

## Fallout of Poor Socio Economic Conditions of the Tea Workers: A Case Study of the Darjeeling Tea Industry

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### Abstract

*The workers in the tea gardens and their families have for long suffered and are suffering from poor socio-economic conditions especially in the tea plantations of Assam and West Bengal where the wages of the tea workers is less than the minimum wage and there is lack of proper implantation of Plantation Labour Act, 1951. This paper<sup>27</sup> based on the findings of the primary survey conducted in the tea gardens of Darjeeling, a tea growing region in West Bengal has tried to analyse the outcome of such situation in terms of rising absenteeism among the workers and labour out-migration in general and out-migration of permanent worker in particular. The paper shows that the tea workers remain absent from their work due to various reasons. In both the gardens the average daily rate of absenteeism was above 35 per cent in 2017 which was an increased figure as compared to previous years. Despite this rising rate of absenteeism, the steps taken by the management implied that the workers who are regular with the work have been working with their productivity increased. Also meagre income from the garden and the lack of employment opportunities, given the higher consumption expenditure has also been one of the major reasons responsible for the out-migration of labour from the gardens. There has been increasing rate of migration of labour with just 9 per cent during 2009 -2011 to 49 per cent in 2015-2017. This labour out migration has made tea gardens the source of cheap labour for the urban areas. The findings of the survey has been analysed with the help of descriptive statistics and also to understand the socio economic factors responsible for the migration of the labour from the tea gardens binomial logit regression has been used.*

### 1 Introduction

In the history of the economic development of India, tea industry has contributed significantly in terms of exports, income and employment (Mishra et. al 2012). India is second to China in the production of tea in the world and ranks fourth in the world tea export after Kenya, China and Sri Lanka (Tea Board of India 2018).

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Started in the state of Assam in the nineteenth century, tea plantation in India at present is carried out in 15 different states. Assam and West Bengal are two major tea growing regions of India contributing 81 per cent of the total tea produced in India. Tea is a labour intensive industry which employ 7, 06,247 permanent workers and 4, 05,695 temporary workers (Tea Board of India 2017). The marketing and the sales of tea formed a multi-billion dollar market estimated at USD 40.7 billion both domestically and globally (Greenpeace India 2014).

However, tea plantations are not only economic units but also social institutions which control the lives of the resident workforce to a large extent (Chattopadhyay 2005). Plantation has been the instrument of force wielded to create and maintain a class structure of workers and owners, connected hierarchically by a staff line of overseers and managers (Eric Wolf, as cited in Bhowmik, 1981). Tea workers who are involved in labour intensive works like plucking, planting, pruning are the main engine of the tea industry. But these workers are in the lowest end of the hierarchy and have always been at the receiving end.

The wages of the tea workers of West Bengal and Assam are below the minimum wage (Sarkar 2015) while the cost of living is increasing. The present daily wage of the tea workers in West Bengal is Rs 176 per day while the minimum wage of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled labour along with the food in the agriculture in West Bengal is Rs. 226, 250 and 277 respectively from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 31<sup>st</sup> of December<sup>28</sup>, 2019.

The tea workers of West Bengal and Assam receive remuneration in the form of wage component and non- wage component. The non- wage components like housing, medical services, education services and other facilities as per the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) of 1951 is often considered by the management to raise the cost of labour intensive tea industry. This has also led to the demand for more temporary workers and casualization of workforce in the tea industry (Sankrityayana 2005).

Also there are legislations like Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972, Payment of Bonus Act 1965, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and others to look after the social security measures of the workers (Ministry of commerce and Industry 2019). However, despite these legislations, their proper implementation has always been questionable.

Tea gardens in West Bengal have reported having huge liability towards the workers in terms of unpaid provident fund, gratuity, wages and other benefits (Talwar et. al., 2005). The recent report by Tamang (2020)<sup>29</sup> about the workers going on strike for not being paid their due share by the management of one of the tea gardens in Darjeeling shows the vulnerability of the tea workers and lackadaisical attitude of the management.

