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Those Lush Tea Estates Are Hiding Death and Despair

BY SABITA BANERJI ON 25/02/2016 • LEAVE A COMMENT



File picture of Munnar tea estates. Credit: Nikolas Becker, Wikipedia Commons

Even as reports of starvation deaths on defunct tea estates (<http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-65-die-of-starvation-future-bleak-for-lakhs-of-north-bengal-tea-workers-2152766>) in West Bengal keep coming in, observers are beginning to ask one crucial question—is it the

end of the tea industry? And if so, can anything be done to save it and more importantly, save the millions of workers that depend on it for their livelihoods?

India has seen economic liberation, the meteoric growth of its middle class, increasing industrialisation, decreasing poverty and an evolution into a global economic powerhouse. Bengal and Kerala, home to many of India's tea plantations, saw some of the world's most extensive agricultural land redistribution programmes.

Yet somehow, tea workers have missed out on all this; according to a Columbia University report

(https://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/human-rights-institute/files/tea_report_final_draft-smallpdf.pdf) they “...remain an impoverished, largely illiterate population, living on the margins. By every conceivable public health measure – maternal mortality, infant mortality, frequency of typhoid and dysentery epidemics, life expectancy – workers are worse off than the general population, according to statistics of the Indian Council of Medical Research.”

The report suggests that the system set up in colonial times to establish tea plantations with a resident, cheap and malleable labour force has remained surprisingly intact throughout India's post-Independence development.

LSE researcher Jayaseelan Raj, echoes this

(<https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/jayaseelan-raj/women-strike-back-protest-of-pembillai-orumai-tea-workers>): “Kerala has been widely lauded for having achieved human development goals comparable to those of economically advanced countries despite being economically poor... However, the ‘pro-poor’ policies largely passed over the plantations.”

This is no coincidence. As far back as the 1940's, when Iris Macfarlane (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Green-Gold-The-Empire-Tea/dp/0091895456>) challenged her tea planter husband as to why workers remained impoverished when the Company was “making huge profits”, he explained that it was simply “the System”. And powerful industry bodies have ever since assiduously maintained this System.

The System of tea production and distribution established over 100 years ago, was predicated on a low-paid, stringently managed manual labour force whose housing, health and education are firmly controlled by their employers (formalised by the 1955 Plantation Labour Act). The dilemma for the modern tea industry is that keeping these costs low is essential to maintain the low prices that tea drinkers have grown used to. If tea workers were to suddenly receive the same freedoms and benefits as other agricultural workers, the System would break and they, like their managers, would be out of a job and consequently out of a home, school and healthcare too. So, for tea companies, improving the lot of their vast army of workers seems the most dangerous thing imaginable if they want the survival of the industry.

Keeping the status quo going

As tea makes a significant contribution to India's economy, local and state governments also have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Even some trade unions have been won over to the managers' side and, according to (<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/trade-union-leaders-work-for-themselves-not-for-worker-welfare/article7781011.ece>) those leading the Pembilla Orumai strike in Kerala last year, no longer represent workers.

So any criticism is met with denial. When 35 year-old Parvati Borai

recently died on a “non-functional tea garden”, the Birpara tea garden hospital said Parvati had a normal death (http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/woman-tea-garden-worker-dies-116020500819_1.html) while the local labourers protested she was a victim of malnutrition.

Whatever the truth of this particular case (and whatever a “normal death” might be), as a former welfare officer revealed (<http://kafila.org/2014/02/23/can-there-be-a-socially-responsible-tea-ashwini-sukhtankar-and-peter-rosenblum/>), tea plantations sometimes do hide the truth. He was told to “conceal the impact of miserable living conditions and impoverishment in the death logs.” Deaths that implicated the unhealthy, unsanitary living conditions – typhoid, or diphtheria – were routinely characterized as “old age,” or other “natural cause.” Respiratory illness was a euphemism for malnutrition.

When child workers are spotted, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-34173532>) or reports of dilapidated housing or unprotected use of dangerous chemicals are made, the tea companies routinely claim these are isolated incidents that the journalist/academic/trade unionist/NGO is inaccurately presenting as widespread due to vested political interests. As the reports mount up, the denials simply make the industry sound like it is *in denial*.

Because, as Parvati’s death and those of hundreds more like her demonstrate, there is no denying that the Indian tea industry is in crisis and that its workers are being hit hardest.

So what is to be done?

Urgent humanitarian aid needed

First and foremost, urgent humanitarian aid is needed for malnourished workers on failed estates. The government is providing some emergency food and medical care, but reportedly not nearly enough.

Longer term, a key cause of the plight of these workers is their powerlessness; a recent fact finding mission by the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition (GNRtFN) “calls on the Government of India

(http://www.fian.org/en/news/article/high_level_of_abuse_and_violation_of_the_human_right_to_food_and_nutrition_in_tea_gardens/) to... ensure the right to organise is not violated and protect workers and trade union representatives against intimidation and coercion by managers.” The worker-owned tea company model adopted in Kerala initially looked promising, but the Pembilla Orumai strike and the Columbia University report on a similar model in Assam reveal that unless workers have a genuine stake in the company and a genuine, well-informed say in decisions about their work, pay and benefits, no genuine progress will be made.

The GNRtFN also recommends that “Companies must be held accountable for the non-implementation of the Plantations Labour Act (PLA)”, to provide decent housing and benefits for workers. The Pembilla Orumai strike led to Kerala Chief Minister, Oommen Chandy observing

(<http://english.manoramaonline.com/news/columns/straight-talk/oommen-chandy-munnar-development-time-for-change.html>) that “Laws are applicable to the management as well and the management, too, had failed to abide by some statutory laws.”

The tea industry itself needs to explore its options. Are the vast swathes of tea monoculture sustainable? The verdant hills where tea is grown have enormous alternative potential; flowers, forestry or non-agricultural options such as tourism or even tech. While

transitioning workers into higher tech industries may not be a bad idea, flogging the land to developers of “Smart Cities” – as is being threatened (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/Doon-residents-weary-of-proposed-smart-city-project/articleshow/50870959.cms>) in Dehra Dun – can leave workers, like those in Chandmani (<http://sanhati.com/articles/236/>), worse off than ever.

Tea has sprung up in Africa, Indonesia and South America, increasing global supply. Britain, once India’s biggest tea buyer, has acquired a taste for stronger, redder African tea, while coffee is gaining increasing global popularity. These shifts in supply and demand may lower prices leaving even less value to pass on to workers. But, according to a 2013 Government report (<http://cds.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/NRPPD23.pdf>), the falling *wholesale* prices cannot be explained by changes in supply and demand – and could be avoidable; it claims “Very large buyers who are producers as well, would find it worthwhile to depress prices at auctions through monoponistic (many sellers and one or few buyers) buying which enables them to buy large share of tea at a lower price. Loss incurred in production can be more than compensated by profit-making at the retail end.” If such manipulation of wholesale prices is indeed happening, could the Government intervene?

Even if this led to a price hike “at the retail end”, surely the demand for the world’s second most popular drink (after water) is inelastic enough to withstand it, so companies can continue to be profitable while those who produce the tea live with decent pay, housing, education and health.

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