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DIMENSION OF CHANGES IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE TEA GARDEN LABOURERS IN DARJILING HIMALAYA: A GEOGRAPHICAL ASSESSMENT



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ABSTRACT

Greater part of the rural economy in the Darjiling Himalaya is based on tea industry. Darjeeling, being a hub of world famous exotic flavour of tea, has always owned its recognition for its tea industry. The main delegates behind such economically soaring tea industries are the hard working tea garden labourers who unfortunately have always been victim of injustice and negligence since the inception of tea gardens in in this part of the eastern Himalaya. Certain changes have taken place in the life of these labourers over the past years. This work attempts to focus on the life of these labourers and a number of changes that have taken place in their socio-economic life, specifically in the educational field, economic front, family life, changing professional preference, basic facilities and health care systems. In order to investigate upon this changing socio-economic pattern in the life of the labourers under the impact of globalisation this study has been carried out on a selected tea garden, namely Orange Valley Tea Estate of Darjiling. Apart from assessing the impact of globalisation an in-depth study has also been conducted to explore the emerging issues and problematic circumstances the labourers have been facing in the garden because of rapid urbanization and modernization. The study is based on both secondary data collected from the concerned offices and primary data generated through intensive field investigation. The outcome of this intensive study has revealed that over the last few decades there has been a significant increase in households and thus increase in population in these tea estates. Being aware of the changing notions of the present generation garden labourers in terms of education, professional choice, family life and modern trends, the tea estate authorities are now trying to adopt new method in tea manufacturing. The trend in which the number of labourers coming as tea leaf pickers is decreasing day by day is increasingly raising apprehension for the future of tea industry

among the entrepreneurs of this industry. Moreover the impact of globalization in the life and behavioural pattern of the tea estate labourers has been found to be quite remarkable.

KEYWORDS : Plantation sector, socio-economy, changing patterns, globalisation.

INTRODUCTION:

Darjiling Himalaya, the most popular destination for the greater part of national and international tourists is a home of the beautifully braided tea gardens. Tea industry is among the major sources of income for the people of rural economy in the hills (Das, and Bhumali, (2011):. The plantation sector is spread over the mountains as well as in the Daur and Terai region. In the initial days of its inception Darjeeling was found suitable as a hill station of sanatorium for the Britishers (Dash, (1947). They preferred its cool climatic condition and location advantage, as the area was sparsely populated at that time. Lord William Bentick agreed to setup a sanatorium in Darjiling and assumed that the place could also serve as a military outpost and a trading hub (Hunter, 1876, Grunning, 1911). It was Dr Campbell in the early twenties of the nineteenth century with his vigorous effort and vision that the plantation industry was materialised and hence became famous in the hills, terai and Duars region providing employment to a large section of rural population (Karmakar, 2011, Moktan and Chattopadhyay, 2015, Tamang, S., and Chattopadhyay, G.P. (2014):. A substantial migration from around this region was witnessed at the time of establishment of the tea industries. Since then the plantation industry came in the limelight. However, it is a certain fact that in spite of being a major economy tea industry has not been able to provide sufficient to its labourers who are the main workforce. Even though the factory of the tea industry can be mechanised the tea leaf plucking process (two leaves and a bud) can never be mechanised as the plucking of the tea leaves determines the quality of the tea (Besky, 2013). Therefore this garden-based industry can never be fully mechanised and therefore dependency on good number of labourers is bound to continue. This paper attempts to study the life condition of these tea estate labourers of their socio economic status and changes that have occurred in their lifestyle over the recent years under the impact of modernisation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The principal objectives of the study are as follows:

- to focus the life and socio-economic condition of the tea garden labourers.
- to highlight the changes that have taken place in the life of the labourers since the inception of the gardens.
- to examine the impact of globalisation on the life of the labourers.

SELECTION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA

For a comprehensive study Orange Valley Tea Estate close to the Darjiling township area has been selected for the study. The reasons behind this selection are the following:

- Proximity and well accessibility of the gardens from the main township area of Darjiling.
- Manageable extent of the study area.
- Availability of secondary (published and recorded) data and accessibility for conducting field survey for generating primary data.
- Cooperative nature of the managements of the estates in providing necessary secondary data and information.
- Friendly and amicable nature of the labourers in the tea garden which was necessary for personal

communication.

