

OUTGOING LABOUR AND ITS IMPACT ON THE TEA PLANTATION SECTOR IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Tea is labour intensive sector, however, the registered labour are moving from the estates and the estate management encourage temporary workers to be engaged in the estate work. Poor housing, low wages are not motivated factors to attract the young workers and the youngster are not willing to work in the plantation sector.

Keywords: Plantation, Tea Workers, Estate, Indian Origin, Wages

INTRODUCTION

Tea plantation sector is a labour intensive sector and requires labour throughout the year. However, the registered labour in the large scale tea estates has declined from 497,995 in 1988 to 405,304 in 1990 and as of 2013 it has further declined to 242,266, which is around 42 percent decline within two decades. The factors which contributed for the declining of the registered labour in the large scale tea estate are the main focus of this study. In addition to that the study also draws an outline of the strategy adopted by the large scale estates to mitigate over come issues of labour for their task in the country.

The tea plantation workers are distinctly different from peasants and other industrial wage labourers in the country. The labour involved in tea plantations are basically Tamils of Indian Origin (Indian Tamils). Around 80 percent of the Indian Tamils are concentrated in the tea plantation sector. Most of the workers in the tea estates reside within the estate area. They are housed in rows of rooms, which are generally called *labour lines* in Sri Lanka. The clusters of the labour lines are strategically located in different parts of the tea estate to enable quick labour deployment and to protect the boundary of the estates. The nature of work needs the involvement of both the male and female labour force. Plucking of tea leaves is an important activity and is a specialized job done mainly by the female workforce in the country.

Tea production has reached a record level of approximately 317 million kilograms in 2010. This was about 22 percent of the world tea output and roughly 18 percent of the total tea exports. As far as the export value of tea in the total agriculture is concerned, it was as high as 70 percent in Sri Lanka in 2013. The contribution of tea was roughly 2 percent in the Gross Domestic Production (GDP) in Sri Lanka in 2013.

The tea plantation workers are comes under the category of wage earning labourers. The daily wage includes the basic wages and other allowances which have been continuously altered but the amount has been always remains lower when compare to rural urban workers in the country. At present the Basic Wage for the estate worker is Rs.450/=. The workers are entitled to receive Rs. 140/= as an attendance intensive allowance only if they attend to more than 75 percent of the work offered to them by the estate management per month. And Price Share Supplement Rs. 30/= which makes

total of Rs 620/= per month. Ironically, the estate workers are identified as the low income groups in the country.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both the secondary and the primary data. The primary data were collected from household survey conducted in the randomly selected four large scale tea estates in the district of Nuwara Eliya. It was decided to select 40 households from each estate and finally the survey was incorporated 122 households for the analysis. The systematic random technique was used to select the houses from the estates and the survey was carried out in the month of June and July in 2014. A structured questionnaire was designed to extract relevant data from the households. Relevant information also collected from the staff of the respective estates in the sample. The secondary data were collected from the published documents and the information published in the various issues of the Plantation Sector Statistics Pocket Book which is an annual publication of the Ministry of Plantation Industry in Sri Lanka and various issues of the annual reports of the central bank of Sri Lanka.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Plucking of tea leaves is traditionally a work done by women workers. But it is now open for both male and female workers due to the inability of estates to provide adequate work like weeding, pruning, etc. to the male workers. However, the male workers do not like this work since they consider it a domain of female workers. The location of the estate is the major determinant of inflow of hired labourers in these countries. Hired workers are largely workers from rural villages.

The study also found that the deployment of workers is divided into three categories based on their occupation. These are; i) 52 percent workers fully involved in estate jobs; ii) 35 percent workers partly involved in estate jobs; and, iii) 13 percent workers fully engaged in non-estate jobs. Male workers heavily dominate non-estate jobs. The non-estate workers who study up to secondary level of education do not live in the estates. They are engaged in trade and business in the major cities in Sri Lanka. It is also observed that persons who study up to primary level have the tendency to join jobs other than plantation work. Higher illiteracy rate leads to a greater labour turnout in the estates. Literacy provides extra avenues for alternative jobs mobility from tea estate work to non-estate jobs in the vicinity.

It is also important to see the studies focusing on the potentiality of employment in the tea sector from the inception of independence of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, this section reviews Tea Master Plan (TMP) of 1978, The Tea master Plan in 1978 (The TMP) also suggested that there is a potential for increasing employment on tea estates through enhancing the productivity. Accordingly, the yield level of 900 kilograms per hectare had been able to provide wage incomes, unchanged and stagnated management style, persistence of unchanged housing conditions, attitudes of the trade unions in the plantation sector etc. Coincidentally the successfulness of school education (primary) etc. significantly transformed the socio economic conditions of the estate workers.

The fixed daily wage and the allowances are the major income components of the plantation workers. Wages for the plantation workers were governed by the minimum wage regulation and controlled by the decision of the tripartite institutions called the Wage Boards until recent years. Presently the wages for the plantation workers are governed by collective agreement. The key partners of the collective agreement are the representatives of major trade unions and the Employer's Federation of the plantation sector. It should be noted that the determination of daily wage and other allowances are not routinely considered by the estate management. Almost all wage revisions to the

plantation workers were made after considerable pressure applied by the trade unions in the country by way of strike etc.

It should be noted that there were several programmes initiated in order to eradicate the line room system of residence for workers after the nationalisation of the estate sector and a considerable number of projects also have been implemented in this regard. Despite all these efforts the estate workers who are living in the old type of double barrack or single line rooms still constitute 63.4 percent of the total number of households in the estates.

Being a non-estate worker in the estate the worker can lose few advantages such as bonus payments, holiday payments and sometimes when the housing ownership entitlement etc. The tendency towards unwillingness to join the parental jobs by the youths in the estates also observed. In brief, the existing problems in labour employment can be categorised as (a) the *Permanent workers* in the estates prefer to be temporary workers in the estate in which they reside in order to engage in the estate job while they also wanted to get the advantages of working outside the estates for higher wages. This mostly persists among some of the male workers in the estates. (b) The persons who have gone up to GCE O/L and could not sufficiently qualified in that examination have become the large portion of unemployed youth in the estates. (c) A considerable number of youth with some education leave to urban areas especially to Colombo for jobs and after some times if they fail to settle down, they revert back to estates and remain as unemployed persons even though estate labour jobs are found in the estates. (d) Though some children of the estate workers have qualified with secondary level education, they have only a limited chance to join in the staff grade jobs available in the estates. The total unemployed persons in our sample were 9.31 per cent of the total labour force in the sample. The unemployed persons in the estates were generally educated youths. When asked about their opinion about joining estate work they showed unwillingness to pursue parental jobs. They also felt that it was not necessary to go for the parental job since they had enough income from several working members in their families. Further, they did not like the working conditions and style of management.

CONCLUSION

The tea workers are not merely confined to the estate works. The persons who study up to primary level have the tendency to join jobs other than plantation work. Continuity of poor housing, low wages are not motivated factors to attract the young workers to be involved in the privatized large scale tea estates. The privatized tea estate is engaging in recruitment of temporary workers mainly from other than the tea sector rather than traditional workers.

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