

Exploring the Socioeconomic Dynamics of Tea Plantation Workers: A Case Study of Chalsa**Abstract**

This study examines the working conditions of tea plantation workers in Chalsa, a significant tea-producing region in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, from a sociological perspective. The research investigates various dimensions of labour conditions, including wage determination, gender disparities in income, job security, access to healthcare and housing, workplace discrimination, and the broader socio-economic realities experienced by plantation workers. Particular attention is given to understanding the role of gender in structuring work and wages within the plantation system.

The study adopts a mixed-method research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Primary data were collected from 25 respondents through structured interview schedules, field observations, and face-to-face interactions, while secondary data were obtained from academic literature, government reports, and existing studies. The findings reveal that tea plantation workers continue to experience low wages, inadequate access to welfare facilities, insecure employment conditions, and structural inequalities embedded within the plantation economy. Female workers, despite constituting a substantial proportion of the labour force, face greater economic vulnerabilities and are disproportionately represented in lower-income categories, indicating the persistence of gendered labour inequalities.

The study further highlights issues such as workplace discrimination, limited access to housing schemes and educational barriers affecting workers' families. The findings are interpreted through sociological perspectives including Marxist theory, feminist theory, industrial sociology, and Castells' concept of structural informality, demonstrating how historical patterns of labour exploitation continue to shape the contemporary realities of plantation workers. The study contributes to existing literature by providing a localized understanding of labour conditions in Chalsa and emphasizes the need for stronger labour protections and welfare interventions for tea plantation communities.

Keywords: Tea Plantation Workers, Working Conditions, Gender Inequality, Informal Labour, Wage Determination, Labour Exploitation

1. Introduction

The tea industry has contributed immensely to the development of India's economy by employing millions who contribute to both domestic consumption and global exports. Both Assam and West Bengal's tea industries occupy an important place in the national economy. India ranks second place in tea production worldwide while West Bengal ranks first in the production of tea. Indian tea is one of the finest because of the geographical location of tea gardens and the long-term investments. The leading states in respect of tea industry in India are Assam and West Bengal. Assam covers approximately 52% of the total land devoted to tea plantations in India. The other states in North East India producing tea in small quantities include Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim and the rest of the states having tea plantations include Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar (Magar, 2024).

West Bengal, particularly the Dooars region in Jalpaiguri District, remains a crucial tea-producing belt. Chalsa, located in Malbazar subdivision of the Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal, is home to numerous small tea gardens. Located at the foothills of the Himalayas, this town is surrounded by hills, tea gardens, rivers and forests. It also homes a large population of tea plantation workers whose lives and livelihoods

are deeply connected to the plantation economy. On the east, the Murti River separates the tea estate from the Upper Tondou Forest. To the west is Matelli Tea Estate, which has an undulating topography intersected by mountain streams. The region of Chalsa, with its scenic beauty and dense concentration of tea estates, remains a space where workers continue to experience systemic inequalities and insecure working environments. The Dooars region is especially recognized for its production of Crush, Tear, Curl (CTC) Tea. This type of tea is created by passing tea leaves through rollers that crush, tear, and curl them into tiny pellets. CTC tea is particularly famous for its strong, robust, and malty taste. West Bengal is the leading producer of CTC tea, although it is also made in states like Assam and Tamil Nadu (Ghosh & Mallik, 2021).

The development of the tea plantation industry in India was intricately linked to British colonial expansion and the movement of European planters into newly conquered territories. The migration of British planters to India began in the early 19th century, particularly after the British East India Company lost its monopoly over the Chinese tea trade. British entrepreneurs were encouraged to relocate in resource-rich but sparsely populated areas like Assam, Darjeeling, and the Dooars by colonial administrators with the goal of establishing a parallel domestic industry (Bhattacharya, 2024).

Kartik Sutradhar (2018) highlights that in pre-independent India, the labourers protested against the oppressions of the tea planters, administrators, police etc. These protest movements were carried on from 1895-1918. The rice movement of 1906 was an unorganized movement of tea labourers wherein they demanded that the supply of rice in ration is adequate and the quantity is increased. Tribal groups such as Santhal, Munda and Oraon took the leading role to run their movements. Further, in 1911 the 'Tana Bhagat Movement' originated in the Jalpaiguri district as a movement aimed at awakening the tea workers. This was a messianic movement which believed that a Messiah would come to redeem the Oraon from their plight. They were tasked with removing (tana) ghosts and evil spirits, which were held accountable for their distress.