Profile of the Orange Valley Tea Estate

Name of the Tea Estate: Orange Valley Tea Estate – Bagaria Business Pvt .Ltd.

Location: 4 kms to the southwest of Darjiling town

Topography and Altitudinal Range: Mountainous terrain with elevation 1,500 and 1,800m

Year of Acquisition: 2000

Area under cultivation of tea: 189.49 hectares

Features: It produces almost all types of the Darjiling Orthodox variety and Green tea.

Number of Workers: 567

Orange Valley Tea Estate is located to the west of Darjiling at an approximate distance of 8kms from the main township. It is also a magnificent tea estate with its mesmerizing scenic beauty. Surrounded by the orange orchards, this garden area also observes a clear view of the Kanchanjunga summit to the north and its east facing gentle slope gives an added beauty to the estate. It lies at an elevation of 1,600 – 1,900m (5,000 to 6,000ft) above sea level. The plantation is spread over an area of 189.90 hectares of the total 273.5 hectare acquired and produces 1,10,000 kgs of tea every year. The factory produces natural flavour of China and Muscatel fruity variety of tea during the first and second flush respectively. The garden also produces Darjiling orthodox and green tea. It is also among the bio-organic gardens producing black tea of excellent quality.

This tea estate was previously known as Bloomfield Tea Estate when it was owned by the Longview Group of Companies. Now it is known as Orange Valley Tea Limited, owned by the Bagaria Business Pvt Ltd. Bagaria group. In Darjiling they have three tea gardens, namely Orange Valley Tea Estate, Phugari Tea Estate and Gayabari Tea Estate. Orange Valley has three divisions: i) Upper Division (Bloomfield Division), ii) Fedrig Berg Division and iii) Orange Valley Division. It has a total work force of 567 of which 204 are male and 363 are female. This tea estate has its own significant features as mentioned below.

- Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) certified.
- Constant replacement of old plantation with the new ones to an extent of 2% every year.
- Practices of extensive quality control mechanisms and strict supervision.
- Practice of quality manufacturing process from the time of inception of plucking to packing and dispatching.
- Personalized management and direct supervision from the board of directors.

The following table demonstrates the overall setup of the Orange Valley Tea Estate.

Table 1: Land use and amenities of Orange Valley Tea Estate

<i>Aspects</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2011</i>
Total area in hectare	189.90	do	Do
Total Population	6,000	6,000	6,000
Total No. of houses	450	450	450
Availability of Educational facility	yes	yes	Yes
Availability of Medical facility	yes	yes	Yes
Drinking water (Potable)	yes	yes	Yes
Nearest township	Darjiling	Darjiling	Darjiling
Distance of the nearest township	8km	8km	8km
Distance of the nearest market	8km	8km	8km
Approach to the village			
Staple food of the people	Rice and wheat	do	Do
Unirrigated land	all	all	All
Gross yield	NA	1,10,190	1,15,600

Source: Office of the Orange Valley Tea Estate

ASSESSMENT OF THE LIFE CONDITION OF LABOURERS

Orange Valley Tea industry provides a gainful employment to a large section of population in rural area. Work in plantation sector is basically manual in nature and is mostly women centric, with a larger portion of labourers are female and the remaining are male. The work structure has been divided into two parts - those working in the garden and those looking after the management and functioning of the industry in the factory. There are mainly four categories of workers in the plantation sector, namely management, staff, sub staff and the workers. The management comprises the manager, assistant manager and the factory manager. The staff members are mainly of white collar personal and the sub-staff comprise the lower level supervisors. Rest of the labourers are the workers in the factory and in the garden area. Permanent workers reside within the estate premises as they have been bonded by the facilities provided which has become the reason for their enslavement in the gardens with very limited facilities and with no further scope of development. They are virtually compelled to settle in the garden area and even the future generation are expected to work in the gardens with no major educational facility and financial support.

