

Journal of Kolkata Society for Asian Studies: Vol 11. No. 1, June 2025

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Abstract:

Tea plantations are often seen as ‘enclave economies’ due to their colonially entrenched oppressive structures. The paper deals with the mid-19th century ‘in-migration’ of pauperised communities from the Chotanagpur region, various parts of Jharkhand, and Odisha to Assam and the Dooars region of West Bengal as indentured labourers and how their current out-migration is causing ruptures in the long existing ‘enclaves’ pertaining to stagnation of wages, closure of big estates, rise of Small Tea Growers (STGs) and potential legal changes such as the abolition of Plantation Labour Act of 1951. It also highlights the emergence of a new form of activism, emphasising the need for systemic change to address historical exploitation and promote fair labour practices.

Keywords: *In-migration, out-migration, rupturing enclaves, Plantations Labour Act, fair labour practices.*

Introduction:

Tea plantations in the Dooars region of West Bengal and various parts of Assam have historically been viewed as ‘enclave economies’¹—isolated from the outer world due to their colonially entrenched oppressive structure. The 19th-century history of colonial Indian labour migration to Assam and Dooars’ tea plantations involves the importation of tribal and lower-caste Hindus from regions like Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh as indentured labourers (Barpujari, 1993: 40). The demand for raw materials and tropical agricultural products led to the establishment of large-scale plantations using European capital, necessitating a diverse workforce from across the Indian subcontinent from around 1839 (Behal, 2014: 2). The plantation system is a labour intensive industry (Bhowmik, 2011), rooted in colonial control and resource extraction, encompasses a distinct form of labour organisation where the workers are tied to the land for lifetime without any land rights and produce commodity crops for national and global consumption

(Besky, 2014: 7; Das & Hazarika, 2022). The tea plantations in India employed an extensive workforce at exceptionally low wage levels among all private capitalist enterprises in the history of colonial India (Behal, 2014). This system mirrors an 'enclave' (Bhowmik, 1980; Dasgupta, 1992; Nath, 2005) where structural oppression pervades the labourer's existence (Chatterjee, 2003). The early conditions within plantations were deliberately designed to keep labourers captive as this workforce was largely imported through coercive means such as- indentured labour, slavery and bonded labour (Dasgupta, 1992: 66; Bhowmik, 1995; 2011; Banerjee, 2017: 3). This extensive workforce was ensnared in a system where their mobility was restricted, their bargaining power minimal and their wages meagre (Behal, 2014; Rudra, 2018). The marginalised position of the labourer is a natural entailment partially belonging to the exploitative, rigid and highly centralised structure of the plantation hierarchy (Banerjee, 2017). Despite subsequent developments, the shackles of low-paid work persisted, denying them true emancipation.

Plantations faced a paradox: while they needed labour, they were hesitant to pay competitive wages (Myint, 1973). The conditions are more or less remained same in both in Assam and Dooars plantations. Despite increased labour productivity, the wage rates in plantations remained stagnant (Bhowmik, 1981). Increment in the wages of the workers has remained a major bone of contention for last many decades (Singh, 2024). The precariousness of their situation underscores the need for fair wages and improved working conditions. The plantation system relied on three interconnected components: coercion, low wages, and immigrant labour. These factors guaranteed high profits for the planters (Bhowmik, 1980). As a labour-intensive industry, reducing the wage bill directly increased profits. Simultaneously, the planters aimed to maintain a captive labour force, extracting maximum work from labourers (Ibid.). By employing indentured labour, the planters ensured that workers remained bound to the plantations, accepting whatever wages were offered (Bhowmik, 1981; Sharma, 2014: 5). Unfortunately, this phenomenon hindered the growth of a competitive labour market, leaving workers without access to fair market wages. The absence of legal safeguards hindered workers' mobility and bargaining power. These perpetuated their reliance on the plantation system.

