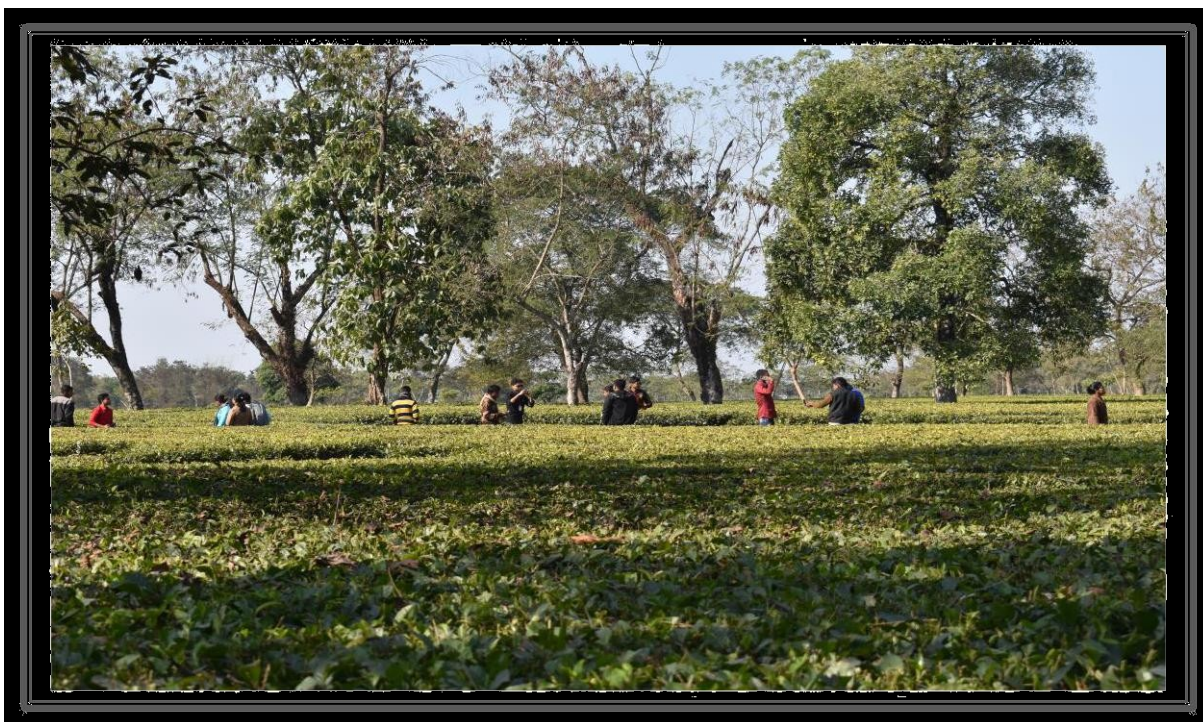


**FIELD REPORT ON**  
**STATUS OF HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY AND RELATED HEALTH**  
**DISEASES IN THE BAGRAKOTE TEA GARDEN OF JALPAIGURI DISTRICT,**  
**WEST BENGAL**



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**Session- January to July 2021**

**Introduction:**

The tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district located in Northern part of West Bengal, has been facing a severe crisis for the past couple of years. The situation is complex, with different versions and explanations, and indeed a vicious cycle of poverty affecting huge number of people involved in those tea gardens as workers. The growing trend of lockouts in the plantation farms leads to an abrupt reduction in income generation and ultimately food insecurity as well as malnutrition. The long tragedy of deprivation instigated a series of strikes and even cases of violent confrontations. Many Non-Government Organizations conducted a number of studies on the issues related to tea gardens during last decade but a comprehensive index of food security was missing. In this study a food security index of the tea gardens has been prepared to explore the real scenario of the households, dependent on tea gardens, regarding their food security. It is evident that unrealistic and irregular wage pattern, inhuman living conditions and frequent closure of the gardens are the focal concerns of this turmoil. Professional management, development of wage and rationing system along with necessary government intervention is needed to address such a problem.