Many acts have been formulated for the betterment of the tea garden labourers; one of them is The Plantation Labour Act which was formulated in the year 1951 with the intention to regulate the working conditions of the labourers and to protect the interest of the labourers against exploitation by the private owners. Health, medical facilities, working hours, formation of unions of workers is the main features of this act. Better working conditions with proper sanitation, welfare of female workers and their children were also the prime concern under this act. This tea estate follows this plantation labour act to a considerable extent by providing housing facilities (to a certain extent). Through the field survey conducted it was found that the land for accommodation has been allotted to them but only 40% expenses for building of house is provided to them; the rest 60% they have to bear themselves. In addition ration (food staff) at subsidized rate, medical assistance, wages as per rule are provided. Whereas facilities like electricity, drinking water, fuel wood and basic amenities like umbrella, gumboots etc. are not provided to the labourers in spite of the PLA being imposed. It is difficult for the labourers, with insufficient wage, to maintain a standard lifestyle in the absence of these basic facilities.

Distribution of Male and Female labourers in the industry

The following table gives details of the distribution of labourers in different sectors of the tea estate from 2001 to 2014.

Table 2: Male-female distribution in the garden and factory in Orange Valley Tea Estate

Year	GARDEN			Percentage		FACTORY			Percentage		Grand Total
	M	F	Total	M	F	M	F	Total	M	F	
2001	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2002	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2003	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2004	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2005	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2006	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2007	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2008	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2009	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2010	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2011	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2012	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2013	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567
2014	190	362	552	34.42	65.58	14	1	15	93.33	6.67	567

Source: Office Record of the Orange Valley Tea Estate

Figure 1: Distribution of male-female labourers in the garden of Orange Valley Tea Estate.

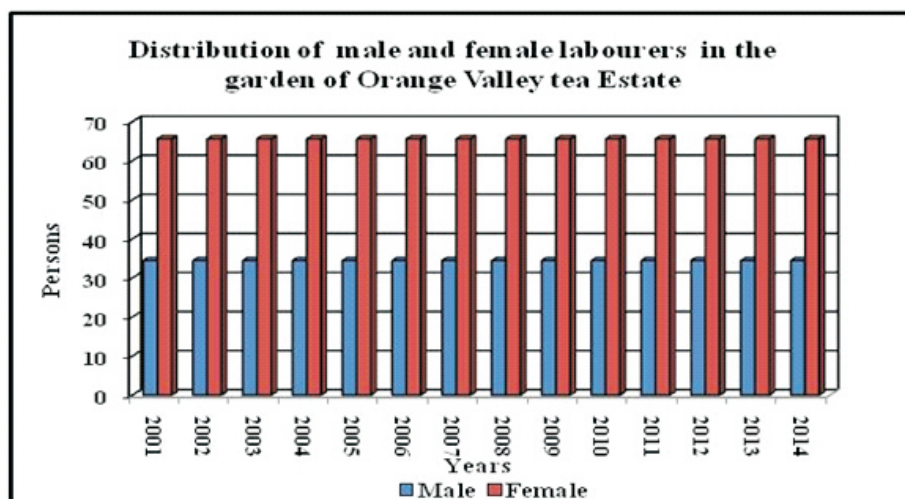
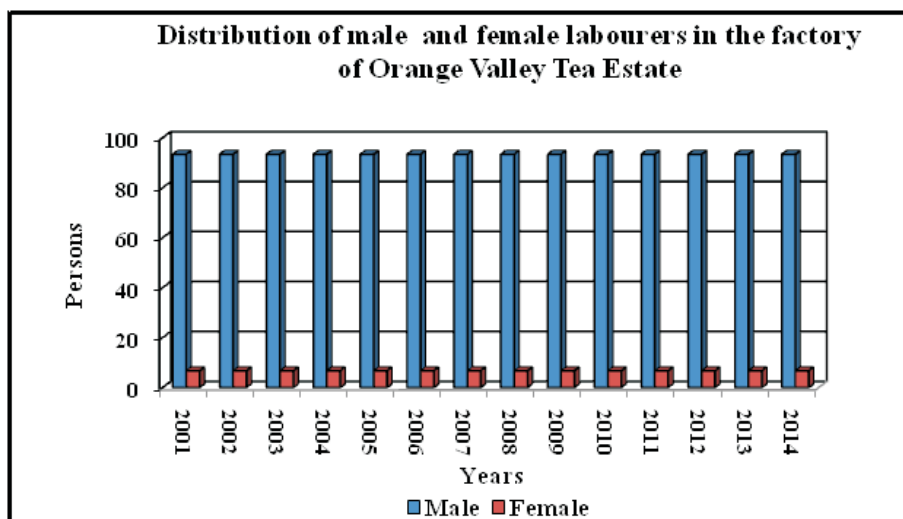


Figure 2: Distribution of male-female labourers in the factory of Orange Valley Tea Estate



The scenario of work participation of male and female labourers in the garden and in the factory of Orange Valley Tea Estate, as emerged in the table and in the diagrams above, show that although female labourers are greater in number in the garden there exists a good proportion of male labourers as well in this sector. In the factory the proportion of female workers is, however, very negligible.

