

# Challenges of Women Workers in Tea Plantation Industry

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## ABSTRACT

Women workers and their role in the tea plantations have received relatively scant attention in plantation literature and women's studies although they dominate the tea industry. Women workers are an asset and backbone of the tea industry, and despite their contributions women workers have always been relegated to the bottom strata and considered the most abundant and cheapest labour force rather than as a source of specialised labour. Workers still earn meagre incomes, suffer from levels of health care and personal well-being, lives entrapped in poverty and are cut off from the main stream. The entire spectrum of elements, which acts as a barrier to the equitable participation of women in development, ranges from education, training, health, cultural and social considerations. This paper deals with the participation of women in the workforce and the impact on their socio-economic life. It also examines the ways in which women workers are marginalised on multiple fronts: casualization of the workforce, upward occupational mobility and political space of trade unions.

**Keywords:** Women workers, tea plantations, backbone, education, training, health care, workforce

## INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has been the oldest form of activity practiced by people in the civilized world. Though many of the development countries have moved away from agriculture to industrialization as their main stay of economic activity, there is no ruling out of agriculture as part of the basic economic activity in any part of the world. There are still certain parts of globe, where agriculture is predominantly influential in determining well-being of the people. India is an agricultural country. About 70% of the people are engaged in agricultural activities. Plantation is a part of agriculture and it directly employs more than 2 million workers in the country. Plantation plays a very crucial role in the export agriculture produce. About 15 percent of the total export earnings of agriculture products come from like Tea, coffee and rubber, although these plantations occupy only one percent of the cropped area. Plantations are economic entities connected historically with certain crops. A plantation crop normally is a monoculture and includes growing of variety of products like Tea, coffee, rubber, pepper & other spices etc. cultivation of crops is taken-up in areas which are conducive to their growth and is mainly determined by the consideration of rainfall, altitude where estates are situated and availability of labour. It is seen that the traditional areas of plantation crops are undergoing a change and newer and newer areas are taking to growing plantation crops. The main reason for such an expansion is the growth in markets, both domestic and foreign. The main feature of plantations in India is their structural concentration in terms of their size. The bulk production of tea 80% is accounted by the corporate sector or by large estates, whereas the bulk production in rubber 87% and coffee 60% comes from the small holdings. A

majority of the workers in the plantation sector are women. The reason for this is that these plantations are historically linked with colonialism. The plantations in remote areas and were sparsely populated during the colonial period. As a result, families were employed rather than individuals, thus absorbing women in the labour force. This work force does not possess any skills other than plucking leaf and the workers are mostly landless.

## **PLANTATION INDUSTRY**

Plantations are farms specializing in cash crops usually mainly planting a single crop, with perhaps ancillary areas for vegetables for eating and so on. Plantations, centered on a plantation house, grow crops including cotton, cannabis, coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar cane, opium, sisal, oil seeds, oil palms, fruits, rubber, trees and forest trees. Protectionist policies and natural comparative advantage have sometimes contributed to determining where plantations are located. In modern use, the term usually refers only to large scale estates. Some of the problems with plantations come from the fact that most are monocultures, that is there is only one kind of crop that is grown there. This makes them vulnerable to pests, for example. Among the earliest examples of plantations were the latifundia of the Roman Empire. They produced large quantities of wine and olive oil for export.

## **TYPES OF PLANTATION**

Here are some common types of crops that are used in plantation agriculture.

### **1. Coffee plantation:**

Coffee plantation has a huge demand in both national and international markets. The warm climate of India serves as the ideal farming condition for this crop. This is why coffee plantation in India is practiced on a large scale. States like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala are the leading producers of coffee.

### **2. Tea plantation:**

India is the one of the largest tea producers and exporters in the world. It exports a significant amount of tea annually. Tea plantation farming in India is a great venture to get started as this commodity has a huge demand across the globe. The east most states of India like Assam and west Bengal are the best areas for this crops. However, tea plantations are also seen in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh.

### **3. Rubber plantation:**

Rubber plantations in India are an important agriculture activity, contributing significantly to the country's rubber production. Rubber cultivation in India is primarily concentrated in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, as well as some parts of North eastern states like Tripura and Assam.

### **4. Palm oil plantation:**

India states like Telangana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka are perfect for palm oil plantations are the tropical climate of these regions is perfect for the cultivation of this crop.

### **5. Fruit plantation:**

Fruit plantation is one type of plantation farming that can be performed in almost all regions. Farmers can grow fruits according to the climate conditions of that area. For example, the hilly areas like Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir for the cultivation of fruits like apples, oranges, pineapples, and many more.

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PLANTATION INDUSTRY

1. **Monoculture** – plantation crops are typically grown as monocultures, meaning a single crop is grown on a large scale over a wide area. This uniformity can simplify management and increase but also makes the crop more susceptible to diseases and pests.
2. **High-value cash crops** – plantation crops are generally high-value cash crops. They are commercially grown primarily for sale, not for local consumption.
3. **Specific climate requirement** – plantation crops often require specific climate conditions. Most are grown in tropical or subtropical regions, as these crops usually require a warm and humid climate.
4. **Labour intensive** – plantation crops are labour intensive. They often require a significant amount of manual labour for planting, caring for the crops, and harvesting. This labour need often provides employment opportunities for many people, especially in developing regions.
5. **Capital intensive** – The cultivation of plantation crops requires substantial investment. This is due to the need for large areas, high-quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and in many cases, advanced machinery for planting and harvesting.
6. **Long gestation period** – many plantation crops have a long gestation period. For instance, a rubber tree, after being planted, may take up to seven years to mature and become ready for latex tapping.
7. **Processing Requirement** – Most plantation crops need to be processed before they can be used or consumed. For example, coffee beans must be dried, roasted and ground before being used to make coffee.
8. **Large scale production** – As the term ‘plantation’ suggests, these crops are usually grown on a large scale. This large scale production is often associated with the commercial purpose of these crops.
9. **Export Oriented** – Since plantation crops are high value cash crops, they are often grown for the international market. Thus, they play a vital role in the export earnings of many countries.
10. **Sensitive to market fluctuations** – This price of plantation crops on the international market can fluctuate widely, affecting the income of farmers and nations that depend heavily on these crops.