Bhowmik (2015) found that even if one adds the cost of ration (in their market price) given to the workers of Assam and West Bengal apart from the wage<sup>30</sup>, the daily wage of the tea workers would still be less than the minimum wage. In fact, John and Mansingh (2013) states that the OP Arya Committee after studying the detailed information about different cost

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<sup>28</sup> <https://wblc.gov.in/synopsys/January/2019>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.groundxero.in/2020/07/05/workers-strike-in-the-time-of-corona-happy-valley-tea-garden-in-darjeeling/>

<sup>30</sup> Ration and the other facilities under PLA are the reason provided by the management for the wage below the minimum wage as they consider these facilities to compensate the low wage.

on the workers suggested the retention of all the security measures provided in PLA and the need to improve the social security system for the workers.

Thus low wage, lack of proper implementation of PLA and other legislations meant for the social security of the workers have led to poor socio economic conditions of these workers. Poor socio economic condition of the households has been one of the important factors driving seasonal and temporary migration in India. The study of migration is important as it has many consequences in the place of origin and the destinations (Srivastava 2011; Keshri and Bhagat 2010). However in the case of the tea gardens there has been inadequate study (Khawas 2006; Beck 2007) on the out- migration of labour in general and migration of tea workers in particular.

The paper thus tries to look into the out migration of the labour from the tea gardens and the rising absenteeism of the tea workers. The result is based on the primary survey conducted in the tea gardens of Darjeeling district, one of the important tea growing regions of West Bengal.

The paper is organised as follows. Section II while briefly talking about Darjeeling tea industry, discusses the data source and methodology. Section III then discusses about the socio-economic condition of the tea workers' household thus relating them to the migration taking place from the tea gardens. Section IV studies the response of the tea workers towards their work in terms of rising absenteeism of the workers from the work in the tea gardens and section V discusses the consequences of migration and rising absenteeism on the tea garden and final section includes the conclusion.

## 2 Data Source and Methodology

First to get the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in India, Darjeeling tea is of considerable importance to the economy of India because of the international reputation and consumer recognition enjoyed by it (Tea Board of India 2008). As of October, 2017 there were 87 tea gardens producing Darjeeling tea. These gardens totalled 17,600 hectares of area under tea cultivation. These 87 tea gardens employed approximately 55,000 permanent workers with the employment of 18,000-26,000 temporary workers as and when required<sup>31</sup>.

The two gardens for the survey<sup>32</sup> were selected using two criteria. First, the distance of the tea gardens from the Darjeeling town which is also the head quarter of the Darjeeling district so as to make the sample garden more representative and second, being the smooth functioning of the garden in the last ten years, i.e., since 2007 in order to ensure consistency in the analysis of data.

Keeping these two criteria into consideration, Happy Valley and Dhajea tea gardens located at a distance of 2.8 km and 37.4 km from the Darjeeling main town respectively were

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<sup>31</sup>According to Sandeep Mukherjee, the principal Advisor of Darjeeling Tea Association (Sherpa, 2018).

<sup>32</sup>The survey was conducted in the month of December, 2017.

selected. After acquiring the list of the permanent field workers<sup>33</sup> from both the gardens, the workers for the survey were chosen using systematic random sampling method.

Based on the proportion of the workers in the two tea gardens, 50 workers from Happy Valley and 100 workers from Dhajea were selected and thus household survey was conducted in these 150 workers' households. Detail information of the socio-economic profile and migration status was collected from 692 individuals spread across these 150 households. Also detail study about the working conditions, facilities provided by the management and the response of the workers towards the work in the garden was captured with the help of well-structured questionnaire.

The findings of the survey has been presented using descriptive statistics and also to understand the socio economic factors responsible for the migration of the labour from the tea gardens binomial logit regression has been used. The equation of the logit regression can be written as,

$$Li = \ln(Pi/1-Pi) = \beta_1 + \beta_2 X_i + U_i,$$

where  $L_i$  is the regressand or the logit and  $U_i$  is the stochastic error term.  $P_i$  is the probability of a household member in the sample becoming a migrant and  $1-P_i$  is the probability of a household member becoming non-migrant. The probability of a household member becoming a member i.e. dependent variable is influenced by different independent variables ( $X_i$ ). Only economic migrant as a dependent variable was taken into consideration for the survey. Economic migrant has been defined as those individuals who at the time of enumeration had migrated from the origin to work (for more than one month) anytime in the past prior to June 2017. This was because from 12th June 2017 to 25th September entire Darjeeling hills witnessed lockdown due to statehood agitation which might have forced individuals in the gardens to out migrate. Thus to avoid the distortion in the result, date prior to June 2017 was taken into consideration for the survey.