**Research Problems:**

Most of the development and expansion in the tea growing area in Jalpaiguri took place in the early twentieth century before independence. In 1900, there were 67 tea estates in total Dooars region (Xaxa, 1985) [7]. Today this number stands at 150. By 1854 tea plantation was established in and around Darjeeling and Kurseong region, as a small nursery for experiment. But by 1891 the number of tea gardens that emerged was around 113. (Sharma et al 2008) [8]. The rapid commercialization of tea garden brought about a change in demographic profile, with sudden influx of labour migrants (Griffiths, 1967) [9]. Today there are almost 235 tea gardens in Dooars covering an area of 81,338 acres under cultivation. They are descendants of poverty-stricken peasants and landless people from the neighboring States, who were recruited and brought by colonial planters more than 150 years ago to work exclusively on the plantations.

**Objectives of the Study:**

The major objectives of the study are:

- ✓ To explore the situation of income generation and pattern of expenditure of the tea garden workers
- ✓ To analyze the pattern of food consumption of the workers and their family
- ✓ To construct a comprehensive Food Security Index for the tea gardens

## Hypothesis of the study:

The major hypotheses are-

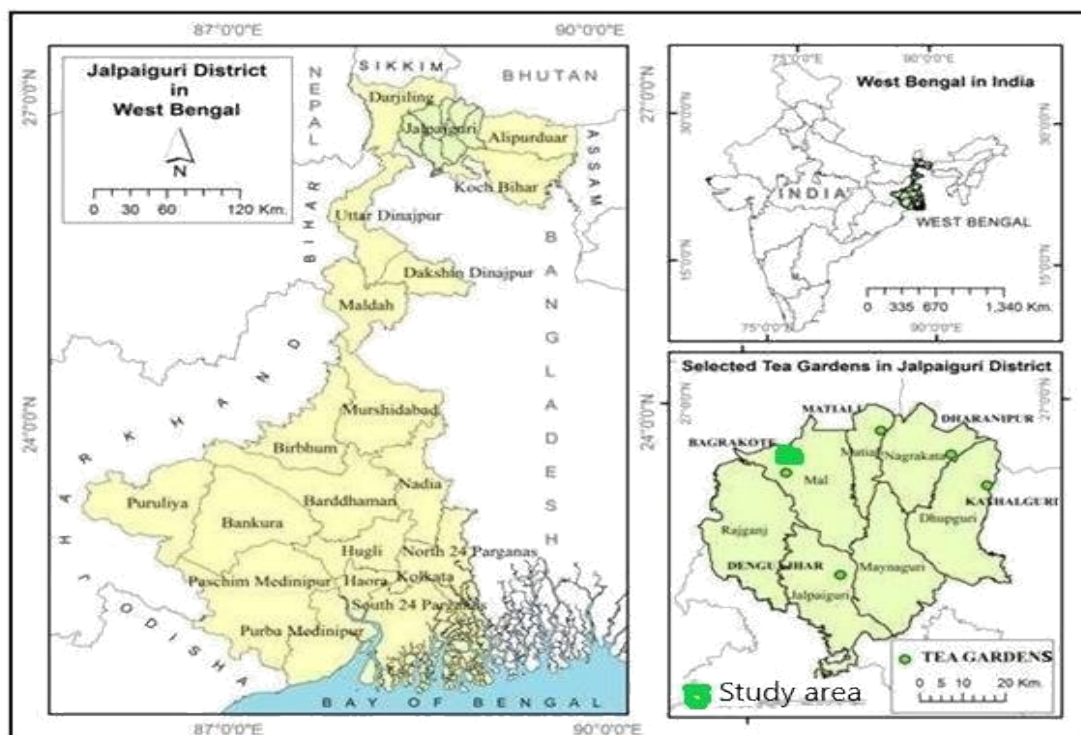
- There are many tea gardens are lock out in North Bengal
- Most of the tea workers are facing food insecurity
- Among the tea workers in the study are facing malnutrition problems.