Scholars such as Sarkar (2017) and Wolf (2022) argue that the notion of spatial immutability in these plantations is evolving. They emphasise the need to reassess and update the academic discourse to reflect the current dynamics. One of the most pressing issues in these plantations today is price stagnation, which is pushing workers out of the enclosed boundaries of the plantations. This economic pressure is significant as it disrupts the long-standing model of labour immobility and insularity. Therefore, a phenomenon of reverse-migration can be seen in these plantations which characterises the space as a dynamic one as opposed to a static one (Besky, 2019; Sarkar,

2017). There are enough reasons to ponder about why this pattern of outmigration is taking place. Either this is happening due to any disruptive change in the pre-existing labour-capital relations or it is simply taking place as a form of escape from the unsolved long-standing issues in the plantations (Sarkar, 2017). The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 (potentially getting abolished) ensured at least some guaranteed benefits (such as housing, sanitation, crèches etc.). This issue further endangers the existing status of the workers living within the plantations (PTI, 2020).

The rise of Small Tea Growers (STGs) in both the Dooars and Assam is also a notable trend. It affects not only the economic viability of the tea plantations but also the social and political structures that have historically defined them. The impact of this transformation on the political economy of tea plantations is profound. It raises questions about the relationship between the crisis in the tea sector and the changing conditions of the workers. As STGs become more prevalent, the traditional plantation model faces challenges, potentially leading to better opportunities for workers but also increasing instability as the old systems of support and control wane.

Moreover, the encouragement of STGs by state governments suggests a policy shift aimed at revitalising the tea industry and addressing issues such as labour exploitation and economic stagnation. However, this transformation is complex and multifaceted. By the end 1970s, ownerships of big tea plantations in Assam and Dooars changed hands and this phenomenon needs to be located within the larger political-economic circumstances of the country (Banerjee, 2017). The transition involved a gradual increase in joint ventures and the emergence of local proprietors. By the 1970s, pan-Indian capital began to gain significance (Raman, 2010). After the advent of globalisation and the beginning of tryst with neo-liberal economy, tea plantations in both Assam and Dooars suffered challenges that are somehow linked to the developments in global capitalist economy. The downturn in the plantations started after hitting a peak in productions in the early 2000s which forced the workers to break away from generational captivity within the plantations and look for alternative avenues of livelihood.

Activists in Dooars are concerned that the government is plotting to sell the 'sick' tea gardens to corporate and further relocating workers to remote and less visible areas. The concern of the activists is not completely baseless as 2019 Tea Tourism and Allied Business Policy of the State of West Bengal is allowing up to 150 acres or 15% of the plantations repurposed for tourism and other business (Singh, 2024). Activism is also gaining ground revolving around the issue of land rights for the tea workers within the tea plantations (Ibid). The reactions of the trade unions and social activists points towards a new form of politics germinating in the plantations.

This paper is divided into three distinct sections. In the initial section, the paper attempts

to examine whether the issue of mobility exacerbates the crisis or provides new opportunities for social advancement, that is, upward social mobility. Secondly, political dynamics within tea plantations is explored and how Small Tea Growers are playing a catalytic role in this phenomenon. Thirdly, the paper examines how various political parties frame narratives around the ongoing crisis and propose solutions within the existing hierarchical structure and investigates how these narratives impact the workers and influence the germination of new form of politics within the plantations.

Based on the objectives of the research, the following research questions are formed:

- a) How does the issue of mobility among plantation workers influence the ongoing crisis in tea plantations, and does it offer opportunities for upward social mobility?
- b) In what ways do Small Tea Growers (STGs) contribute to the evolving political dynamics within tea plantations, and what impact do they have on the traditional plantation labour system?
- c) How do various political parties frame their narratives around the crisis in tea plantations, and what are the effects of these narratives and proposed solutions on the workers and the emergence of new forms of politics within the plantations?