Dimension of Changes in the Socio-economic Life of the Tea Garden Labourers

Over the last two decades considerable changes have taken place in the family life, economy, education status and profession of the tea garden labourers in almost all the tea gardens in Darjiling hills as in other areas of Terai and Duars. Often considered the exploited section of the society, with very limited opportunity available and deprivation from the major access to minimum possible facilities of day-to-day life they have been stranded in the tea gardens as bonded labourers for generations. It is a certain fact that the labourers at present in most of the tea estates are third or fourth generation labourers, since they have been residing in the garden from the time of their ancestors, adjusting themselves with the limited facilities available. If they are asked about their place of origin they all mumble in answering this as they have no clear idea of their place of origin. Being born and brought up in the garden they have spontaneously got used to living a very simple and sometimes hard life; they barely seek changes and hence do not have any expectation for settling anywhere else but cherish desire in mind not to allow their children to work in the garden again and face the same hardship as they have been through. They have now started believing that the scope of good education, employment and better standard of living are nothing but a fantasy for them. Through the recent years and decades the labourers have experienced many changes in their socio-economic life which can be cited as below.

Educational level

Education of a person is often considered to be his or her societal backbone and supreme pride. It not only makes a person responsible and much more adapted to the environment but also determines one's ability to earn his or her living which is indirectly related her standard of living. In order to understand the educational status of the labourers and the major changes in the educational sector the following data have been generated in the field by door-to-door survey and were analyzed subsequently.

Table 3 : Age-wise educational status of the residents in Orange Valley Tea Estate
Sample size: 50 families

Age Group	Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Graduates And Above
0-20	8	6	8	0
20-50	5	5	1	5
40-60	4	2	0	0
60-80	0	0	0	0

Source: Data generated in the field through door to door survey

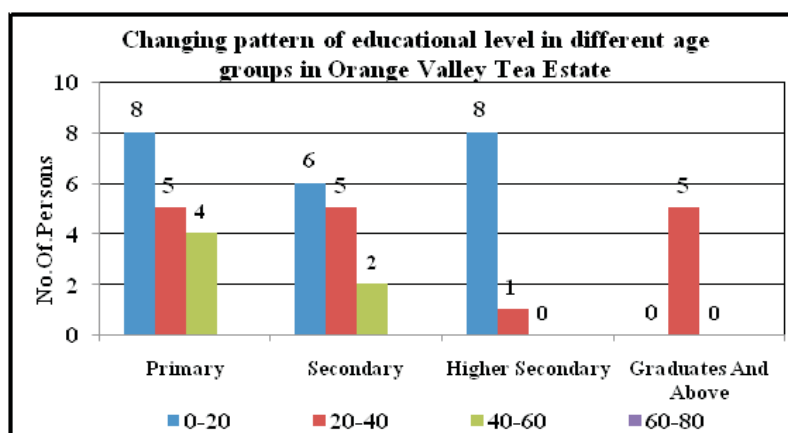


Figure 3: Age-wise educational status of the residents in in Orange Valley Tea Estate

It can be seen from the above table and figure that the largest contingent of educated persons of the labourers and the members of their family exist in the age group of 0-20 years. People of 20-40 years of age group also have marked proportion with education up to primary and higher levels. The education status falls sharply among the people of age group higher than 40 years. A remarkable feature in the case is that no literate person was found among the people with age group higher than 60 years. This signifies that they were not given any education facility at their young age in the past.

Considering the data it has been found that over 55% of persons only up to primary level of education. The percentage declines for the higher age groups. It has been found that less than 5% have studied up to secondary level and very negligible proportion of population have studied up to the graduation level.

CHANGING PATTERNS

- The levels of educational standard and the educational awaress have shown a very positive increase in the last decades.
- The labourers are having increasing awareness of the importance of education and thus tend to send and encourage their children to go outside and pursue higher studies for the prospect of better jobs. Virtually they do not want thier children to be absorbed in the garden work with the same ordeal of life as they have experienced.
- The children and the younger generations are showing initiative and interest in pursuing higher education.
- The people of younger generation with even post-graduate degrees have been found in some families of this tea estate, who are now working outside the garden as teachers and with employment in other

services.