## Research Methodology:

The present study is based on both primary and secondary database. Secondary data have been mainly collected from various available reports and Department of Labour, Government of West Bengal. Primary data have been gathered through an extensive field survey in those tea gardens. 50 households from the Bagrakote tea garden have been chosen randomly from different worker lines and they were interrogated with a framed questionnaire. After the collected data compiled and established in tabulation form that can be help to prepare the report.

## About Study area:

The present study highlighted the situation of Jalpaiguri district, covering 3386.16 sq. km, located in 'Dooars' region in the foothills of eastern Himalaya. The district is consisting of seven C.D blocks though most of the tea gardens are located in Mal, Matiali, Nagrakata, Dhupguri and Sadar block of the district. The district is situated between  $26^{\circ}15'47''$  N to  $26^{\circ}59'34''$  N and  $88^{\circ}23'02''$  E to  $89^{\circ}07'34''$  E having international border with Bhutan in the north. In this study we have selected Bagrakote Mouza and tea garden under the Mal Block.



## Map:1, Study area map

### Literature Review:

Tea plantation industry is one of the most important agro-based industries in India in terms of employment generation and foreign exchange earnings. West Bengal has 276 organized tea gardens, in which Jalpaiguri itself possesses 120, employing about six Lakh workers and it has been estimated that more than 2.5 million people are dependent on the tea industry. Nearly 32 percent land in the district is occupied by these tea gardens. The main economy of this district depends directly or indirectly on this industry (Lhamu, 2015) [1]. But, following the economic liberalization of the 1990s, the tea industry in the region has witnessed major crisis. Most of the gardens that became sick and closed after 2001 had experienced fall in production, with ageing tea bushes yielding lesser quantity of tea and often of inferior quality. According to an estimate, more than 50 gardens were closed between 2000 and 2007, affecting a huge section of the workforce (NTUI, 2011) [2]. A survey conducted in the closed gardens revealed that welfare schemes, the public distribution system, and basic amenities such as safe drinking water, healthcare, primary education, and electricity were practically non-existent (Chaudhury et al 2007) [3]. There are tea plantations in other Indian States, including Assam and Kerala but West Bengal has worse labour conditions (Bhadra, 1992) [4].

### Result and Discussion:

West Bengal, which is below the minimum wages of agricultural labour, i.e. 206. As the wages are very low the workers cannot afford even the basic needs of their life. But the workers actually get 92 in hand as rest of the wage is generally deducted for Provident Fund (PF) and other facilities and they got work for 24 days a month. As a result, a worker can earn merely 2,200 in a month to sustain the life of all the members, dependent solely on him or her in the family Throughout the study especially during the field survey, the hardship of livelihood of the tea garden workers has been observed. The simple, honest and hard workers want to live a simple life with their family. They just want simple regular food, some medical support during emergency and a small but repaired house to live. But these small and minimum requirements are not fulfilled by the feudalistic system of plantations, where betrayal of 'Plantation Labour Act' happening again and again.