Methodology:

The research employed qualitative analysis as a method to understand the issues outlined in the research objectives. Four tea gardens in Dooars region were purposely taken of which two are categorised as regularly operational tea plantation and the rest two are categorised as sick and closed respectively. Random Stratified sampling and snowball sampling was involved to select the respondents among the workers. Interactions were made with workers and local managers to understand the current conditions, challenges, and dynamics within these plantations. For the tea plantations in Assam, the research primarily relies on secondary data. Extensive review of literature was done to analyse the issues in plantations in Assam. This includes reports (such as TRA publications, newspaper reports), publications (publications of DTR & DC), and statistical data obtained from various offices of the Tea Board of India, located in Siliguri, Guwahati, and Kolkata. Secondary sources also include academic publications, industry reports, and previous research studies which provided a historical and economic context to the current state of the tea industry in Assam and Dooars. Analysis in the paper integrates insights received from the workers and inputs underscored in the existing literature.

Ruptures in the Enclaves:

The history of tea plantations in Assam and Dooars cannot be fully understood without recognising the diverse narratives of labour migration to these regions. Together, Dooars and Assam produce more than half of India's total tea output, the state of Assam being the largest tea producing state in India. This tea-producing belt in West Bengal and Assam spans over 138,000 hectares and employs over 800,000 permanent workers, making it the largest organised sector in both regions. Plantations were established in sparsely populated areas due to the need for large, cultivable land. Planters generally avoided using local labour, even when available, as local workers would have greater bargaining power (Xaxa, 1985; Bhowmik, 2011). Instead, planters opted for migrant workforce, which were seen as a more suitable option for achieving maximum productivity (Ibid.). This strategy involved importing labour at low costs, preventing the development of a competitive labour market (Ibid.). Many labourers, primarily from Chhota Nagpur region presently situated in the state of Jharkhand, and other tribal belts of Odisha and Chhattisgarh were permanently recruited to work in the isolated, malaria-prone, and bushy areas that needed clearing for the plantations (Sarkar, 2019).

Geographical locations of plantations in alienated areas and insularity of the labour quarters within the plantations placed workers mobility within the plantations which is also characterised lack of social and political capital due to their cultural alienation. In an institution like system within the plantation, workers are deprived of the ability to leave the confined environment and are isolated from the socio-economic changes taking place in the outside world. The only link to the outside world from the plantation is through the nearby satellite towns (Raj, 2022). Poor connectivity of the road network further restricts movement of the workers to the satellite towns (Ibid). Workers were unable to leave the plantations for two primary reasons. First, planters kept workers and their families' captive on the plantations, with watchmen guarding the labour lines to prevent outsiders from luring workers away (Bhowmik, 1981). Second, planters did not permit alternative employment in the tea-growing region, ensuring workers' total dependence on the plantation for sustenance (Ibid.). In the early years of plantations in Jalpaiguri, the Forest Department tried to attract workers by offering cultivable land in exchange for work in forest plantations. The planters' association protested, using their influence on the colonial government to prevent this, as they had invested in recruiting labour from distant areas.

The workforce recruitment in Assam's tea plantations was primarily through indentured labour, unlike the newly established tea estates in Dooars and other parts of the country where this method was not employed (Bhowmik, 2011; Sharma, 2014). Despite the absence of an indentured system in Dooars, workers faced challenges in leaving the plantations due to coercive measures

used by the planters (Bhowmik, 2011). Workers were encouraged to bring their families, which helped sever their ties with their native places and ensured their permanent settlement within the plantations. The landscape of the tea plantation sector evolved with favourable government concessions (Dasgupta, 1992; Sharma, 2014). Those already in business found it highly lucrative to reinvest their profits and savings in tea plantations and other resource-based industries. This reinvestment, along with government policies that extracted revenue from the agricultural sector, played a significant role in the rise of the modern tea plantation sector in Assam.