Since the 1940s, the formation of Labour Unions started and The Communist Party of India (CPI) had a significant role in this formation and organizing the tea labourers in the Dooars. Communist leaders like Bimal Dasgupta, Jadunath Singh tried their best to organise the tea labourers. Beginning in 1946, the tea workers in Jalpaiguri district became active participants in the Tebhaga movement. From 1946 to 1948, labourers in the Duars area organized protests, which included general strikes and work stoppages. In 1948, the Grasmere tea garden workers initiated an 11-day strike to advocate for their demands, marking a significant first in Bengal's history. In February 1955 a demand from the Cha Sramik Union led to an agreed increase of the minimum wage in the Dooars by 3 anas per day to Rs I/II/6 for men and to corresponding increase for women and children, with lower rates for gardens under five hundred acres. At the same time, plucking rates were increased. These increases were substantial and represented the inevitable, though unfortunate, reaction to the high prices and profits of 1954. However, the Tea Planters Association strongly objected to this increase. The 'Co-ordination Committee of Tea Plantation Workers' was established in 1965. This committee endeavoured to secure the rights and status of tea laborers, enabling them to live with respect and dignity (Sutradhar, 2018).

The State Conference of Centre of Indian Trade Unions was held in 1974 in Malbazar under the presence of Jyoti Basu. A large gathering of tea workers from Malbazar, Meteli, and Nagrakata came together for

this convention. Following the establishment of the Left-Front Government in 1977, a new dynamic emerged in the labour movement in the Dooars. An additional 7000 positions for labourers were established, and a 20% bonus was provided for the workers. In the following years, there seemed to be changing situations in the lives of tea labourers. The number of lands for tea cultivation was increased; new ways of technology were adopted. The owners who owned the tea gardens obtained profit by using temporary labourers. However, the recruitment of tea labourers was limited.

In 1954, the Tea Board of India was formed which is a state agency of the Government of India. The major aim of this board was to promote the cultivation, processing and domestic trade vis-à-vis export of tea from India. The headquarter of the board is located in Kolkata, West Bengal.

Over the past few decades, the Tea Plantation Industry has been facing numerous challenges; from climate change to increased cost of production, from increased international competition to large scale migration and poor working conditions of plantation workers, such problems require immediate solutions. With a total expenditure of Rs. 967.78 crores for the five fiscal years 2021–2025, the Tea Board of India hopes to address the crisis brewing in the tea industry under a number of categories, including plantation development, sector-specific action plans, market promotion, worker welfare, research and development, and others (TBI Report 2022–2023: 22–23). The social aspect of the tea crisis is not addressed, though. Data regarding ill and closed tea gardens, as well as the condition of the labor force in the tea gardens, are not included in the report. It also doesn't include how management violates workers' rights (Rai, 2024).

There exist legal frameworks which oversee the working conditions of Tea Plantation Workers. After the Independence of India in 1947, the government passed the Plantations Labour Act in 1951. The Act's provisions include registering the plantation and designating a chief inspector from the State Government to ensure that essential facilities like drinking water and medical care are provided. The Act also gives the State Government the authority to choose a labour commissioner to investigate any legal difficulties or wage disputes with management. According to the Act, no adult, adolescent, or child may work more than 48 or 27 hours per week, respectively, and each employee is entitled to one day off throughout the seven-day work week. Further, the West Bengal Plantations Labour Rules, 1956 highlight that it is mandatory for employers to offer and maintain healthcare facilities for employees and their families, as well as housing amenities for them. In addition, workers are entitled to paid yearly leave, and the guidelines outline weekly work schedules and overtime policies.

In addition, in 2015 the Tea Plantation Employees' Welfare Fund Act was passed which established a fund for promoting the welfare of employees in tea plantations. The fund also aims to improve the well-being of these employees. Specifically, this act applies to districts such as Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Uttar Dinajpur and Coochbehar.