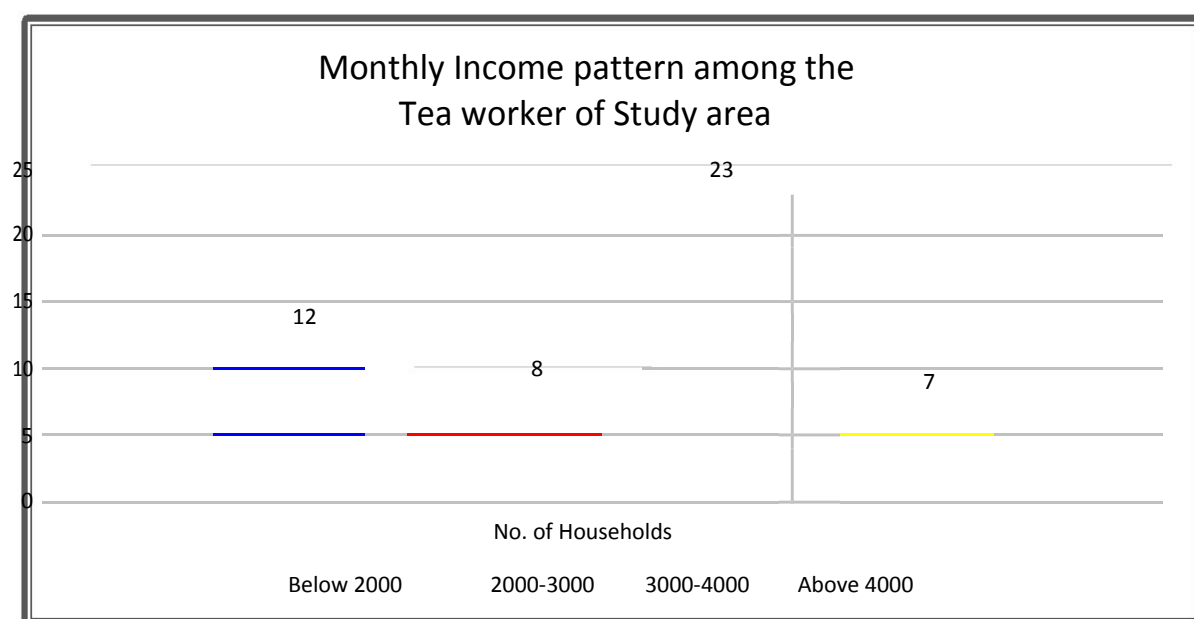
**Income Generation:** It has been claimed that employment conditions in the tea industry of West Bengal are highly exploitative as the wages of workers in West Bengal is the lowest among all tea-growing states in the country (Bhowmik 1981). To compensate for low wages, employers are supposed to ensure non-cash provisions such as subsidized rations for wife and two dependent children, two and half piles (A specific quantity) of firewood for each permanent worker per year; and *pucca* or non-*pucca* houses. Additionally, a worker is

entitled to free medical care, safe drinking water, electricity, transport, support for children's education, crèches, house repairs, and so on, according to the Plantations Labour Act of 1951. The wages of a tea garden worker is 122.50 in West Bengal, which is below the minimum wages of agricultural labour, i.e. 206. As the wages are very low the workers cannot afford even the basic needs of their life. But the workers actually get 92 in hand as rest of the wage is generally deducted for Provident Fund (PF) and other facilities and they got work for 24 days a month. As a result a worker can earn merely 2,200 in a month to sustain the life of all the members, dependent solely on him or her in the family. The job assignment under 'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' (MGNREGA) is also very irregular. The workers merely get a chance to work 15-30 days a year under this scheme. The delayed payment process, political intervention and administrative lacunae have made the situation more difficult. In presence of low wage pattern in the tea gardens, proper implementation of MGNREGA can play a vital role to make provision of more income for the workers to survive.

Table:1, Monthly income pattern of the Bagrakote Mouza Tea worker

Income Category (in Rs.)	No. of Households
Below 2000	12
2000-3000	08
3000-4000	23
Above 4000	07

Source: Field Survey



## 7.1 Pattern of Expenditure on Food

Income level of the workers cannot afford a highly nutritious food to the family members. After spending seventy to eighty percent of their entire income they can only manage two square meals of food a day. IV it is clear enough that, major part of the total expenditure for food is spent for buying cereals like rice and wheat only. So, the entitlements of Public Distribution System (PDS) are not enough to feed all members of the family. As majority of the workers came under the purview of *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (AAY) under National Food Security Act (NFSA), they get only 35 kg cereals including rice and *atta* for the whole family irrespective of the family size. They have little money left to buy other essential food items like pulses, fish or meat, milk and fruits along with vegetables. They spend only 10 to 20 percent of their total expenditure sometimes less than 10 percent to buy animal protein like milk, fish and meat apart from fruits. The precarious scenario of carbohydrate-based food habit due to low purchasing power is conspicuous almost in every tea garden. In closed tea garden like Dharanipur the situation is worse with a huge due for payment. In Denguajhar and Matiali the situation is slightly better. They spend some little more for pulses and other nutritious food items. In fact, the income of a tea garden worker falls far short of dream of a wholesome food.