The tea tribes of Assam, despite having a newer generation with improved education and a growing presence of intellectuals and professionals, remain among the backward and most exploited tribes in India. Primarily labourers, they reside in villages within tea estates established by tea planters. The remote locations of these estates contribute to the overall backwardness and exploitation faced by the tea tribes. Living with basic facilities provided by the tea planters, the workers often experience various forms of exploitation. During the interactions with the workers and in some of the well-maintained plantations in Dooars, it has been explored that migration from various parts of India continued not only during the colonial period but also during and after independence. However, when an inquiry was made with the administrative personnel about whether this migration had ceased, they explained that the unions no longer allow external workers to be hired. The new workers are typically relatives or distant relatives of the existing plantation workers. It suggests that in-migration to the plantations might have been restrained to a level but on contrary out-migration far outnumbers it. During the field survey, it was found families living in the coolie lines where no family members are actively or permanently employed in the plantations, thus not contributing to the labour force. These families typically consist of retired workers who, due to age, no longer have the physical strength to work in the plantations. In most cases, the next generation of these families is not absorbed into the plantation labour force and must seek employment elsewhere, either in nearby areas or by moving to distant cities for better opportunities. Members of these families do not get any support from the planters as they no longer contribute to the active labour force. Similar trends are noted in plantations of Assam by Mishra, et. al. (2011) which highlights the issue of multiple exclusions and inability to ensure inclusive growth.

When it was asked to Bibhash from Matheran Tea Estate³ in Dooars, a relatively well-maintained plantation, about work opportunities, he responded, "Kaam ekhene nai, kichhu kori khati to hobey? Lokgulai kutha jabe?" which roughly translates to, "There are no jobs available in the plantation. They have to earn their bread somehow, or else where will they go?" His son recently joined the State Police as a Civic Volunteer and married a woman in the same profession.

Arun³, whose family lives in the residential area within the garden, known locally as the coolie line, works as a construction labourer in Birpara and visits his family once or twice a week. Since no family members currently work in the plantations, he finds it challenging to keep his family there. He hopes to save enough money to move his family to his nearby workplace, as union members are also pressuring him to vacate the land. Ramen from Kalindi Tea Garden earlier used to work as a permanent worker in the tea garden but intermittent closure of the tea garden forced him to look for casual work outside in the forest department or nearby plantations². Deputy Manager of Kamtapur Tea Estate Mr. Srinivas³ told me that some of the young labourers are migrating to plantations in South India for better wages and opportunities as plucking season goes on throughout the year there.

Tea labourers and their children exhibit various forms of mobility away from plantations, including subsistence farming, temporary work in metropolitan cities, and activist engagements (Wolf, 2022). Subsistence farming often proves inadequate for financial stability, compelling former labourers who left plantations to return under worse conditions as temporary labourers. Thus, spatial mobility frequently results in downward social mobility. Temporary labour migration to cities offers an alternative, but it rarely leads to sustainable upward social mobility, as many workers ultimately return to plantations (Wolf, 2022). Therefore, while the traditional notion of labour immobility within plantations might hold some truth, it cannot be taken for granted. Increasingly, instances are emerging where workers and their families are migrating from the plantations, either permanently or in search of better wages and working conditions.

Workers are not always leaving their residences willingly; various factors such as occupational distribution, diversification, and non-absorption into the labour force contribute to this phenomenon (Mishra, Upadhyay, & Sarma, 2012). Interestingly, some reverse migration is occurring from one 'enclave' to another, leading to the transformation of seemingly unaltered spaces into expanding ones. Hence, the ongoing labour mobility, driven by various factors, is rendering the space dynamic and permeable rather than stagnant one (Wolf, 2022). The increasing rate of casualisation labour also significantly contributes to strengthening Small Tea Growers as a competitive economic segment where workers do not come under any regulations and are paid according to the daily wage rate. The issue is dealt in the following section.

Emergence of Small Tea Growers: Catalysts for Change in Dooars and Assam:

In the Dooars region, encompassing districts such as Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, there is a significant presence of small tea growers (STGs). For instance, Cooch Behar boasts 3,139 STGs cultivating 1,496.01 hectares, while Jalpaiguri has 19,696 STGs working on 12,289.73 hectares. Collectively, West Bengal has a total of 36,559 STGs cultivating 24,212.41 hectares, with the

Dooars region contributing a substantial portion of this total, underscoring its critical role in the state's tea production landscape.