This research aims to shed light on the working conditions faced by tea plantation workers in Chalsa, situated in the Jalpaiguri district, with a focus on wage inequality, limited access to essential services, job insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and exploitative labor practices. The study intends to examine how tea plantation companies set laborers' wages and whether there are any gender-based differences in pay structures. Additionally, it investigates the role of trade unions in helping workers address workplace

issues, including occupational hazards. A significant goal is also to understand how female workers in the tea plantations manage and endure these difficult conditions, both structurally and personally.

2. Literature Review

The terms ‘Tea Plantation Worker’ and ‘Bonded Labour’ are important while studying about Working Conditions of Tea Plantation Worker. A tea garden worker refers to an individual employed in the cultivation and processing of tea in tea gardens or plantations. These workers are typically involved in activities such as plucking tea leaves, maintaining the gardens, and processing the harvested leaves. On the other hand, bonded labour or debt bondage is a form of slavery in which persons are forced to work for their creditors for the loan incurred, either without wages or for nominal wages.

Colonial foundations of the tea industry have been critically explored by scholars such as Virginius Xaxa (1985), who argues that colonial capitalism produced underdevelopment in North Bengal by creating infrastructure (roads, railways) that served the interests of planters but excluded the local population. Plantation workers were subjected to low wages and total dependency on estate-provided housing, establishing a system of structural deprivation that persists even today. Expanding this analysis, Aritra De (2015) explores the exploitative labour regime in colonial Bengal and Assam, particularly the gendered nature of plantation work. De shows that tribal women were systematically recruited for leaf-plucking under the colonial logic of “nimble fingers,” while men were assigned more physically demanding tasks. This division not only maximised profit for the estate but also entrenched a patriarchal system of labour exploitation.

The gendered dimensions of plantation labour remain visible in the postcolonial period. Manami Datta and Gopa Samanta (2023) highlight that women workers in the tea plantations continue to be confined to low-paid plucking jobs, with little opportunity for upward mobility or representation in decision-making bodies. Their double burden of paid plantation labour and unpaid domestic work further marginalises them. The authors also note that women are severely underrepresented in trade unions and, even when present, are often tokenised to serve broader union interests rather than address gender-specific concerns. The labour recruitment logic of the colonial era, particularly the preference for family migration, has been analysed by Swatahsiddha Sarkar (2019). He demonstrates that colonial capitalists strategically encouraged the migration of families, rather than individuals, to ensure a steady supply of controllable, reproductive labour. This system not only ensured a sustained workforce but also reinforced caste and gender hierarchies within the plantation complex.

The socio-economic vulnerabilities of tea plantation workers in North Bengal are further illustrated in the work of Rajak and Bose (2023). Their study of the Jalpaiguri district reveals that despite being part of a legally protected sector, tea workers—especially from tribal and migrant backgrounds—continue to suffer from livelihood insecurity, low income, poor access to education, and minimal upward mobility. These findings are reinforced by Chhetri and Kasemi (2018), whose study on the Dooars region highlights the persistent issues of low wages, substandard housing, and inadequate access to public services as central problems in the lives of tea plantation workers.

In addition, Priyanka Das (2025) offers a critical assessment of the structural crises facing North Bengal’s tea estates, tracing their roots to both colonial-era exploitation and the post-liberalisation policy shift. She

notes that the state's decision to allow up to 30% of tea estate land to be diverted for commercial use has been widely criticised by unions for threatening the livelihoods and settlement rights of indigenous and tribal communities. Das argues that declining tea prices in the global market have enabled planters to bypass responsibilities mandated by the Plantation Labour Act (1951), including housing, healthcare, and social security provisions. Estate closures, the casualisation of labour, and environmental degradation—especially the destruction of wildlife corridors and community forests—are presented as interlinked crises that demand comprehensive reforms, including trade policy changes, climate adaptation, and improved labour protections.

The systemic financial precarity faced by tea workers is echoed in a 2025 *Hindu* report, which highlights persistent wage delays in four government-managed estates—Banarhat, Karballa, New Dooars, and Choonabhutti—under Andrew Yule & Co. Workers have reportedly not received wages for five to six weeks at a stretch, affecting nearly 4,000 individuals. The Centre's acceptance in the Rajya Sabha, citing financial stress and poor productivity, underscores how even public sector plantations are failing to uphold minimum labour standards, revealing deep-rooted structural instability within the industry.

