

Role of Tea Industry in Rural Development of Assam: Issues and Challenges in respect of Human Resources

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Abstract

Rural development refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic well being of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. With the onset of Globalization, the need has arisen to approach development from a wider perspective viz. education, entrepreneurship, physical infrastructure, social infrastructure etc. to improve the rural lives with participation of the rural people themselves so as to meet the required need of the rural area. The outsiders cannot contribute towards local rural development due to lack of knowledge about things prevalent in that area. So there is an urgent need to look into the problems faced by the local people for sustainable rural development.

Assam is located in the North East of India surrounded by several states. Its economy continues to be primarily agrarian and the agricultural sector is providing employment to more than 50 percent of the rural population. In this paper the researchers makes an attempt to study the important role played by the Tea Industry of Assam towards state economy as well as national economy. It also highlights the prevalent status of the Tea workers working within limitations and the challenges coming their way in the face of globalization.

Key words: Rural Development, Tea Industry, Assam, Economic condition

Introduction:

The Tea Industry of Assam plays a vital role in the State as well as in the national economy. The Assam's Tea Industry also possess a significant reputation in the Global economy. With the advent of the East India Company in Assam especially before the treaty of Yandaboo, in 1826, the Britishers found the entity of tea plants in the hills of Assam. The establishment of tea industry of Assam not only changed the existing demography of Assam but also political life of the people of Assam. The total area under the cultivation is accounting for more than half of the country's total area under tea. With the establishment of tea garden in Assam, the tea companies were in great need of utilizing huge labour force for

the growth of tea industries, which they could not manage locally. This necessitated importation of labour from different parts of India and as such these labours were trapped by company's "thinkadar" in the plea of good earnings and amazing life. It is not wrong to infer that those provided witnesses frequent famines and epidemics in Central Province, Uttar Pradesh Bihar and Bengal due to the miss governance of the East India Company. These indentured labour forces of tea gardens of Assam are now very important and integral part of the socio-economic life of Assam and also form the backbone of the Assamese Tea Industry. Till now as per the source of Assam Tea Welfare Board, there are 950 number of tea estates in Assam. In these 950 tea estates, seven lakhs ninety five thousands eight hundred fifty (7,95,850) number of total population are engaged as labour force in the tea production process.

Tea is a labour oriented enterprise as it is agro-based. It requires labour at every stage of its work right from clearance of jungle, making the land suitable for plantation, work for the nursery giving manure both in the nursery and in the plantation area, spraying of pesticides, drain cutting, path making, plucking, manufacturing and then finally dispatching it to different destination. Hence labour is the heart and soul of tea plantation. Without labour, not a single tea plant can survive as no baby survive without mother.

But unfortunately as far as life situation of the tea labours are concerned, things are not ideal as it should be in our country and especially in Assam. Here tea labour hardly gets a chance to lead a good life let alone a rosy one. As described by Wikipedia, the tea tribes of Assam are among the backward and most exploited tribes in India though their newer generation is comparatively educated and now it has intellectuals and professionals in various fields. The tea tribes, being basically labourers live in village inside tea estates. These estates are located in interior places and thus contributing to the backwardness and exploitation of them by the tea planters. The workers devoid of the basic amenities of life live in impoverishment and often dies in obscurity. The tea planters usually exploit the tea tribes in every possible way. Agitation of labour against Management is common. Illiteracy, poverty, addiction to country beer by male and to some extent even female, poor standard of living and health facilities are the immutable problems in their lives. In some stray cases it is seen that tea planters do not even supply the life-saving drugs when workers are dying out of epidemics.

