**“Life in layam with endless lamentations”-A study on crisis in tea plantation and livelihood issues of the workers.**

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Abstract

In Kerala, the tea plantation industry is a significant part of the economy. Both directly and indirectly, it is essential for generating income, earning foreign currency, and creating jobs. However, this sector's overall performance is deemed to be underwhelming. Tea is a global commodity, thus trade liberalisation has caused a lot of problems for the sector and significantly impacted its performance. Both domestic and foreign markets have experienced issues as a result of trade liberalisation, free import of tea, import of tea of poorer quality, and re-export of that tea mixed with the traditional product. There is competition among tea producers on a global scale as a result of the market for tea opening up.It is difficult for those units to remain operating when their production costs are higher than the global average price. As evidence, consider Kerala's situation. As a result, several tea factories in Kerala were forced to close down. This was followed by high production costs, weak international competition, low price realisation, and intense union pressure, making the Kerala sector too fragile to survive.All of these have caused a crisis in the tea business in Kerala. This study chronicled the expansion of the tea industry in India and also documenting the crises that pervaded the Kerala tea industry.

Keywords: plantation, crisis, liberalisation, price realisation, competitiveness

Introduction

As a result of the British Empire's urgent need for an alternative tea grower to China, tea was introduced to India in the early 19th century. Tea plantations maintained their profitability through wage suppression for a sizable portion of the colonial period because of rules that permitted workforce indenture.Following the removal of the indenture regulations, the tea industry increased its profits through collaboration in the global tea markets, which artificially raised the price of tea. Tea largely remained an export product throughout these changes. Since the 1960s, domestic demand has only increased significantly during the post-colonial era.

Because of the inherent nature of the plantation sector, the plantation workers have been dealing with a lot of economic and social issues. Since the businesses had such serious financial issues, we have previously seen that they were unable to make timely wage payments. It was exceedingly challenging for the employees to cover their daily expenses. As the workers who work on plantations are typically subjected to unfavourable climatic conditions where the firms are seemed to be oblivious to the physical and environmental risks. In addition to the awful living conditions of the workers, the tea plantation sector is also in a very critical crisis. It was discovered that no significant research had been conducted previously to evaluate the effects of this business crisis on the living circumstances of plantation workers.

Historical evolution of tea

Few products in the past, like tea, cotton, and sugar, have been widely dispersed over the globe by a sequence of dramatic occurrences. Tea and sugar in particular, which appear to be modest consumer goods, have over the years greatly contributed to the writing of booms and busts around the world. They have changed capital-labor relations globally as well. The British Empire had a pressing need to locate a different supply of tea than China at the beginning of the 19th century, and this led to the arrival of tea in India.

In this context, the tea economy declared its entry into India through exploration and experimentation and solidified its foothold with a "Tea Mania" in the 1860s. However, it was difficult to keep prices low enough to compete with Chinese tea and preserve profitability, so the British turned to worker indenture, which was made possible by harsh contractual regulations, to address the issue. Generations of tea industry workers' lives were profoundly impacted by the laws. Trade union rallies and labour opposition during the colonial era helped to overturn the indenture rules and bring about later labour reforms.

Following the labour changes, the Great Depression brought about another crisis that required the tea plantation industry to take strategic action. Due to the collusion of tea growers from other nations, tea prices increased in order to retain profitability. Additionally, it planted the seeds for the expansion of small tea growers and the study of the domestic tea market in India. These actions have significantly impacted the development of the tea industry since independence.

Labour in the plantations

By the middle of the nineteenth century, slavery had been declared illegal; theoretically speaking, soil slaves were now "free men." However, neither this nor the employment of these former slaves on the estates resulted in the emergence of a free labour market. A new labour market—a market for wage labor—was thus opened up from which the metropolitan capital began to source affordable labour for their investments in the colonies around the world. A number of them continued to be attached to the land and entered another phase of slavery in indentured form with their old masters, with little deviation from the old adima relationships; it was primarily the remainder that could be recruited for work on the plantations.