Changing Pattern in Economy

Changing pattern of economy of the tea estate labourers has also been studied through primary survey and the data as generated has been presented below.

Table 4: Other sources of income of the labourers in the Orange Valley Tea Estate.

<i>Source of income</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Agriculture	8
Livestock	7
Teaching	5
Driving	5
Other source of income	15
Tea estate	60
Total	100

Source: Data generated in the field through door to door survey

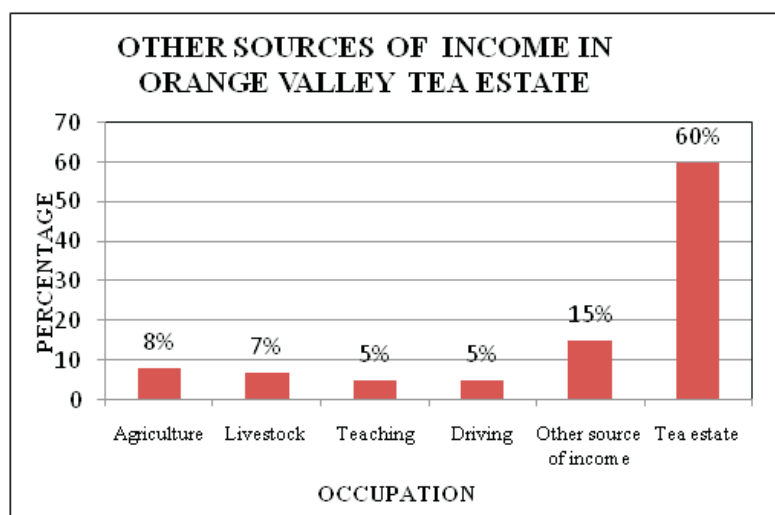


Figure 4: Other sources of income in orange valley tea estate

The other sources of income, the people are engaged in from outside the tea estate, can be assumed from the above table and the figure. The proportion of people working in the tea estates is highest as this is still the principle and traditional source of income for them. Besides this some of them have engaged themselves in agriculture, livestock rearing, teaching and driving vehicles. Since this tea estate is located at considerably high altitude (2,000m, 6,200ft), with favourable climatic and soil conditions, cultivation of various crops like squash beans, spinach, corn, oranges etc. is possible. Livestock rearing is also practiced for marketing the product locally. Some of the literate persons of the tea estates are employed in the educational institutes (schools) teachers and others are engaged in works like carpentry, tailoring, daily wage labourers and others. Some have got employed in the defence sector and some are doing petty jobs in the main city. A few of them work as employed driver for agencies (mainly tourist agencies). Investigation in the field has shown that the pattern of sources of income has changed over the recent years. It has become a very recent practice of some members of

the labourers' families to move out of the garden in search of better jobs. Although the other sources of economy are not very sound.

CHANGING PATTERN OF JOBS

- Even though the wage structure has shown a rise since the last decade the standard of living of the tea garden labourers has not improved significantly.
- Besides traditional assignments with their parent tea garden the labourers and the significant proportion of the members of their families have now started looking for alternative sources of income to meet their requirements in daily life.
- A formidable proportion of the young generation is looking for jobs in sectors other than job in the tea estates. Many are trying and getting engaged in services in army sector, in various other jobs in the cities like teaching, construction sites as labourers, hotels jobs, tailoring and others in attempt to improve their economic condition.
- Some of the younger generations, who are being educated, are moving out of the garden in search of better job opportunities, and do not take any interest to return to the garden life with work assignment in the tea estates.

CHANGING PATTERN IN BASIC FACILITIES

Provisions for basic facilities

All the labourers working in the tea estates are entitled to be provided with basic amenities in day to day life. For their safety and comfort in the work place some of the items that are required, viz., while plucking tea leaves umbrella, gum boot, gloves, apron, raincoat, baskets etc. are essential. All these necessary items are supposed to be provided by the management for the security and convenience of the labourers employed for leaf plucking. Over the years there has been a lot of changes in the provision of basic facilities they are being provided with.

The following tables show the pattern of facilities provided to the garden labourers in the past and at present.