The independent variables ( $X_i$ ) which influence the migration from a place are the economic status (tea worker/those engaged in other work or unemployed), sex, marital status, age, religion, social group of the household members. Tea garden, household size, Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE), number of years completed in school by the household members have also been taken as regressors.

#### 4 Socio Economic Conditions and Out-Migration in the Tea Gardens

Tea workers' households in the tea gardens followed different religions and belonged to different social groups. However, majority of the workers' households, 68 per cent in Happy Valley and 83 per cent in Dhajea followed Hindu religion while none of the household reported following Muslim religion. Also most of the households in the gardens, 58 per cent in Happy Valley and 70 per cent in Dhajea belonged to Other Backward Class (OBC) Category.

The findings about the mean household size of these gardens implied two things: nuclearisation of family or preference for fewer children. The mean household size in Happy

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<sup>33</sup>Field workers was chosen for the study as they form the majority among the daily wage workers compared to factory workers which are limited in number.

Valley and Dhajea was found to be 4.2 and 4.8 persons per households respectively. This nuclearisation which might lead to the demand for more space as the children tend to part away from the main household becomes problematic due to the fact that the tea workers in the gardens till now neither own the land nor the house they live in.

The study about the ownership of assets of the households and the economic activities of the household members do not provide bright picture of the tea gardens. Table 1 provides the information about the primary economic activities<sup>34</sup> of the working age individuals in the sample.

From the information provided in the table it is seen that the major source of employment in the tea gardens was the work in the garden where the share of the female worker was more than 60 per cent in both the gardens. “other work” which employed second highest share of household members in both the gardens, included those working as sales person, casual non-farm labour, domestic maid, working in beauty salons and construction workers. This section along with those employed in hotel and private company (see Table 1), mostly comprised the migrant labour from the tea gardens working in various urban areas.

**Table 1 Primary Economic Activities of the Household Members in the Tea Gardens (%)**

Tea garden	Happy Valley			Dhajea			Overall		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Primary economic activity									
Working in tea garden	55.6	62.0	58.5	37.6	64.1	50.6	43.9	63.3	53.5
Cultivator/agricultural worker	1.4	-	0.7	1.5	-	0.8	1.5	-	0.7
Livestock rearing	1.4	-	0.7	10.5	0.8	5.8	7.3	0.5	4.0
Driving	4.2	-	2.1	3.0	-	1.5	3.4	-	1.7
Tourism/trade and business	1.4	2.8	2.1	6.8	-	3.5	4.9	1.0	3.0
Private teaching/coaching	-	2.8	1.4	2.3	1.6	1.9	1.5	2.0	1.8
Carpenter	5.6	-	2.8	3.8	-	1.9	4.4	-	2.2
Other work	20.9	9.8	15.4	15.8	11.7	13.8	17.6	11.1	14.4
Housewife	-	22.5	11.2	-	19.5	9.6	-	20.6	10.1
Employed in hotel	8.3	-	4.2	11.3	0.8	6.1	10.2	0.5	5.5
Employed in private company	1.4	-	0.7	7.5	1.6	4.6	5.4	1.0	3.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Thus apart from the work in the garden, the job opportunities for the working age population in tea gardens are very less. Low wage in the garden and less job opportunities have resulted in the rising absenteeism and the out migration of labour from the tea gardens. Low wage of the tea worker have also led household members to supplement the income by undertaking other secondary economic activities in order to meet the high household consumption expenditure. For instance, workers especially male could get time to domesticate some

<sup>34</sup>Primary economic activities involved those activities in which the individuals remained engaged for six or more than six months during the reference period of the survey (July 2016- June 2017)

animals to supplement the meagre income from the tea garden but it was difficult to get time for female workers to do so. Also housewives were found running small retail shops.