Tribes and the areas they inhabited continued to be traded even after slavery was abolished. The expansion of plantations accelerated the process of pauperization, which resulted in the eviction of tribal people from their ancestral lands and the collapse of the small peasantry under the weight of unfavorable government regulations like an increase in land revenue. These people were compelled to migrate to the plantations because they appeared to offer them a better quality of life.

Because of caste hierarchy coupled with economic power, the lands were in the hands of upper-caste Hindus. Dalits and other low-caste people who worked on these fields were inevitably threatened with eviction. Between 1860 and 1869, the rate of eviction of tenants in Malabar increased dramatically. The average yearly number of eviction suits increased from 2,039 in the five-year period ending in 1866 to 4,983 in the four-year period completing in 1880.

Another important source of labour for plantations was migration, which has been called "the light infantry of industrial capital" and comes from famine- and disaster-affected areas. The threat to subsistence was the primary driver of the depressed-caste migration that began in the middle of the nineteenth century from the "labour catchment areas" in various regions of Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, and the Konkan Coast.

The following tabular statement from the Planters' Inquiry Committee of 1896 summarises the situation with workforce recruiting in southern India at the end of the nineteenth century.

Labour recruitment position in southern India, 1896 (in percentage)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Planting region | Local labour | Labour from British India | Labour from Mysore | Total |
| Wayanad  Nilgiris  Madurai  Thirunelveli  Kodagu  Mysore  Travancore  Kochi | 20  17  86  80  20  37  20  4 | 54  45  14  20  53  63  60  96 | 26  38  -  -  27  -  20  - | 100  100  100  100  100  100  100  100 |
| Review of Literature  Sen and George (1992) and George (1982, 1984) have both examined the issues facing South Indian tea estates, particularly the 1970s tea industry crises. The issues have been classified as developmental and financial. These research concentrated on the causes of the increase in the price of factors affecting the amount of production, price, and profitability of the tea industry of long-term financing, investment, and development strategy  S. Senthil Kumar & Dr. C. Vellaichamy (2020),The study's research focuses on the health, safety, and welfare measures offered and also seeks to recognise the extent of advantages supplied to tea plantation employees by tea plantation estates. Tea plantation workers play a key role in the production of tea, hence this study examines the issues they face in the Nilgiris District.  Wagh (2014). This study aims to provide an explanation of the present and potential future of the Indian tea business. The study discovered that while Sri Lanka and Kenya were boosting their tea exports, India's proportion of the global tea export market was declining. This is because domestic tea consumption in these nations is low, and they are focusing on tea exports, but domestic tea consumption in India is very large; more than 80% of the tea produced in India is consumed domestically.  According to Sumitha (2012), the ASEAN and other free trade agreements had a negative impact on the Indian plantations sector's ability to compete as well as the living and working conditions of plantation employees, particularly women workers. Every tea plantation industry in India has benefited from the implementation of PLA 1951. However, estate management is hesitant to adhere to the PLA's guidelines. South Indian tea plantation estates often meet the PLA requirements better than North Indian tea plantation plantations do.  According to Bhowmik (1991), the tea board has a significant impact on the growth of the Indian tea plantation business. The tea board places little emphasis on the growth of small growers; instead, they are primarily focused on the development of the big plantation. The study's major argument is that India's small producers play a crucial part in the country's tea industry. Tea quality and India's tea export performance will improve if the tea board and UPASI take the initiative to attract smallholders to the area of tea cultivation. | | | | |

Tea plantation industry in kerala

In Kerala, plantation estates originally appeared in the former Travancore state in the late 1860s. In the past, tea and coffee were the main crops grown on plantation estates.With their power in the imperial administration, the planters, who were primarily British, exerted persistent political pressure on the princely state of Travancore to obtain the inexpensive land, labour, and capital required for building plantations. When compared to British planters, the number of local planters was quite low, and they only possessed a little amount of land. Kerala's plantations were made possible by the institutional role the British government played. (1989; Umadevi). Government, family, and caste institutions had a significant role in the expansion of the state's plantation industry.

