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IDUKKI, November 5, 2016

## Idukki estates face severe shortage of skilled labour

*Migrant workers are no substitute for traditional workers*

: The plantation sector, which accounts for the highest number of migrant workers in Idukki, is facing a severe shortage of skilled labour in harvesting, once exclusively entrusted to the women workforce.

As per estimates given by the plantation inspector's office, Peerumade, there are 13,424 workers on the 52 estates in the taluk, of which 876 are migrant labourers. A large number of them is from Assam. The migrant workers are given accommodation, but they are not employed in cardamom plucking as it requires experience for selection of the ripe beans from the tender ones.

### **Traditional workers**

According to George Kurien, a cardamom planter at Vandanmedu, since the migrant labourers cannot be expected to stay for long periods, they are mostly employed in clearing weeds, replanting, and in fertilizer or pesticide application.

During the peak harvesting season, there is severe shortage of skilled workers, he said adding that it is compensated to an extent by the traditional workers daily arriving from the border areas of Tamil Nadu.

Thousands of women workers who once stayed on the estates now arrive daily to the cardamom plantations by taxi jeeps. However, in the interior areas of the Cardamom Hill Reserve, local women workers are the only alternative, he added.

Even if training is given to the migrant workers, lack of expertise and skill would affect the quality of harvested beans, he said.

On tea estates, transformation from manual hand plucking to machine plucking has made it less labour-intensive.

Traditional workers get the expertise when initiated into it at an early age, said the manager of a tea company at Vandiperiyar. Owing to shortage of skilled labourers, the tea estates have abandoned timely pruning.

The migration of traditional skilled workers to other fields of work and lack of interest among the young generation to work in tea harvesting are the main reasons. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme ( MGNREGS) had opened opportunities for employment. Those engaged in the plantations shifted to work under the MGNREGS. The rubber estates in Peerumade taluk are also experiencing shortage of tappers — where men are mostly employed.

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