## 7.2 Health Care Facilities

There are serious complaints about the quality of health services provided, including the medicines given. Considering that tea garden workers are exposed to several occupational diseases such as tuberculosis and that they live far away from the government hospitals, the absence of proper medical facilities, including qualified doctors, is a matter of major concern. It is obvious that if basic and life-supporting facilities are not available in the tea gardens, other facilities like crèches, proper sanitation will also be non-existent. Among others, the most contentious issue for stakeholders is the non-availability of safe drinking water and electricity. Parents and children of all labour lines complain about insufficient and poor quality of drinking water provided to them by the company managements. For example, Kathalguri tea garden has only one source of drinking water, provided by the management. About 6,727 persons are dependent on the single source of water which is located at a distance of three km from some households. The upper line *basti* collect their drinking water from a nearby *jhora* which is full of dolomite particles. So, it is not surprising enough that the tea garden workers became vulnerable to some major diseases like Alzheimer's, diabetes and formation of stone in kidney.

## 7.3 Status of Food Security in the Tea Gardens

The workers are totally dependent on the tea garden (Chakraborty, 2013) [12]. The workers' dependence becomes most obvious when plantation farms close down and these helpless people have nowhere to go and without any savings, these tea garden workers are forced to reduce their food intake. Some family members (inclusive of children and adolescents) may migrate or manage to take up any sort of irregular job available near the plantation while others no other option except starve to death.

To find out the food security status of the tea gardens, an attempt has been made to prepare a comprehensive Food Security Index (FSI). Through such a mechanism most important trio of food security (Availability, Accessibility and Utilization of Food) has been analyzed taking eleven different indicators which cover almost every possible dimensions of food security. As food security involves three of its dimensions, i.e. availability, accessibility and utilization of food, it has been observed in the tea gardens that development or deterioration in these aspects directly affect overall scenario of food security.

### **Recommendations:**

To get rid of such severe conditions different Government entities, NGOs, tea garden owners, effective trade unions, workers and individuals have to work together and thereby develop a systematic management system of the gardens (Rasaily, 2013) [13]. If the garden runs smoothly without suspension or closure, then all the stakeholders can sustain despite ups and downs in the market. Some steps have to be adopted by different entities to win over the prevailing situation. In a nut shell these are as follows:

- I. Government has to ensure that wages of the tea garden workers are in conformity with the 'Minimum Wages Act' (MWA) and are duly paid with full transparency by the owners of the tea gardens.
- II. Urgent attention is needed for the closed tea gardens that have been abandoned by the owners; in this context, the Government of India and State Government have the obligations to provide immediate support to the workers to guarantee the provision of food rations. Both the governments have to ensure that unpaid wages, gratuity and provident fund are duly paid by the tea garden owners and to prosecute those owners who fail to fulfill their legal obligations.
- III. Both the governments have the liability of providing adequate facilities to the workers for making provisions of safe drinking water and sanitation, medical and educational infrastructure, regular supply of electricity and livable housing in case of closed and abandoned estates too.



- IV. Transformation of the closed tea gardens into cooperatives of workers managed by themselves can be an effective management alternative.
- V. Different Government schemes like NFSA, MGNREGA, Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) etc. have to be implemented properly.
- VI. Government and the owners of the tea gardens shall implement an effective health care policy for the workers through construction new hospitals, recruitment of fresh medical officers along with trained nurses. Proper pre-natal and post-natal care should be provided to the women workers to create an ambience of mutual trust.
- VII. The rationing system need to be modified. Cooperatives of the workers may be appointed as dealers of rationing in collaboration with the garden owners to bring transparency and accountability in Public Distribution System.
- VIII. The trade unions have to be more responsible to make the workers aware about their proper right and have to create an environment of healthy work culture in which the tea gardens can run smoothly without any '*Bandh*' or '*Hartall*'. The garden owners will have to take the onus of not opting for closure or lay- off.
- IX. It was opined by several respondents that the Government could treat tea plantation as part of the afforestation programme, since the quality of green cover provided by the tea plantations dotted with trees would be better than the natural forests rendering justice to soil conservation on one hand and economic benefits for the society on the other. (Sankrityayan 2006) [14].
- X. Government organizations and NGOs shall put a hawk eye on social and legal protection against discrimination of women and girls, throughout their life cycle in general and against human trafficking, child labour, under age and forced marriage in particular.