Table 5: Facilities provided by the tea estate to its labourers in the work place (Past Scenario)

Umbrella	Gumboots	Basket/Doko	Gloves	Apron	Raincoat
✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓

Source : Primary data generated from the field

Table 6: Facilities provided by the tea estate to its labourers in the work place (Present Scenario)

Umbrella	Gumboots	Basket/Doko	Gloves	Apron	Raincoat
✓	x	x	x	x	X

Source : Primary data generated from the field

From the tables above it can be seen in the past the basic facilities in the work place provided by

the management to the labourers were being met. They used to be provided with umbrellas, gumboots, apron, rain-coat, basket to every leaf picker once a year. But the scenario has now changed. Among the facilities provided to them in the present day include only umbrella once a year. To meet other requirements they get money; for gum-boots they receive an amount of Rs 80/- which is insufficient as compared to the present price level. For the basket (doko) in which they collect the plucked leaves, they get only Rs 50/-. To meet the requirement for these the labourers have to spend additional amount of money from their personal fund.

The basic facilities used to be provided to the labourers in the tea estates (past scenario) and those provided at present to the labourers in the tea estates (Present scenario) are presented below.

Table 7: Basic facilities provided to the labourers in the tea estate (Past scenario)

House	Electricity	Water	Ration	Fuel Wood	Medical
✓	X	X	✓	✓	✓

Source: Secondary data generated from the field through interview survey

Table 8: Basic facilities provided to the labourers in the tea estates (Present scenario)

House	Electricity	Water	Ration	Fuel Wood	Medical
✓	X	X	✓	X	✓

Source: Secondary data generated from the field through interview survey

The basic facilities as used to be provided by the management authorities to the labourers and the members of their families have been listed in the Table 5 and the existing facilities now being provided to the labourers are given in Table 6. The table on the top (Table 7) shows that the labourers used to obtain a number of facilities directly from the estate authorities in the past. Initially the labourers were brought from the neighbouring areas but they could not adapt to the weather and living conditions of tea gardens. As a result a number of them used to quit after some time. So in order to keep them in the tea garden works the estate authority used to make provisions for free housing, ration at subsidized rate, safe drinking water, free fuel wood, medical facility etc. This system proved fruitful and many labourers migrated to the tea garden areas willingly and have been living in the garden since decade. The facility they were provided with included, free housing facility and other subsidiary support. Each labourer was given land within the tea garden area and thus small quarters were built for the workers. Previously there was no access to electricity. This is a very recent phenomena and it is only over the last 15 to 20 years that the tea estates' labourer quarters have got access to electricity. Regarding safe drinking water the labourers usually depended on the nearby springs and natural water reservoirs. They were also given the facility of subsidized ration which included 1kg rice and 2kg of wheat per head per week. They used to be provided free fuel woods a well. But now many of the facilities have been curtailed.

Impact of Globalisation on the changing pattern of life

The impact of Globalization in the life and behavioural pattern of the tea estate labourers has

been found to be quite remarkable. As has been mentioned, because of the proximity to a very westernised hill station like Darjiling the residents come under the exposure of the behavioural pattern and culture of the modern generation almost round the year. The changing lifestyle of the people in the urban areas developed around the tea estate particularly over the last three decades has exerted marked influence on the labourers and the members of their family in recent years. Perceptions towards the life of the people, particularly the present generation, who are now being educated in the schools and the other higher educational institutions outside, in Darjiling proper, are developing different notions towards their future.

In order to work out the proportion of young generation engaged in service in the the tea estates data was generated in the field with classified years of service being rendered by the labourers in Orange Valley Tea Estates. The data generated thereby has been presented in the table below.

Table 9: Years of service being rendered by the labourers in the Orange Valley Tea Estates
Sample size: Randomly selected 50 labourers

Years of service being rendered	No. of Labourers	%
Up to 5 years	1	2
6 – 10 years	5	10
11 – 15 years	10	20
16 – 20 years	10	20
21 – 25 years	11	22
26 – 30 years	5	10
More than 30 years	8	16