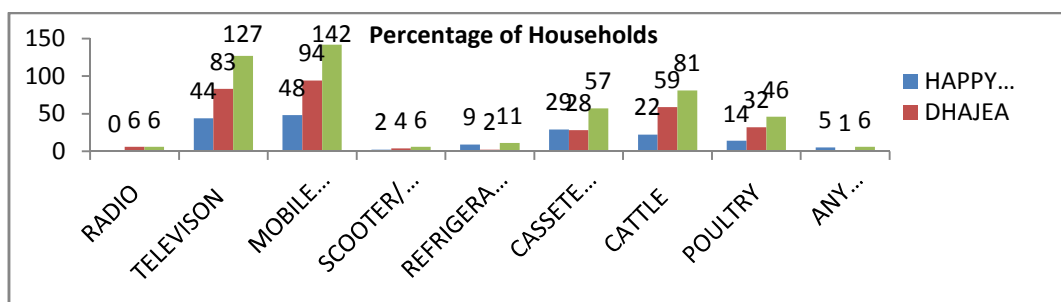
The ration provided by the management in the form of rice, wheat and sugar was not enough to meet the needs of the households and these made them buy other food and the non-food items from the market leading to high consumption expenditure of the households. In fact in Happy Valley, the highest average yearly non-food expenditure was incurred on education<sup>35</sup> reported by 58 per cent of the sample households followed by medical expenditure which was reported by 78 per cent of the sample households<sup>36</sup>.

In Dhajea, the highest average yearly non-food expenditure was medical expenditure<sup>37</sup>. This was followed by expenditure on education reported from 71 per cent of the sample households. This relatively high expenditure on education beside other factors might be one of the reasons behind the high drop-out rates in the tea gardens. In fact in both Happy Valley and Dhajea, after the middle school level (Class V-VIII) decreasing share of household members was reported in the higher education irrespective of gender.

High expenditure and low income has left the tea workers' households with very low or no savings, that is, there is no fund left to meet the precautionary motive of the workers' households. While 100 per cent of the sample households in Happy Valley had savings account, only 36 per cent reported any monetary savings done in the reference period of the survey. Similar was the case in Dhajea which reported 99 per cent of the households having savings account but only 18 per cent reported any monetary savings done in the reference period. Also most of these savings reported, were from the migrant households.<sup>38</sup>

From Figure 1 it can be said that the workers' household owned nothing much except the mediums of entertainment and communication. While 81 per cent of the total sample households reported cattle rearing, absence of grazing lands discouraged them from domesticating animals like cow and ox and thus common animals domesticated were goat and pig.

Figure 1: Distribution of Workers' Households According to the Ownership of Assets (%)



<sup>35</sup>College/school fee/ stationaries

<sup>36</sup> The highest average yearly non-food expenditure was on jewellery/ornaments but it was incurred only by 8 per cent of the sample workers' households in Happy Valley.

<sup>37</sup> In case of Dhajea too, the highest average annual non-food expenditure was on jewellery/ornaments but it was incurred only by 3 per cent of the sample tea workers' households

<sup>38</sup> The highest share of remittances sent by the migrants went for savings, followed by expenditure on food and expenditure on house repairing/house construction.

\*Any Other Assets includes commercial car, computer/laptop and other assets like land

Migration studies based on secondary data have revealed that different socio economic factors like gender, age, caste, religion, marital status, household size, education level, nature of place of origin (rural/urban), economic status often measured in terms of MPCE, land possession influence the migration decision of the individuals (Srivastava 2011; Keshri and Bhagat 2010). Beside individual decision, migration can also be the resultant of family decision to diversify risk and increase the welfare of the family (Stark 1984). Also important is the role of social network in the facilitation of the migration process (Thieme and Muller-Boker 2010).

However, before trying to understand the socio economic factors influencing the migration decision of the labour from the tea gardens, it is important to understand the scale and the nature of out-migration reported from the two tea gardens. Out of 150 households, 29 per cent of the households reported to have one or more than one migrant working outside the tea garden and both the garden reported rural to urban migration. While those who left tea gardens for the work prior to June 2017 were considered as migrant, one could see increasing trend in the migration of labour from the tea gardens. While the year 2008 reported only 2 per cent of the total migrant in the sample, period 2009-2011 reported 9 per cent, 2012-2014 reported 39 per cent and 2015-2017 reported 49 per cent of the total sample migrant.