In a parallel critique, Orchie Bandyopadhyay (2022) exposes how even sustainability-certified tea estates continue to violate labour rights. Her study reveals that casual workers, who often wait two to three years to gain permanent status, are denied basic entitlements such as leave, provident fund benefits, school fee support, and childcare facilities—violations of the Plantation Labour Act. Bandyopadhyay also exposes the exploitative use of incentive systems to mask unpaid overtime, particularly during peak harvesting periods. Health and safety violations, including the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and safety training in workers' native languages, place workers—especially women and chemical applicators—at constant physical risk.

2.1 Theoretical Approaches to study Tea Plantation Work and Labour

The International Labour Organisation (1950) notes that the term plantation at first referred to a group of settlers, or the political unit formed by it, under British colonialism, specially in North America and in the West Indies. Bhowmik (1980) defines Plantation worker as a migrant often having a tribal background and is structurally tied to an isolated, hierarchical system of production where coercion, low wages and lack of legal protection are historically embedded. He further argues that the plantation workers sell their labor power in a capitalist mode of production. In addition, plantation workers are often subjected to social isolation which reinforces their dependency on plantation life.

Therefore, from the Marxian perspective, labor is not merely physical effort but a historical and social category. It is the activity through which humans transform nature to meet their needs (Bellofiore and Davies, 1998). This dynamic is consistent with the Marxian theory of surplus value, which posits that capitalists generate profit through the exploitation of labor. According to Marx, workers produce surplus wealth, yet they do not benefit from the surplus they generate. Instead, the owners of the means of production appropriate this surplus wealth as profit for their own benefit. The exploitation of workers exacerbates their misery and poverty, as evidenced by the conditions faced by plantation workers in Chalsa, who lack access to basic healthcare, housing, and economic opportunities.

The economic exploitation and inhumane working conditions lead to an increasing alienation of man. Alienation results from a lack of sense of control over the world. The process of alienation is central to Marxian theory of class conflict. The social world confronts people as a hostile thing, leaving them “alien” in the very environment that they have created. The workers caught in the vicious cycle of exploitation find no way to get out of it. Hence, they lose interest in work and it becomes an enforced activity, not a satisfying or creative one (Rao, 2009).

In India, the tea plantation industry largely operates within the informal sector, despite being one of the country’s oldest and most significant agro-industrial enterprises. Workers often face irregular employment, lack formal contracts, and are excluded from key labour protections. Wage payments are frequently below statutory norms, and access to healthcare, education, and social security is minimal. Ramasawmy (2008) writes that working conditions refer not just to wages or safety but also include the overall terms of employment—contracts, hours, work intensity, worker dignity, and the opportunity to negotiate conditions. The International Labour Organization (2016) in their report noted that, Working conditions cover a broad range of topics and issues, from working time (hours of work, rest periods, and work schedules) to remuneration, as well as the physical conditions and mental demands that exist in the workplace.

Jan Breman’s (1996) definition of working conditions in India’s informal sector underscores the deep rooted structural inequalities and exploitation faced by labourers. In India, the tea plantations come under the umbrella of the Informal sector. Breman highlights how informal labour is characterized not only by the absence of formal employment contracts but also by a chronic lack of social security, union representation, and enforceable labour rights. Workers receive meagre wages that often fall below the subsistence level, while job security remains elusive due to the casual or seasonal nature of their employment.