Tea Plantation Act:

Immediately after independence in view of the pathetic condition of the plantation labour in the country (labour engaged in estates of tea, coffee, rubber etc.) the Parliament of India passed an Act called the Plantation Labour Act 1951 which was regularly amended from time to time. The provisions of the Act include the registration of the plantation and the appointment of chief inspector of the state Government who has to verify the provision of basic facilities life health care, drinking water, sanitation, canteen crèches, recreational facilities and housing facilities in the tea gardens. Under the Act, the State Government also has the power to appoint a labour commissioner to look into the issues of wages conflict with the Management or any other legal matters. The Act also stipulates that no adult worker and adolescent or child shall be employed for more than 48 hours and 27 hours respectively in a week, and that every worker is entitled for a day of rest during the seven days period. But the rules prepared by the State Government on the basis of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 have loop-sided provision leading to the widening of the chasm between the productivity of labour and the compensation disbursed. The Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) set up by the previous government's Union Labour Minister, had looked into various issues relating to the plantation sector in the country. The reports of IMC says that the welfare committees ordinarily provided by the state to the citizens of the country need to be extended to the plantation estates too, and therefore, the relevant provisions in the Plantation Labour Act need to be reviewed. No substantial plan has been announced so far for promoting the human development of the tea garden labourers.

Rural Development:

Rural development – refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic well being of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. People in rural areas should have the same quality of life as enjoyed by sub-urban and urban areas. With the onset of Globalization the need has arisen to approach development from a wider perspective viz. education, entrepreneurship, physical infrastructure, social infrastructure etc. to improve the rural lives with participation of rural people themselves so as to meet the required need of the rural areas. The outsiders cannot contribute towards local rural development due to lack of knowledge about things prevalent in that area. The economy of Assam is primarily agrarian and tea garden labour community living in the rural areas of Assam represent around 20% of total population of the state and contributing to the economy of Assam both directly and indirectly. Hence Rural Development which is concerned with

economic growth and social justice, improvement in living standard of the rural, social services and minimum basic needs become essential.

Keeping the above scenario in view the researchers makes an attempt to study the important role played by the Tea Industry towards State Economy and National Economy and also examines the prevalent status of the tea workers working within limitations and challenges.

Objectives of the study:

To study—

1. The educational status of the tea garden workers.
2. The economic status of labourers of the proposed tea gardens.
3. The infrastructural facilities of the proposed tea gardens.
4. The health status and environmental awareness of the labourers.
5. The social status of the tea workers.
5. Role of NGO and other organizations in creating awareness.

Hypothesis:

Educational Empowerment, enhanced economic status, Govt introduced schemes and general awareness can uplift the tea community and enable them to face all challenges and also contribute towards extra ordinary results of the Tea-Sector in India.

Methodology:

A. Selection of Universe:

The Universe of the study are three tea gardens viz. Kakojan Tea Estate, Rajoi Tea Estate and Diha Tea Estate located in the Jorhat district of Assam, which is also known as the “Tea Capital of the world”. All the Tea Gardens selected for the study are within the jurisdiction of Hologapara Mauza under Teok Legislative Constituency. The total population of three selected tea gardens i.e. Rajoi is 5270, Diha is 4759 and Kakojan is 8748. Kakojan Tea Estate is surrounded by Rajoi Tea Estate to the North, Diha Naginijaan Tea Estate to West and Moriani Constituency in the East and South. Rajoi Tea Estate is surrounded by the Kakojan River to the North, Kakojan Tea Estate to the South, Diha Naginijaan Tea Estate to the West and Lahing Sundarpur Village to the East. Diha Naginijaan Tea Estate is surrounded by Kakojan Besapati Village to the North, Rajoi Tea Estate to the East and Gohaingaon to the South and West. The Tea garden viz. Kakojan, Rajoi and Diha are situated at a distance of 22 km, 20 km and 17 km from the nearby city of Jorhat, Assam. Due to good communication facilities and close proximity of the National Highway 37, the three tea taken up for study Gardens are able to keep contact with other neighbouring areas.

The nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC) located in Kakojan area within easy reach of the three gardens and the First Referral Unit (FRU) is situated in Teok Town which is 10 km from Kakojan, 12 km from Rajoi and 15 km from Diha Naginijaan Tea Estates. There are no primary school in each of the three tea gardens. Middle school i.e. Kakojan M. E. School is situated in Kakojan. There are two (02) high schools one for boys and another for girls in Kakojan area. There is also one higher secondary school and one college in Kakojan area, which is situated within 10 km distance. As there are no provision for higher study in the study area, students of the three tea gardens are compelled to go to either Kakojan or Teok for further educational purpose if they so desire.