## DETAILED ABOUT TEA PLANTATION

- Much of the world’s tea is harvested on plantations called “estates” or “gardens”. Many of these have ski-tow-like ropeways and chutes that are used to carry leaves to where the leaves are processed. The tea industry is a labour-intensive business driven by thousands of peasants who pluck and dry the leaves and are paid very little- often less than \$1 a day- but usually live in free housing in crude dormitories on the estate where they work, and they are given free medical care and education.
- Tea bushes are grown from cutting or seeds. They take about four years to mature. When they are six to 18 months old they are planted in the plantation and when they get a little bigger they are replanted into their permanent spot in a row at the plantation about four feet apart. About 3000 plants grow in a hectare of land.
- Tea grows best on sloping terrain. Tea plants on mountains and hills rest on carefully constructed terraces that trap water and prevent erosion. Sometimes trees are planted for shade and windbreaks. Plants grown in low regions are ready to harvest after three years. Plants grown in high regions are ready to harvest after five years.

## **WOMEN WORKERS IN TEA PLANTATION INDUSTRY**

A majority of the workers in the plantation sector are women. The tea industry in Assam heavily relies on the contribution of women who constitute over fifty percent of the workforce. Historically, women have played pivotal roles in Indian tea production, primarily as pickers and farmers. Despite enduring exploitation during the colonial era, characterised by low wages, long hours, and inadequate facilities, these women have displayed remarkable resilience.] They are mostly entrusted with particular set of work mostly plucking and pruning which are tagged as requiring feminine attributes and skills. This also shows how women were given the crucial, labour-intensive task of plucking tea leaves based on their 'nimble fingers'. In India plantation is one of such industry where women's employment has been steadily increasing. Women workers used to get lesser wages than men workers. Being women they face many problems as workers.

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WORKERS IN TEA PLANTATION INDUSTRY**

In the present study, it is operationally defined as the inconveniences faced by the women plantation workers in performing various tasks at the tea garden or tea garden factory. Their tasks include; plucking of tea leaves, weeding, nursery work, column cutting, cleaning of drains and other factory etc. Half of the labour force is constituted by women. In plantation industry the women tea workers face the double burden of being labourers.

1. The female labourers are seen mostly in the fields and engaged in the art of plucking.
2. They need to remain away from their homes for at least eight hours per day, spend more extended hours at work than a man does, and also require faster speed to earn better wages. This results in higher pressure on women to increase productivity.
3. Plantation work entails a demanding and exacting work schedule on the workers to keep labour expenses down.
4. The companies do not offer long-term, protected work contracts to the workers to keep the chance open to move their capital wherever they find a more significant cost advantage.]
5. Women workers usually perform the most hazardous work such as carrying heavy loads on uneven terrain.]
6. At times plucking is done amidst harsh climates such as scorching heat or even in rain. They are easily susceptible to water-borne diseases while in the field.
7. Reports have shown that in some of the tea gardens, there were disproportionately high numbers as permanent workers. This has impacted their life's every aspect, including their ability to access basic social services.]
8. Women pluck tea leaves with their bare hands, as a result, they are exposed to certain chemicals sprayed on tea leaves which affects their health.
9. There are no medical facilities available
10. There are issues related to exposure to the chemicals used in plantation estates which may affect their health.
11. In addition to that tea gardens during summers are prone to snakes which can be a threat for these women plucking tea leaves for hours likewise, during winters and rainy seasons mosquitoes and frogs come into play.
12. With improper maternity leave, women workers even during their pregnancy have to work in the field so that their wage is not missed.

13. Also, a few days after the delivery of the baby, women are expected to be immediately present in the field to work.]
14. There is little scope for the quality education to their children and in many cases children are employed for work
15. Even there are any trade union, they are male-dominated and ignored the issues of the women workers.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

1. Since women workers lack in salary reasonable salary should be provided to them to enhance their skill level.
2. Women workers should be educated and make them aware about their rights and legislative provisions.
3. It is very much essential to create awareness among women workers about the institutional support available to them to protect their rights.
4. A comprehensive law is needed to protect the rights of women workers.
5. Any kind of exploitation including sexual harassment of women workers is to be prevented and stringent action needs to be taken against the wrong doer.
6. Mass media should be used to communicate the social message relating to women equality.
7. A separate women grievance cell headed by a woman should be established in every organisation sector and in case of unorganised sector women to form self-help groups for their protection.
8. Necessary amendments are required to be made in labour laws. There should be proper regulation of unorganised sector industries, which ensure job security, healthy work environment and at least minimum wages, maternity and child care benefits.
9. To give proper medical facilities to the workers in plantation industry.

### **CONCLUSION**

Tea plantation falls under unorganised sector of an economy. Unorganised labourers refer to those workers who have not been able to organise themselves in pursuit of their common interest owing to certain constraints like casual and uncertain nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy, small and scattered size of establishment. They are working under unsecured environment or work culture. The scenario only can be changed with the government intervention, by implementing the policies strictly. Strict action has to be taken against all those who harass the employees. It is very necessary to all workers to know about government schemes. The status of the women only can be improved when major transition. More research is required in this area to suggest solutions to existing problems and no issues like social security and positive impact of unions and labour Acts on the workers.