, is a common phenomenon in the North Bengal plantations. There is, however, no guarantee when that contractor will visit again after the usual seven days of such contracts. In the absence of regular work in their own estates, the workers, usually the women workers, keep moving in groups throughout the year at uncertain intervals to work in other estates.

The third layer – the stagnant population – is the sharpest representation of the precariousness that characterizes the labour force of closed estates as a whole. This layer has continuously absorbed the stream of workers who lost their job as soon as the estates were locked out, and represents a substantial reservoir of disposable labour. They eke out a living by collecting green tea leaves and selling them at varying prices to the local leaf agents linked with a bought leaf factory (BLF) or a nearby estate that produces tea with leafs collected elsewhere. Other options available to them might include working at a nearby brick kiln or a plywood factory (as was the case with the workers of the closed Demdima tea estate), and when such opportunities are unavailable they are reduced to doing the tedious work of collecting sand and stones in the nearby riverbeds (this is practically the case with the workers of the closed Redbank, Tulsi Para and Bundapani tea estates among others). They are the self-reproducing and self-perpetuating elements of the working class – the ones who were forced back further by their own devices (Jonna & Foster 2016, 8).

The pauperised population – those at the lowest level of the North Bengal plantations – emerges out of the stagnated working class of the closed tea estates. The pauperized layer includes those who are on their last legs – the demoralized ones who succumbed to their

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inability to adapt, those who were unable to work due to having lived beyond the worker's average life-span, victims of industry (whose number keeps increasing as more and more outmigrants are getting involved in construction works), the mutilated, the sickly, and the widows among others. This is also the layer that the trafficking agents target to find prospective victims of sex trafficking. While precarity looms large in the entire tea belt of North Bengal, pauperism seems to be the 'hospital' of the active labouring population and the 'dead weight' of the disposable lot (the floating, latent, stagnant and pauperised ones).¹

Coda

The concept of outmigration – projected through facts, figures and narratives – probably requires a few more comments especially when one is to think in terms of policies that may adequately redress the problem. Clearly, the arguments raised in the paper are not in favour of propositions that views plantation labour in terms of its radical exteriority to neoliberal labour regimes. On the contrary, it is argued that the political-economic *mélange* of people in flux – of outmigrants, trafficked, floating, latent, stagnant and pauperised populations – cannot be understood in isolation from the fundamentals of capitalist accumulation and the governing influence of neo-liberalism upon the tea industry as a whole. To conceptualise the issue of outmigration, two further comments are in order. Firstly, the need is to adopt a perspective on labour as a whole in the tea plantation industry and not on plantation labour *per se*. Hence the attempt made in this paper to show that the trajectory of plantation labour in North Bengal is far from linear or one that leads to a 'pure' form of wage labour. This was highlighted by the variety of labour regimes present, and the various forms in which plantation labour is incorporated into the circuits of capitalist tea economy, with blurred boundaries between the different categories of free and unfree labour. Secondly, to think in terms of a policy perspective for redressing the problems of outmigration and trafficking, at a time when precarious work conditions appear to be the 'new normal' for the plantation labour, one has to be careful about the approach taken to ameliorate the conditions of the working class in the plantations. The plantation labour issue is already overshadowed and bypassed by quick-fix, welfare-centric solutions – the governing principles of citizenship politics. What the workers need is not welfare nor are they aspiring for entitlements to be bestowed upon them for enhancing their capabilities or their skills in taking initiatives; they do not even need policies and programmes for alternative skill development. However, this is the approach currently in operation. The government is keen to promote citizenship politics at the cost of the politics of labour and displacement. Plantation politics – when viewed from the vantage point of the workers – is all about the workers' rights. Is it not at all possible to reach the domain of full citizenship entitlements via the domain of labour rights? Can't we address the fundamental questions of employment, wage and security for the plantation labour before channelizing huge amount of funds for sundry development initiatives?

Note

1. The analogy of ‘hospital’ and ‘dead weight’ to depict the condition of plantation labour in the present context is drawn from Karl Marx [Marx 1986 (1887): 603] who, while describing the condition of the industrial reserve army in the *longue durée* of capitalist development of wealth, has used these notions (for details vide ‘The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation’ the Chapter 25 in Capital, Vol. I)

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