Sample:

The sample of the data was collected from 50 households of each tea garden. The Random Sampling method was adopted to select the sample.

Types of Data:

Data pertaining to the study are collected both from the Primary and Secondary sources. Primary data have been collected mostly by direct contact method and prepared questionnaires and schedules to carry out the investigation for this purpose.

All the information based on primary sources has been collected from the personal departments of the selected tea estates of Assam and through personal interviews with the workers, Union leaders and officers on the basis of pre-structured questionnaires eliciting information on a number of issues related to the Tea garden and its workers to authenticate the research and arrive at genuine conclusions.

A major chunk of the portions based on the secondary sources are obtained from newspapers, journals, books, unpublished thesis, annual reports of companies and various other publications of the Government of India and Government of Assam. Finally all information and data collected are analyzed and important inferences have been drawn from them.

Limitations of the Study:

In the present study, an attempt has been made to cover all important aspects of tea labourers in the tea industry of Assam with the maximum degree of thoroughness. But in this earnest endeavor, various difficulties at all stages of the enquiry have been experienced.

The study, however, brings within its fold almost all vital issues relating to the Tea Community. But it is pertinent to mention that as these are case studies, results and findings presented in it may not strictly apply to the tea industry of Assam as a whole. An attempt has

been made to highlights the empirical part of the work and the respondents views were taken on a number of common aspects relating to their respective gardens.

Findings and Discussions:

Educational Status:

Literacy can be considered as acid test of socio-economic and cultural improvement of a society. Education is considered as a major component of human resource development. In our limited sample out of 50 persons in Kakojan Tea Estate 34 persons are illiterate, i.e. around 68 percentage. In Diha Tea Estate out of 50 persons 22 persons are illiterate, i.e. around 44 percentage. In Rajoi Tea Estate out of 50 persons 31 persons are illiterate, i.e. around 62 percentage. This is not a very good sign. It was found that there are no primary schools established either by the Government or the Management inside the garden area. So the children of the tea community of the studied area have to go to nearby villages or Kakojan or nearest town Teok for educational purpose. The tea garden labourers are also much reluctant to send their children to even a primary school as they are totally unaware of the importance of education. They prefer to keep their children at home to look after their young siblings while they go out to work in the garden or to engage them as casual labourer in the Tea Estate.

Economic Status:

People of any society depend on earning to meet the need of daily necessities. The economic picture of the tea workers in the studied areas was found to be different from their outside counterpart. The tea plantation workers are found to be paid wages much below the minimum wages for agricultural workers so they cannot afford the minimum need of livelihood. Due to this reason, there was dissatisfaction expressed by the respondents. The workers are found to be unskilled except a handful, who works in the tea processing factories. The Management has not provided any skilled training programmes for the benefit of the tea workers. All the tea workers, irrespective of their status are given the same wage in all the three gardens. So their standard of living is extremely low. In present day of high prices, they are not able to meet the demands of the family due to their low wage rate. Insurance system for the tea garden from the government side or social security system from the Management side is non-existent. There is also no implementation of micro insurance schemes. As the tea garden "Cooli Line" are considered as neither urban nor rural, despite their obvious poverty and poor living conditions they do not enjoy the BPL (Below Poverty Line) status. So, they receive no ration card cum identification card reserved for BPL candidate.

Infrastructural Facilities:

As far as infrastructural facilities are concerned, the present study reveals that the workers of the three gardens reside in rent free labour quarters in the residential colonies called as “Cooli Line” made of semi-brick materials without good sanitation facilities. The workers are not permitted to build private houses within the jurisdiction of the garden so they have to make do with their crammed quarters. Other basic facilities such as electricity are not provided by the Management or the Government.