**Table 2 Distribution of the Migrants According to the Activities in the Origin (%)**

Tea garden	Permanent field worker	Unemployed	Studying	Others	Total	Total No. of Migrants
Happy Valley	10.0	50.0	10.0	30.0	100.0	10.0
Dhajea	19.2	55.3	10.6	14.9	100.0	47.0
Overall	17.5	54.4	10.6	17.5	100.0	57.0

Table 2 shows that though lack of employment opportunities was one of the driving forces behind migration, those studying, permanent field workers and those involved in 'others' had also migrated. "others" included temporary jobs like teaching, business and other causal non-farm jobs. People engaged in these activities had migrated in search of better jobs fetching higher wages.

The fewer number of migrants among the permanent field worker is due to the fact that though the wage of the workers is low, the cost of migration seems to be high given the age and the educational background of the workers on one hand and round the year employment of the garden on the other. While the mean age of the male workers was found to be 41 years, the mean age of the women workers was 40 years. And while mean years of schooling for the male workers was 8 years, for the female it was only 6 years. However these constraining factors have not deterred some to migrate for work and in fact Dhajea tea gardens reported three of the worker families to have migrated to places like Delhi, Punjab and Kolkata thereby abandoning work in the tea garden.

**Table 3 Socio Economic Factors Influencing Out-Migration from the Tea Gardens**

Result of Logistic Regression			Result of Marginal Effect	
Number of Observations =575			Number of Observations =575	
LR Chi2(12)	= 67.48			
Prob >chi2	=0.000			
Pseudo R2	=0.1816			
Explanatory Variables	Coeff.	Z-value	dy/dx	Z-value
Working in the garden (Reference category)				
Working in other area or unemployed	1.508**	2.96	0.091***	3.99
Female (Reference category)				
Male	0.439	1.37	0.033	1.41
Married (Reference category)				
Unmarried	-0.620	-1.60	-0.047	-1.64
Divorced/Separated/Deserted/Widow	-0.069	-0.10	-0.006	-0.01
Age	-0.020	-1.21	-0.001	-1.21
Years of school completion	0.134**	2.53	0.010**	2.54
MPCE	-0.001**	-1.81	-0.0003**	-1.82
Household size	0.011	0.10	0.0008	0.10
Hindu ( Reference category)				
Buddhist	-0.269	-0.33	-0.019	-0.35
Christian	0.012	0.02	0.001	0.02
ST/SC <sup>39</sup> (Reference category)				
OBC	2.021*	1.87	0.089***	3.79
General	2.141*	1.88	0.100**	2.54
Happy Valley (Reference category)				
Dhajea	-0.217	-0.49	-0.017	-0.47
_cons	-4.467	-2.68		

\*Level of significance: \*p<0.1, \*\*p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.001

It can be seen from the regression result that as compared to a tea worker a person engaged in other work and those unemployed has higher likelihood of becoming a migrant. This can be attributed to the fact that beside work in the garden there are very less employment opportunities in the tea gardens. For a person not working in the garden, probability of out-migration for work increases by 9.1 per cent.

Additional years of schooling also increase the likelihood of a person becoming a migrant. One extra year in school will increase the probability of migration by 1 per cent. Although the percentage change in the probability of out migration is negligible with regard to MPCE, the negative relation of MPCE with the migration is concurrent with the existing literature

<sup>39</sup> ST=Scheduled Tribe, SC= Scheduled Caste



(Srivastava 2011; Keshri and Bhagat 2010) which states that the seasonal and the temporary migrants happen to come from the lower economic class of the society (as the increase in MPCE is taken to be a step towards upward economic mobility). Also as compared to SC/ST individuals, individuals belonging to OBC and General category have higher probability of becoming a migrant. The reason behind such result is the fact that in the sample household majority of the households belonged to OBC and general category. In Happy Valley, 58 per cent of the households belonged to OBC category while in Dhajea, the percentage share of OBC household was 70 per cent. While in Happy Valley only 9 per cent of the households belonged to general category but in Dhajea, their share was 19 per cent. For a person belonging to OBC probability of migration increases by 8.9 per cent and for a person belonging to General category probability of out migration increases by 10 per cent.

Thus while some tea workers migrated themselves, some had family members working as migrants and some workers were found fighting against the low wage and high expenditure by remaining absent and engaging themselves in other works fetching higher wage while remaining in the garden.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of some of the variables used in Table 3**

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age	38.01	15.50	15	84
Years of school completion	8.82	5.03	0	20
MPCE	1718.51	895.78	609.04	6534.23

While 29 per cent of the households were reported to be migrant households, the absolute number of migrants were 57 in number. Thus, the descriptive statistics of relevant variables for 575 individuals has been taken for both the gardens together.