Comparatively, Assam has a considerably higher number of STGs than West Bengal. The area cultivated by STGs in Assam is nearly five times larger than in West Bengal, indicating a more significant impact on Assam's tea production. The proliferation of STGs in the Dooars has shifted the tea industry from being dominated by large estates to a more diversified sector. This transition has notable implications for market dynamics, as STGs typically incur lower production costs and can adapt more swiftly to market demands. However, STGs are not definitely not above problems as most of them are hugely dependent upon a class of middlemen and sub-contractors. Price determination of green leaves are largely left on the mercy of the bought leaf factories and profits depend on the whims of the weather conditions as well.

These STGs are increasingly contributing to the total tea production in both states, and they are actively supported by state governments (Panda, et al., 2022). This shift is transforming the tea industry landscape, indicating a move towards a more diversified and less isolated economic model. The rise of STGs exerts competitive pressure on large estates. Their lower operational costs and greater adaptability provide STGs with an advantage, potentially affecting the profitability and sustainability of larger estates. In Assam, this effect is more pronounced due to the higher number of STGs and the greater area they cultivate. The diversification brought about by STGs helps mitigate risks associated with dependency on large estates, potentially fostering a more stable tea economy in both regions. This shift presents both challenges and opportunities for the sustainability and evolution of the tea industry in Assam and West Bengal. The tea sector in Assam has adopted several cost-cutting measures to cope up with the challenges posed by globalisation such as casualisation of labour force (Mishra et. al., 2011). Workers in the “sick” plantations seek work in these small tea gardens on temporary basis to make ends meet (Wolf, 2022). In times of sickness, the inherent violence of monoculture intensifies, laying bare its intricate relational dynamics beyond the human realm (Besky, 2019).

Table 1
State wise Tea Growers and Tea Area

State	Organised Sector		Enumerated STGs as on 31.03.22		Total	
	No. of Tea Gardens	Tea Area in Hectares	No. of STGs	Tea Area in Hectares	Growers	Tea Area (Ha)
Assam	762	232961.73	122415	114848	123177	347809.73
West Bengal	449	114479.37	36559	24212	37008	138691.37

Source: <https://www.teaboard.gov.in>

The incremental role of STGs in the Plantation scenario is clear from Table 1. In Assam, STGs contribute significantly to the tea area, accounting for 33.03% of the total tea area. This is a clear indication that substantial portion of tea cultivation is being carried out by the STGs in contemporary scenario. STGs contribute significantly to the tea area in Assam and West Bengal which accounts for 33.03% and 17.46% of the total tea area respectively. From the experience gathered during field survey, STGs (Small Tea Growers) located near large tea estates typically do not face manpower shortages for garden maintenance. Casualisation of the labour force is prevalent, with workers who struggle to contribute to the larger tea estates often seeking employment in nearby small tea gardens. This trend provides a steady labour supply for STGs. During the lean season from October to January, many tea gardens across the Dooars region temporarily close, which has become a recurring issue in gardens like Dheklapara, Damdima, and Kalchini, where fieldwork was conducted. The management often issues suspension notices citing reasons such as hooliganism or the casual attitude of the workers, using these excuses to shut down operations. This tactic allows them to avoid paying salaries during a period when not much work is needed, thus bypassing their financial obligations to the workers. This cycle of closure and casualisation highlights significant management and labour challenges within the tea plantation industry.

Despite the substantial capital investment by Small Tea Growers (STGs) in the tea sector, they have not been entirely successful in absorbing labour from closed tea estates or from larger estates where workers struggle to find opportunities. In the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar, most STGs employ leaf plucking machines, leaving only the smaller and poorer growers to rely on manual labour for plucking tea leaves. A significant observation is the gender disparity in the labour force composition between large tea estates and STGs. Large estates primarily employ a feminised labour force, while male labourers dominate the workforce in STGs. Female labours dominate in the large tea plantations because during colonial times they were employed to keep the wage level depressed as they earned less than their male counterpart (Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998). Inside the plantations gendered division of labour reflects the centrality of patriarchy as a structure of control (Banerjee, 2017). This discrepancy highlights the gendered nature of labour casualisation. When labour is casualised, male workers predominantly take part in this shift.