Environmental Status:

The Environment around the tea garden habitats presents a dismal picture. There is no proper drainage in “Cooli Line” and the labourers have no sense of personal hygiene. They keep the domestic animals and birds even within their over crowded family campus. They buy food stuffs from the local markets called “Huts” which are kept open in unhygienic condition. They do not have access to appropriate water supply and sanitation technology. The facilities provided by Management are not in adherence to the standards set by the government programme normally implemented in the rural areas in the country. The toilets are not sanitary. Mostly direct pit toilets (without water seals) connected to open pits are used. The super structure are made of brick walls and too cramped to allow individual to use toilets comfortably. In case of damage, the Management take no immediate steps to repair it. Hand pumps are most common source of water supply. Normally one hand pump is provided for 4/5 families which are of much higher ratio compared to norms followed by water supply programme of Government of India. There are also other provisions for water supply but these provisions are temporary and not adequate. The water supply provided by the Management is not found to be pure or wholesome for drinking purpose.

Health Status:

There is a small hospital within the jurisdiction of all three tea gardens but not well equipped or modernized to cater to all medical needs of the workers. In case of medical emergencies the patients have to travel to Primary Health Centre (PHC) at Kakojan or First Referral Unit (FRU) at Teok town. There are no pharmacies within these gardens. There are also no maternity benefit schemes for the tea garden women workers. It was observed that even during pregnancy and post natal period they continue to engage in hard work. Most of the tea workers are also addicted to alcohol due to which they suffer from various health problems.

Social Status:

Despite the hard living condition, these people preserve their socio-cultural status. The labourers enjoy most of the puja festivals like durga puja, manasha puja, kali puja etc. in all the three tea estate. Each festival is celebrated in the garden with dance and music. Jhumur is the most outstanding tune of tea garden culture. Though their income is limited they do not hesitate to spend money for various festivals but one social evil reigning amongst them is gambling due to which they squander away their precious hard earned money.

Role of NGO's or other organizations:

It was found that there are no NGO's or other organization in the three tea gardens working for the upliftment of the tea workers. Therefore, due to their unawareness of various Govt. aided schemes and other facilities these tea workers remain deprived and marginalized in various areas of life. No health or general awareness programmes have been organized by any organization in these three gardens to create awareness amongst the workers.

Suggestions:

On the basis of the above study the following suggestions have been forwarded:

- (1) Primary schools should be set up in the studied tea gardens to offer the minimum level of literacy to all the children of the tea community. The Management can monitor the activities of the schools besides taking care of the infrastructure and payment of the teacher salaries.
- (2) The existing hospitals in the three tea gardens need to be upgraded so that the respondents do not have to go outside in case of medical emergency.
- (3) Women workers should be empowered through skilled training and awareness programmes and provided with proper health care during their pregnancy and post pregnancy period.
- (4) The accommodation provided by the Management should also be improved.
- (5) The Management should also make provision for pure drinking water as impure water is the carrier of many water borne disease germs.
- (6) Electricity should also be provided in all the labour quarters.
- (7) The Management should also encourage children of the tea workers to go for higher studies by providing financial support.
- (8) Awareness programmes must be organized by the Management and NGO's to make women workers aware of negative effect of early marriage and large families.
- (9) In present day of high prices there is urgent need for increase of wage rates amongst the tea workers.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it may be suggested that the tea industry of Assam which have long been neglecting the human aspect of the organization needs to change their attitude in regard to the tea garden labourers. The time has come for the tea industry to realize that in order to produce extra ordinary result; organization will have to depend a great deal on human aspect as this will help in bringing about the much needed competitive edge. The tea industry should understand that technology is no longer monopoly nor is the availability of money but what may be monopoly would be the people associated with the business organizations. The competitor of the Industry can duplicate the business strategies, but cannot duplicate the human resources. Findings of the study cannot be generalized for all the tea gardens of Assam. So, for development of human resources related to this booming business of tea industry more study needs to be taken up by researchers, academicians and others to verify the findings.

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