Table 4 shows that the mean age of the individuals was 38.01 years. While the minimum age was 15 years, the maximum age was 84 years<sup>40</sup>. The mean years of schooling was 8.81 years with minimum 0 year of schooling and maximum 20 years of schooling. The mean monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) was Rs. 1718.51 with minimum MPCE Rs. 895.78 and maximum MPCE Rs. 6534.23.

## 5 Rising Absenteeism among the Workers

Low wage, rising cost of livelihood and poor implementation of PLA has lessened the scope for the workers to work in the garden. Thus this section tries to look into the absenteeism and the reasons behind absenteeism of the tea workers. The absentee workers included those who had out-migrated for some other work, those who have not migrated but worked in other higher wage jobs while remaining in the tea garden and some who remained absent due to other reasons (see Table 6).

The interaction with the manager of the two tea gardens revealed that in Happy Valley the average daily rate of absenteeism was 20 per cent in the year 2016, which increased to 35 per cent in 2017. In Dhajea, the average daily rate of absenteeism was 17-18 per cent in the year 2011 which increased to 38-40 per cent in 2017.

<sup>40</sup>Individuals aged 14 years and below was excluded.

This rising absenteeism was in spite of the carefully planned mechanism put in place by the management which can be understood as the cost, the worker had to incur for remaining absent. This mechanism could be seen as an effort to deter the worker from being absent rather than encouraging them to come for the work in the garden.

A day absent from the work implied no pay for a worker; however the consequences from being absent didn't end here. The facilities provided to the workers were also conditional on the number of working days the worker worked in the garden.

In Dhajea, fortnightly ration<sup>41</sup> was provided to both the workers and their dependents up to the age of eighteen years but Happy Valley provided fortnightly ration only to the worker. As per the information given by the workers in both the garden, if one worked continuously for four days in first week and the following week, the amount of ration did not get reduced. But, attendance of less than four days led to the reduction of their ration amount for both the workers and their dependent. In Happy Valley, the workers who fulfilled the minimum day's criteria for full amount of ration, got 2 kg rice and 4.5 kg wheat whereas in Dhajea the workers got 3 kg rice and 3 kg wheat and the dependents of workers in Dhaje received half the amount of ration provided to the workers. The dependent included only the children and not the husband of the female worker.

As per the information provided by the management, for items like umbrella, blanket, firewood, footwear except the plucking basket, the workers in both the gardens had to work for 180 days out of total working days in the previous year<sup>42</sup>. Some items were provided once in a year and some twice in a year and some in cash while some in kind.

Both the gardens provided Rs. 400 in cash once a year for the firewood. Such amount for the firewood when the average cost of filling one Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) cylinder was Rs. 1020.9 in Happy Valley and Rs. 1062.7 in Dhajea discouraged the workers' households to use LPG. Thus almost all the households were reported using firewood collected from the forest so as to minimise the use of LPG. The use of LPG in Dhajea was more difficult for the workers as they were not receiving the subsidy on the LPG since they started using the LPG in 2014.

Not only this, the laxity on the part of the Management to implement the statutory provisions under PLA also discouraged one to go to the work. The poor medical facility and poor housing condition leaving aside the canteen and the drinking facility in the work place<sup>43</sup> for the workers who worked for 8 hours in normal season and 6 hours in winter season was seen as unfair by the worker. Though the percentage of the workers exposed to toxic substances were comparatively less, there was need for regular and proper medical check-up and also

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<sup>41</sup>The money for the fortnightly ration was deducted from the daily wage. Apart from this fortnightly ration, the workers were provided weekly ration (rice, wheat and sugar) worth Rs 2 per kg (rice and wheat) for which the money was not deducted from the wage but had to be paid separately by the worker who took the ration.

<sup>42</sup> The total working day in Happy Valley was 302, for the workers in Dhaje the total working day was 280.

<sup>43</sup> Workers carried their own food and drinking water. There was no conservancy facility for the workers in Happy Valley but Dhajea had common conservancy facility for the workers. As per PLA workers are supposed to be provided with canteen facility, drinking water and separate conservancy facility.

there was need of well-functioning medical equipment as there was reporting of malfunctioning medical kits during medical check-up.