Within the protected boundaries of tea estates, women find favorable working conditions (Banerjee, 2017). However, outside these secured plantations, women are less likely to work due to the change in spatial and material conditions. This reluctance is often influenced by family restrictions and perceived vulnerabilities in the less protected external environments. Thus, it can be argued that plantation spaces offer female workers a domesticated arrangement where the

invisible governance mechanisms provide security and protection from perceived vulnerabilities. This protective environment contrasts sharply with the less secure conditions outside the plantations, where women feel less safe and supported. This analysis underscores the complexity of labour dynamics within the tea industry, where economic, spatial, and gender factors intersect, shaping the employment patterns and experiences of the workforce.

Navigating Change: Political Shifts in Tea Plantations of Dooars and Assam:

By the late 1970s, ownership of large tea plantations in Assam and Dooars shifted towards joint ventures and local proprietors, influenced by the rise of pan-Indian capital (Banerjee, 2017; Raman, 2010). Subsequently, globalisation and neoliberal policies had a profound impact on tea plantations, contributing to production declines from the early 2000s onwards. Within this context, political entities including unions and NGOs operating within these plantations framed narratives highlighting ongoing crises in Assam and Dooars. As the Indian economy integrates into global circuits of production, exchange, and accumulation, the burden of adjustment falls disproportionately on small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, workers in the urban informal sector, and informal workers in the organised sector (Sarma & Borah, 2016). Globalisation tends to favour capital, which can swiftly move across borders, while disadvantaging labour, particularly lower-skilled workers who face challenges in migrating or cannot migrate at all (Ibid.). To enhance global competitiveness, many investors are relocating to countries with lower labour costs or relying increasingly on informal employment.

While the evolution of unions varied between these states, common issues such as non-payment of bonuses, housing repairs, and food supply persisted. In Dooars, union movements have become increasingly fragmented in recent decades, with workers aligning themselves with various political factions such as Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad, Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress, Hindusthan Mazdoor Sangh, among others (Banerjee, 2017). The once influential Indian National Trade Union Congress and Centre of Trade Unions have experienced a diminished presence in the tea gardens of Assam and Dooars. Instead, Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangh continues to maintain a foothold in many large tea plantations, alongside other unions such as Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha, Bharatiya Cha Parishad, and ABITA. This fragmented allegiance among workers has exacerbated issues of non-inclusivity for permanent casual workers within the trade union movement, hindering their ability to negotiate for improved working conditions, wages, and facilities (Duara, 2017). The efforts of these unions failed to achieve unified solidarity among workers and effectively pressure management or the government, resulting in only sporadic protests (Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998).

Trade union politics is generally stable in nature in a sense that it does not keep on changing with the change of government in the Centre or State. However, both in Dooars and Assam a constant change of allegiance is being observed as Unions in this contemporary period are more likely to align with the ruling parties. In some cases, the workers' organisations and trade unions are mostly led by individuals who are not part of the community, making it difficult for them to truly represent the aspirations of the workers (Bhowmik, 2015). In the last decade, the Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad (ABAVP) gained significant traction in Dooars and Assam. The violent response to Adivasi protests in Assam fueled larger demonstrations in the Dooars against injustices perpetrated by the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) and their push for a separate state. ABAVP leaders have highlighted several factors responsible for the emergence of the movement, including: (a) the threat to their territory by Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJMM), (b) fear of losing their land to non-advasis, (c) the prolonged crisis in the tea gardens and its impact on their livelihood, (d) lack of development in the region, (e) declining faith in political parties, trade unions, and the government, and (f) the desire to establish their distinct adivasi identity (Roy, 2017). This evolving political landscape, marked by the declining influence of older unions like INTUC and CITU and the rise of new alliances, reflects the complex socio-political dynamics in the tea plantations of Assam and Dooars (Bhowmik, 2011). During this period, the Progressive Tea Workers Union in Dooars became aggressively vocal, demanding a sudden hike in wages and directly challenging other existing union bodies. However, these movements, despite their initial promise, eventually died down over time.