Source: Data generated in the field by questionnaire survey

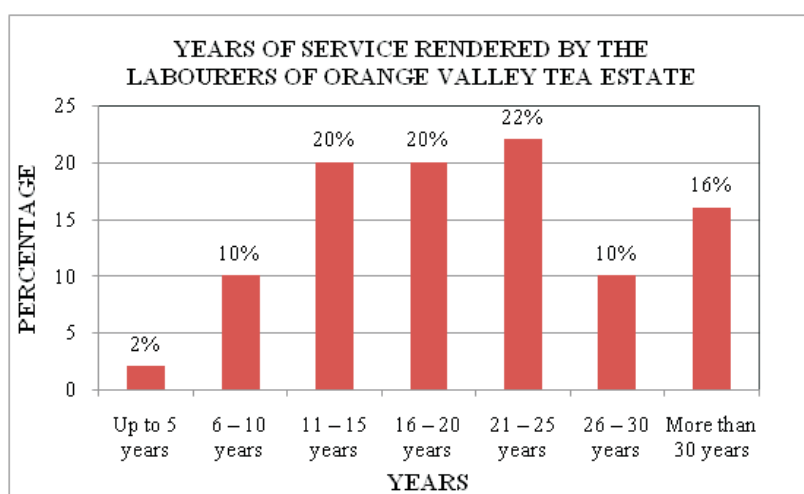


Figure 5: Years of service being rendered by the labourers in the tea estate

The table and the figure above show that among the labourers in the tea estate very negligible proportions (10%) working for the tea industry are newcomers; i.e., they have been appointed only a maximum of 10 years ago. Compared to these labourers serving in the estates; i.e., middle aged labourers (serving more than 16 years) are greater (68%) in number. This clearly shows that the number of people coming in the tea estates in recent years is decreasing steadily. In other words the young

generation is now changing perception negatively towards the tea garden jobs. This is a certain indication that under the impact of globalisation the tea gardens, as well as the estates are gradually losing the supply of young and energetic blood in the internationally famous industry of India.

Considering the above findings a further study was conducted in which attempt was made to explore the present day pattern of desire of the heads of the labourers families regarding sending their children in jobs in jobs (both plucking and manufacturing) in the tea estates. The data generated in the field in this regard has been given below:

Table 10: Desire of the heads of the family regarding sending their children in jobs
Sample size: 30 persons at random

<i>Status of workers</i>	Nos.	%
In jobs outside the tea estate	22	73.33
In tea estate job	8	26.67
Total nos. interviewed	30	100

Source: Data generated through field investigation

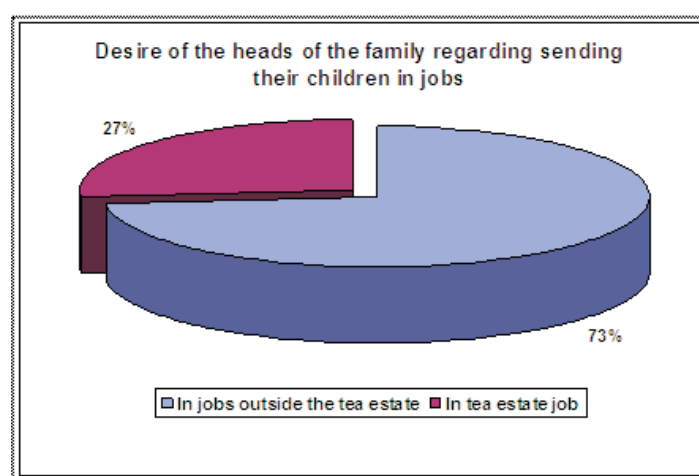


Figure 6: Desire of the heads of the family regarding sending their children in jobs

The above finding shows that notions of the people are now changing rapidly under the impact of modernised thoughts. Greater part (over 73%) parents of present day are not willing to bring their children in this job which they consider hazardous and without having any good prospect of future. Certainly this is an indication of the impact of globalisation.

Being aware of this changing notions of the present generation garden labourers and trend as well the tea estate authorities are now trying to adopt new method in tea manufacturing. Most of the tea factories are being mechanised rapidly to shake off dependence on labours in manufacturing. This is certainly a timely and positive response from the authorities to keep up with the changing environment. But the danger lies in the other side, i.e., in the works of tea plucking, the art of which is entirely dependent on human skill and art. Mechanisation is almost impossible in this sector. The trend in which the number of labourers coming as tea leaf pluckers is decreasing day by day is increasingly raising apprehension for the future of tea industry among the entrepreneurs. This problem is virtually worldwide and gripping this plantation industry at the global scale.

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