Given these facts about the management dealing with the tea workers, wage differential can be looked as one of the main reasons behind higher daily rate of absenteeism. The worker in Happy Valley revealed that he earns Rs. 500 daily by working in casual non-farm job in Darjeeling main town as compared to Rs.132 in the garden<sup>44</sup>

**Table 5 Distribution of Workers in the Tea Gardens who remained absent in the Working days (%)**

<b>Number of Days Absent</b>	1-30	31-60	61-120	121-180	181-240	>241	Total
Happy Valley	53.6	8.7	11.6	4.3	4.3	17.4	100.0
Dhajea	60.2	17.1	9.8	5.7		7.3	100.0
Both the Garden	57.8	14.1	10.4	5.2	1.6	10.9	100.0

Table 5 shows the number of days, the workers remained absent from their work days which has been grouped into six classes. It can be seen that in both Happy Valley and Dhajea, the highest number of workers remained absent for 1-30 days: 53.6 per cent in Happy Valley, 60.1 per cent in Dhajea and 57.8 per cent for both the gardens together. While in Happy Valley, the second highest number of field worker, 17.5 per cent remained absent for more than 240 days; in Dhajea the second highest number of workers, 17.1 per cent remained absent for 31-60 days.

Table 6 helps us to understand the reasons behind the rising absenteeism among the tea workers. The reasons provided by the workers behind remaining absent from the work were broadly classified into three heads: health reason, other work (worker doing other job which earned them higher income than the work in the garden) and other reasons.

However even in the event of rising absenteeism on the part of the workers, no steps were found to be taken by the management to address the concerns of the workers, mainly the low wage, health problems nor the proper implementation of PLA. While the lack of labour forced the management to employ temporary workers at the time of plucking, the Manager of Bannockburn tea garden<sup>45</sup> which had been facing absenteeism problem since 2005 confessed that it was even difficult to get temporary workers during plucking season.

<sup>44</sup>The wage of the workers was Rs. 132 per day during the time this survey was carried out (Nov-Dec )2017.

<sup>45</sup> This tea garden was one of the gardens visited during pilot survey and is situated 11 km away from the main town Darjeeling.

**Table 6 Reasons behind Absenteeism of the Workers in Happy Valley and Dhajea**

Health Reason	Other work	Other Reason
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bleeding from the mouth</li> <li>• breathing problem</li> <li>• hands pain</li> <li>• gastric and pressure problem</li> <li>• gout</li> <li>• head problem</li> <li>• heart problem and chest pain/chest case</li> <li>• heart problem</li> <li>• joint pain, cough and cold</li> <li>• leg problem/hand pain</li> <li>• not well</li> <li>• old and health problem so can't work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• runs retail shop</li> <li>• carpentry</li> <li>• driving</li> <li>• casual non - farm labour work</li> <li>• working in hotel</li> <li>• worked in construction</li> <li>• out migrated for work</li> <li>• work as domestic maid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• had to take children to school since the school was far</li> <li>• don't go far off place for plucking</li> <li>• don't go to work during rainy season</li> <li>• had to go for official work</li> <li>• household work and sometime not well</li> <li>• laziness</li> <li>• laziness and alcoholic</li> <li>• mother's death</li> <li>• son expired</li> <li>• husband death and children sick</li> <li>• Children sick</li> </ul>

The steps taken to address the rising absenteeism was only in the form of notices sent to the worker once in a year. The notice was sent only to the worker who had migrated without replacement and to workers who were in the garden but remained absent for long (marked as long absentee). As per the information provided by the workers, their appearance in the garden even once in fortnight saved them from getting notice from the management.

All such actions on the part of the management show that the increasing absenteeism has not hit their production level which also implies that the workers who remain regular are working with their productivity increased. But how long can these workers continue with the existing low wage given the higher consumption expenditure? Such increasing rate of absenteeism should be addressed as early as possible.

## **6. Tea Gardens- The Alternative Source of Informal Labour?**

In India, labour from the crisis (low agricultural income and lack of employment opportunities) ridden rural areas are often the source of cheap labour for the urban informal market (Mishra 2016). Thus this section in similar lines will analyse the consequence of migration and absenteeism stemming from the tea gardens of Darjeeling.