There is a widespread decline in unions across the plantations. Even though the statistical participation of workers (both permanent and casual) appears high, these numbers are grossly misleading. This decline happens when unions adopt a narrow perspective, failing to develop the necessary linkages, alliances, and broad reform vision required to build significant political power (Turner, 2004). Based on fieldwork in several plantations, it appears that there are currently two dominant unions in Dooars: one aligned with the ruling TMC party and another associated with the BJP. Despite its affiliation with the TMC, INTTUC has been ineffective in negotiating various issues with the government and management. During interactions with workers, it is discovered allegations of corruption within the TMC-affiliated union, where leaders allegedly receive kickbacks from management in the form of bonus cuts. Workers like Bitun Kharko from Matheran Tea Estate and Shibu Rani from Kalchini Tea Estate reported instances where union leaders failed to advocate for worker demands. Arun, also from Matheran Tea Estate, shared how union leaders are pressuring his family to vacate their quarters due to their lack of current employment in the plantation. Activists in Dooars are concerned about government plans to sell

struggling tea gardens to corporations and relocate workers to remote areas. This concern is supported by the 2019 Tea Tourism and Allied Business Policy of West Bengal, which allows up to 150 acres or 15% of plantations to be repurposed for tourism and other businesses (Singh, 2024). Activism is also growing around land rights for tea workers.

Different political outfits shape their narratives around improving conditions within the plantations. Both BJP and TMC top leadership visit tea garden localities, promising to address poor working conditions, reopen closed tea estates, and inject capital to resume full-scale operations in the 'sick' tea gardens. But these promises remain perennially unfulfilled. The large pool of unemployed individuals on plantations gives employers a significant advantage. Employers leverage the availability of casual labour to depress general wage levels. During wage negotiations, when trade unions push for higher wages, employers often counter that higher wages are possible only if the number of casual labourers is reduced (Bhowmik, 1980). This puts workers in a difficult position: while higher wages would increase individual income, reducing casual labour would decrease household income. Consequently, wage increases are inevitably scaled down. But there are ample instances where it can be noted people are leaving the plantations despite the case that their family had been living there for centuries. Various global and local factors discussed earlier are heavily influencing this phenomenon. Ultimately, the future of these tea plantations will depend on the ability of workers, unions, and activists to navigate these complex dynamics and push for more inclusive and equitable economic models. The ongoing struggles underscore the need for systemic change that addresses the root causes of exploitation and creates sustainable livelihoods for plantation workers and their families.

Findings:

Based on the responses to the three major research questions the following findings are observed.

1. One of the major factors forcing the workers to seek alternative opportunities outside the plantation is the price stagnation in the tea industry. In the context of economic pressure, forces are pinching everywhere and leaving no room for the workers to stick with their traditional property within the plantations and therefore leading to reverse migration.
2. Small Tea Growers (STGs) are identified a key determinant in bringing dynamism and change in the Tea industry of Dooars and Assam. They are also making substantial contribution in tea production with support from their respective state governments. This reflects a shift towards more diversified and less isolated economic model.
3. The responses from the trade unions and social activists show that it may be a case of

new political equations forming within the plantations. These trends mainly consist of attempting to combat the current crisis and supporting the interests and well-being of workers. The evolving narratives are efforts to negotiate the shifting socio-economic terrain of tea plantation life in Dooars and Assam.

Conclusion:

The tea industry's transformation in the Dooars and Assam regions involves complex interactions between economic pressures, labour dynamics, gender roles, and political responses. The historical evolution of plantations is different in Dooars and Assam and even the manifestations of crises are different. While drawing structural parallels between plantations of these two regions may not be feasible, the nature of their problems exhibits some similarities. The issues in the tea plantations in both Assam and Dooars cannot be understood in isolation from each other; rather they are largely entangled and enmeshed with each other. The workers are tied to the land not only as a result of occupational immobility due to generational captivity inside the plantations but various other factors are responsible for perpetuating the issue. Despite the traditional notion of labour immobility within plantations, recent trends indicate increasing labour mobility driven by various factors. This includes economic necessity, non-absorption into the labour force, and better opportunities elsewhere. The mobility of workers is not entirely voluntary, as workers face multiple exclusions and pressures from both economic and managerial fronts. The movement of workers from one plantation 'enclave' to another, as well as to different regions, underscores the dynamic and permeable nature of plantation spaces. This ongoing mobility challenges the static perception of plantation labour, revealing a more fluid and adaptive workforce.