For its contribution to economic development, employment, and foreign exchange revenues, Kerala's tea plantation business has been recognised. However, the tea business has faced challenges alongside other sectors and industries since India's economy was opened up with the onset of globalisation and trade liberalisation. The issue has become worse every year to the point where it is now considered a crisis. This critical condition is currently affecting the tea sector.

Effective factor utilisation can only be seen in the short term in the Kerala tea plantation industry. The use of outdated technology, a lack of product variety, and a lack of professional management all point to inefficient long-term factor utilisation. Capital investments must be made using short-term surpluses in order to achieve long-term growth. However, it appears that the KeraIa tea plantation failed to reinvest the short-term revenues for capital expenditures. In terms of its backward and forward connections, tea's contribution to Kerala's economic prosperity is outstanding.

Huge tracts of arable land and a huge labour force were two fundamental requirements for the growth of plantations. A severe workforce shortage plagued plantations during their initial years. They had to rely on migrant labourers, whose movement the planters had to encourage. This led to widespread migration of labourers from distant regions who were drawn in by the planters' alluring pay and better living standards. The movement of employees to the plantations at that time was clearly influenced by the push and pull factors. The majority of plantation labourers originated from very impoverished regions. Working on plantations provided low caste Indian employees with a path out of their caste's oppressive surroundings.

Because of this, workers were drawn to the plantations by pull factors like higher pay and better living conditions as well as push factors like the prevalence of starvation and caste animosity. Workers from far-off locations arrived in the hopes of earning great earnings, but instead they encountered harsh treatment from planters who gave them unclean living and working conditions and paid them less than what they had promised.

Due to the fact that labourers came from far-off regions, their families were forced to reside permanently. The entire family, including women and children, worked on the plantations for the planters' set wage. This permanent settlement of workers made inexpensive labour available. Family migration also made sure that labour could be redundant, which would alleviate the issue of future recruiting.

Tea is grown on 36762 hectares in Kerala. It displays the area of tea grown in different districts of kerala from 1951 and 2000. Idukki, which has 26615 hectares cultivated with tea, is Kerala's primary tea-producing district, followed by Wayanad, which has 5454 hectares. Kollam, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram, and Palakkad are further significant tea-producing regions.

* Map showing tea planting areas in Kerala.
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* Major crisis in the plantation

The tea plantation industry requires a lot of labour. The most crucial task is plucking or harvesting tea leaves. Mechanical harvesting has mostly replaced hand picking in companies. It has been discovered that hand plucking yields raw leaves of a high quality. But during peak season, the majority of businesses use automated harvesting due to a lack of labour. For picking leaves, both hand-held manual and hand-held motorised shears are utilised. The average time between plucks for shearing is 12 to 16 days and 7 to 10 days for manual plucking.

Tea is primarily marketed by auction. Seventy-seven percent of Kerala's total tea production will be auctioned off. The majority of businesses use auctions to sell their products. Direct export, forward contracts, and ex-garden sales are some additional common marketing strategies. In addition, businesses manufacture and sell packet teas. The producers are unable to receive the actual price due to the active participation of intermediaries in the tea auction. It has been discovered that there may be fraud committed throughout the auction process, which would allow the middlemen to profit significantly.

The situation of the workers in the current crisis environment is in many ways a continuation of a history of alienation, which is thought to be a result of the workers' "stigmatised" categories of identity, such as being a member of the underclass. Categorical oppression is the word used to describe this phenomena (Raj 2020), which describes how the categories of the workers, who are situated at the bottom of the hierarchy of such categories, make life difficult for them (Mitchell 1956).

In the context of the crisis, the workforce is stigmatised, devalued, and subjected to categorical oppression, which refers to the ways in which different categories of identification, including caste, class, ethnicity, language, and place of origin, are experienced by the workforce. The labourers are perpetuated through categorical oppression as one of the most stigmatised groups within the greater social hierarchy and as a source of cheap labour. The majority of the workforce comes from Dalit groups, which still endure untouchability, violence, and prejudice. Therefore, it is important to understand how the crisis affected the workers and the new social circumstances it brought about for them in the context of India's caste system. In a casteist society that not only provided a less expensive labour force but also legitimised it, the capitalist plantations established themselves. Nevertheless, the caste system's influence should not be limited to its role as a facilitator of labour divisions in capitalist societies.