### **Conclusion:**

The overall study brings out the fact that, tea garden workers are at the mercy of the garden owners and management. For generations, they have been tied to tea plantations and thereby, reduced to the level of bonded- workers; without ownership of the land they have been working and living on without any alternative sources of livelihood. The hunger and food insecurity of the people is prevailing all along the green lush undulating landscape irrespective of the status of the tea garden; good, sick or closed. The chronic violation of human rights in tea plantations requires a structural change. Widespread unawareness and illiteracy have profound impact on the labour psychosis. The venture of the government to develop the region as a hotspot of tourism should also have a focus on providing



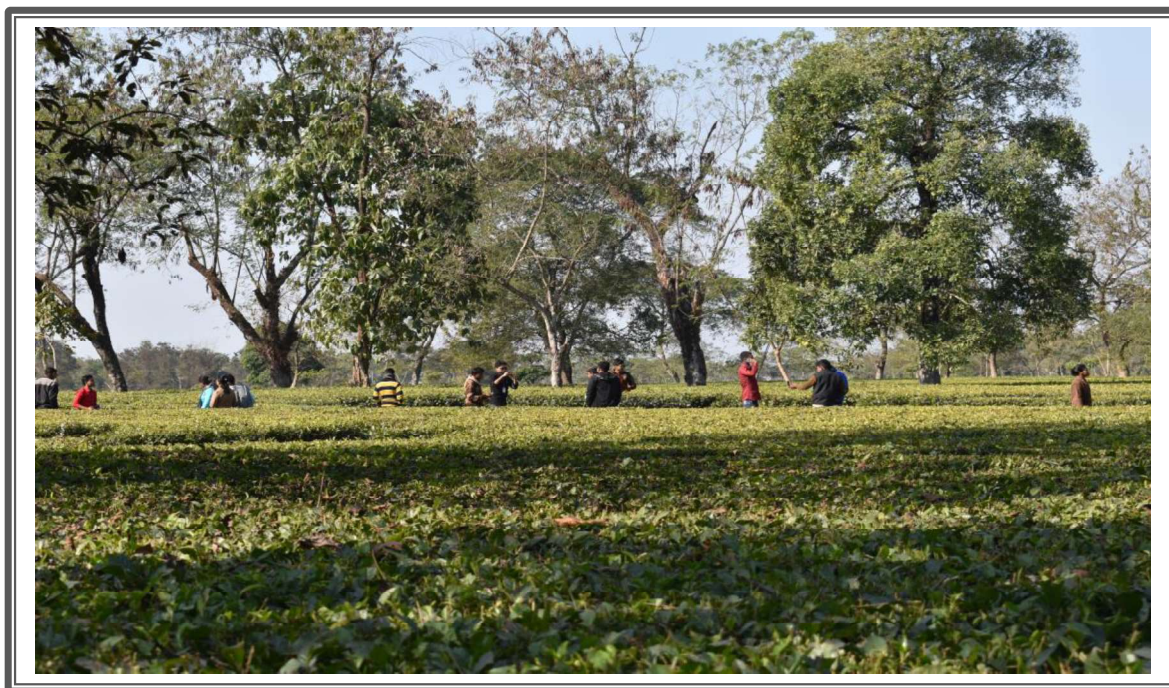
opportunities to these down to earth people who have lost their livelihood to destiny. Higher income generation thus assuring higher purchasing power can only provide them a secure life style which is which is free from hunger and malnutrition.

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