Price stagnation in the tea industry has emerged as a critical factor driving workers to seek alternative employment opportunities outside the plantations. This economic pressure, coupled with limited financial prospects within the plantations, has led to reverse migration. Workers are increasingly unable to sustain their livelihoods within the traditional plantation economy, prompting them to explore other avenues. STGs contribute substantially to tea production and it reflects a shift towards a more diversified and less isolated economic model. This shift enhances the resilience of the tea sector by promoting smaller, more flexible production units over large, static estates. Despite their significant capital investment, STGs have not fully absorbed labour from closed or struggling large estates. This however produces a new challenge in labour integration.

The researchers' interaction with the workers in different plantations revealed that they tend to develop an intimate relationship with the plant being cultivated in a monoculture such as Tea plantations which extends to 'boundaries of species' (Besky, 2019). The rupture within plantation

boundaries are not only a result of sudden policy shift or corporatizing the space for better output and productivity, but it is, to a large extent happening due to the breaking of inter-species intimacy between plants and human beings. The plantations are to be seen more as a living and growing space rather than only as a colonial or feudal remnant.

Therefore, the rise of small tea growers becomes a natural outcome to repatriate momentum in the tea industry in terms of productivity and growth. The unusual paradigm is activism within the plantations revolves around the narrative of sustenance amid sickness. The politics even though disorganised is always navigated towards protection of the eroding 'enclaves' and a desperate search for unsustainable and temporary alternatives. The political dynamics in these regions are navigated towards protecting these spaces and addressing the deep-seated issues faced by the workers.

To expunge the issues existing in the tea plantations several policies are already put in place but seemingly these policies only exist on paper. For this the nature of the policies cannot be criticised rather there is a serious lacuna in the implementation part. Previously, alternative practices such as cooperatives-run estates were implemented but in the long run they proved to be failed experiments. In many of the closed tea gardens, worker-run cooperatives function as a means of sustaining livelihood, but many times, this lands the workers in an uncomfortable terrain of a legal battle with the owners where the owners surely have a better edge to win it. Nevertheless, the cooperative model of running the estates involved multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process, with community leaders having a larger voice in the whole process. But there were allegations from multiple fronts of hegemonising the decision-making by the ownership faction in their favour. But state government needs to play a greater role in ensuring vindication of labour rights and owners get fair profit. The government also needs to encourage diversification of income-generating activities of the workers, such as livestock rearing or growing alternate crops alongside tea, which can garner some extra income for the families. Introducing micro-finance schemes for the women tea garden workers can also bring palpable changes as a vehicle of empowerment for them. Proposing a plausible solution to the existing crises is a complex task. However, considering the multi-faceted nature of the crises, the role of the state needs to be placed critically in order to underline the causes and implications of the crisis. In other words, whether the state and its collusion with the capitalist classes, meaning estate owners and perpetuating crises is a question that needs further research.

Endnotes:

¹Enclave economy: export-based industry dominated by international capital extracting resources

from another country, often applied to describe post-colonial dependency, notably in Latin America. See: Singer, H. W. (1950). The Distribution of Gains between Investing and Borrowing Countries. *Papers and Proceedings of the Sixty-second Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association*, 40 (2), pp. 473-485.

² The apparent crises in the tea plantations in North Bengal are explained in the following news articles. See: Crisis in North Bengal tea belt continues as another tea garden shuts in Alipurduar. (2023, November 04). Telegraph. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/crisis-in-north-bengal-tea-belt-continues-as-another-tea-garden-shuts-in-alipurduar/cid/977532> & Chaudhuri, Mohuya (2015): "Tea Gardens in the East Are Brewing Starvation, Malnutrition," The Wire, <http://thewire.in/2015/07/30/tea-gardens-in-the-east-are-brewing-starvation-malnutrition-7571/>, accessed on 21 June 2023.

³ For ethical reasons, the names of the tea gardens and workers have been kept anonymous to protect their identities.

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