A significant shift from foreign control of the plantations to native owners occurred after Kerala State was established in 1956. The structure of power merely shifted from foreign elites to indigenous elites (uppercaste Hindus and Syrian Christians), who in turn effectively carried on the same practises. In a few instances, such as Harrison Malayalam Plantations, foreign companies kept stakes in plantation businesses through their Indian subsidiary companies.

Plantation system, especially the labour class facing several problems .The main issue associated with this business is high production costs and low price realisation. Workforce costs account for 65 percent of the entire cost of manufacturing. Labour unions are quite powerful in Kerala, and their impact on salary increases is obvious. The auction price fluctuates or falls continuously.

In comparison to other Indian states, Kerala offers better pay to its tea plantation employees. Kerala's real wages, however, are pitiful. In Kerala's tea plantations, the daily wage is Rs 301. The previous salary was Rs 216 per day. In 2015, there was a significant protest, and the estate management decided to give Rs 301 each day. The women workers sought 500 rupees per day in wages and a 20 percent bonus during the protest period. The estate management, however, was not willing to boost the pay to Rs. 500. However, in Kerala, Rs. 301 is less than the minimum wage paid to agricultural employees in Kerala.

Since the primary source of income for the families of the plantation employees was their pay and salaries from the industry, the sector's crisis has a significant influence on their socioeconomic circumstances. Their economic situation and purchasing power have declined as a result of the real income falling and frequent irregularities. The family budget became unmanageable due to the ongoing occurrence of price increases for  necessities. As a result, they were struggling to pay for both sides of their lives. Their furniture and household items, which they had purchased years before, were now outdated and worn out. They might not be able to afford to buy new ones.

The Layams, the residence where they reside, has a structure that is in the most deplorable state. Each unit in the lines has a small portico, a living room, a kitchen, and a tiny work space with restrooms. There are fewer than ten residential apartments total in the building. With an average age of 80–90 years—exactly the same as the estate's tea plants—the majority of the Layams are in poor condition. The estate plantation firm is required to maintain and repair the building, but they frequently neglected to do so.

Frequent political agitations or strikes are another factor contributing to the issue.In every estate of a tea plantation, there is political agitation. Many estates were either permanently closed down or were closed for a number of days as a result of the ongoing political unrest and labour unrest. Tea output, export, and employment are all negatively impacted.

Other factors contributing to the rise in production costs in tea plantation estates include high fuel and transportation costs. The majority of the tea estates were situated in remote regions, far from the tea factory. In such remote locations, the infrastructure, particularly the road transport system, is extremely pitiful. Therefore, the estate management needs a lot of money to move the pesticide and other fertilisers to the tea bush field and transport the harvested tea leaf from the hilly location to the factory.

Kerala's tea production and area under cultivation are neither growing nor expanding, and Kerala's contribution to India's total tea production has decreased. Kerala had a lot of large estates closed. Numerous small farmers also started working in the tea industry at the same time. The tea industry's underwhelming performance in India and Kerala can be attributed to a variety of factors. The Indian tea market's inability to compete with the global tea industry is the main reason. For the production of tea and HYV of tea bushes, every other major tea-producing nation in the world uses modern technologies. But in India, where more than 50% of the tea bushes are old.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the crisis affecting Kerala's plantation industry is a complex issue that needs prompt attention and all-encompassing remedies. The industry, which has long served as the foundation of the state's economy, is currently dealing with a number of problems, such as fluctuating commodity prices, labour disputes, and environmental concerns. The government, key players in the industry, and local communities must work together to jointly address these concerns. Sustainable agricultural methods, better working conditions for labourers, and crop variety may be crucial first steps in reviving this important industry. Kerala can protect its economic stability, the welfare of its plantation workers, and the continuation of its illustrious agricultural history for future generations by tackling these issues head-on.

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