Migrants from Happy Valley and Dhajea involved both male and female migrants and most of the migrants were reported to have undertaken inter-state migration to places like East Sikkim, Bengaluru, Pune, Hyderabad, Gujarat and Punjab. Intra state migration to places like Siliguri and Darjeeling (both in the state of West Bengal) was also reported from the gardens. Also along with internal migration, international migration to countries like Dubai, Honkong, Singapore and Nepal had also taken place from the tea gardens.

Though migration provided solution to the unemployment problem and low wages, the study on the economic activities of these migrants revealed that almost all of these migrants were engaged in the lower end service and manufacturing sectors of the urban economies, thus making tea gardens another source of cheap supply of informal labour. Table 7 provides the information about the kind of work the migrants were engaged in various destinations.

**Table 7 Distribution of Migrants According to the Economic Activities in the Destinations (%)**

Tea garden	Working in hotel	Labour in private company	Domestic workers	Salesman	Working in parlour	Others	Total
Happy Valley	30.0	10.0	10.0	10.0	20.0	20.0	100
Dhajea	31.8	27.7	12.8	6.4	4.3	17.0	100
Overall	31.6	24.6	12.3	7.0	7.0	17.5	100

Majority of the migrants from both the gardens were employed in hotel as cook, waiter, bartenders and housekeepers. Migrants from Dhajea and Happy Valley were also found to be working in various private industries manufacturing garment, tiles, sports materials and pharmaceutical industries.

In the process of migration social networks in the form of friends, relatives and agents played important role for these migrants. For instance, many migrant youths from Dhajea found employment in the pharmaceutical industries in neighbouring state of Sikkim with the help of their friends and relatives who were working in these industries before. All of these migrants were found to be engaged in packaging of medicines. In fact, it was found that in case of the migrants knowing someone in the destination before their migration, the migrant was more likely to get help from the person in contact and do the same work as the person in contact in the destination.

Domestic work was another employment providing area for the migrants; all the domestic workers were reported to be female. While some migrants worked as salesman some worked in beauty parlours. Apart from these economic activities, migrants were found to be engaged in other different activities as well which has been clubbed as "others". Activities included in this group included babysitting, looking after old age, security guard in private office, airhostess, nurse in private hospital, private teaching, selling/running of momo shop, and construction. It was also found that all the female migrants from both the tea gardens in countries like Hongkong, Dubai and Singapore provided their labour in the care economy.

Poor economic condition, low level of education and lack of skill could be the reasons behind such placement of these migrants. While most of the migrants from Happy Valley had middle level education (till class 8), most of the migrants in Dhajea had high school education. Thus tea gardens due to the low wage for its workers and lack of employment opportunities are becoming the source of informal cheap labour for the urban areas.

## 7 Conclusions

Placed in the unequal power relation, lowest end of work and pay hierarchy accompanied with the lack of proper implementation of PLA and the rising cost of livelihood, all these have lessened the scope for the workers to work in the garden. The fallout of which has been analysed in the form of out migration of labour in general and out migration of permanent tea worker in particular and rising absenteeism among the permanent tea workers in the two tea gardens of Darjeeling.

The rising absenteeism in the tea gardens of Darjeeling even in the presence of deterrent measures put in place by the management, points on one hand towards the flexibility in the mobility of the workers which could have been impossible not only in pre independence but even some decades post-independence; on the other hand, it also points towards the non-serious attitude of the management to address the concerns of the workers.

This lack of any action on the part of the management and the tea planters to address the issue of rising absenteeism and out migration except sending notices indicate that the scale has not reached to the limit so as to affect the production level of tea in the two gardens. Also it points to the other fact that the remaining workers are working in the garden with their productivity increased.

Though out-migration of permanent tea workers in particular has not happened in high scale so as to affect the work in the tea garden, out-migration of labour taking place from the tea gardens in this era of globalisation has connected the tea gardens with the world outside by supplying the source of cheap informal labour in various urban destinations.

While on one hand the vulnerability of the migrant workers from the tea gardens can be taken care of by providing non-farm job opportunities in tea garden, skill and by encouraging higher studies, the future of Darjeeling tea industry on the other hand can only be bright if all the stake holders, the planters, the management, the government and the trade unions make sincere effort to address the issues of the tea workers the main engine of the tea industry as early as possible.

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