From the perspective of industrial sociology, a tea estate functions as both an integrated social system and a site of economic production. Historically, the tea estates in Chalsa and the Dooars were designed by the British as closed systems, wherein the employer exerted control over both the social lives and labor processes of the workers. The estate management established what scholars term a "total institution" by exerting influence over the housing, healthcare, education, and even cultural activities of the workers (Goffman, 1961). Workers on the Chalsa plantations remain heavily dependent on the estates for their essential needs. This dependency, which arises from the potential loss of housing, healthcare, and social networks upon job resignation, binds individuals to exploitative working conditions. The sociology of work underscores the intersection of gender with work organization. In the tea estates of Chalsa, women predominantly occupy field labor positions but are systematically excluded from supervisory and factory roles, which offer better pay and greater job security than field roles. They receive lower wages, face health risks such as exposure to pesticides and repetitive strain injuries, and bear the burden of unpaid domestic labor, exemplifying the concept of gendered labor exploitation (Datta, M., & Samanta, G. 2023). Jobs on tea plantations are largely informal, marked by the lack of formal contracts, job security, and limited access to social security systems. This scenario aligns with Castells' idea of "structurally informal labor," which benefits capitalist gains while denying workers legal protections. This idea originates from Castell’s and Portes (1989) book, ‘The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed

Countries.’ In Chalsa, plantation workers have minimal access to social security and medical benefits, and they lack legal protections. Women are particularly impacted as they are involved in low-paying roles. The structural informality is intended to enhance profit.

Patrycja Zwiech (2009) examines how systematic and historical structures create and reinforce women’s subordination. Drawing on scholars like Ortner, Rosaldo and Engels, she explores how maternity, domestic roles, cultural ideologies and capitalist structures work to keep women in a disadvantaged position. The tea plantation industry in India exhibits a deep-rooted gendered division of labour, where women are routinely assigned to lower-paying, labour-intensive, and repetitive tasks like leaf plucking and sorting. Although they make up a significant part of the workforce, female workers in plantations often earn less than their male counterparts for similar or even more strenuous work. This wage gap is not merely coincidental but stems from patriarchal labour frameworks that devalue women’s contributions both in formal employment and in domestic settings (Sarkar, 2022).

Additionally, women working in tea plantations experience a dual burden of exploitation. In the workplace, they encounter wage discrimination, a lack of maternity benefits, sexual harassment, and limited prospects for advancement. Simultaneously, traditional gender roles at home impose on them the responsibilities of childcare, cooking, and other household duties, even after enduring long hours of physical labour in the fields. This combined role leaves them with minimal time or energy for rest, education, or involvement in decision-making processes, both at home and in their jobs.

3. Methodology

To enhance the validity and reliability of the research results, this study employs the triangulation technique, which incorporates various methods to examine the same phenomenon. This study combines both quantitative methods such as survey-based questionnaires and qualitative methods such as field observations, in-depth interviews to collect data. Following the objectives of the study, to get the answer of the research questions, both primary and secondary data were collected. Primary data was collected using fieldwork. Secondary data was collected using existing research papers, articles, census reports and government reports. The population comprises both men and women who work and reside in tea plantation areas in and around Chalsa. These individuals are directly employed in various capacities within the tea estates such as plucking, pruning, factory work, and maintenance. Given the population's diversity, the study uses a purposive sampling technique to ensure representation across a range of age groups, educational backgrounds, and household economic circumstances.

In order to balance both quantitative survey respondents and qualitative interviewees, a total sample of 25 respondents was chosen. A structured Interview Schedule was administered which contained both closed and open-ended questions. To ensure accuracy and facilitate transcription, specific responses were recorded with respondents' consent for interviews. Face-to-Face interviews were conducted to record the lived experiences of Plantation labourers.

The specific areas within Chalsa surveyed during the study were:

1. Uttar Durgram Makrapara
2. Zurantee Tea Estate
3. Paschim Batabari

4. Tilabari
5. Church Lane
6. Batabari Tea Factory

4. Results and Discussions

Figure 4.1 Chart of Addresses

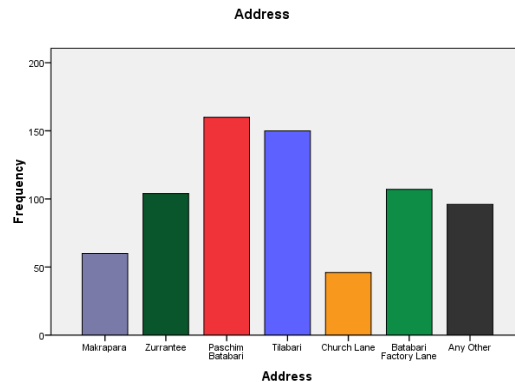
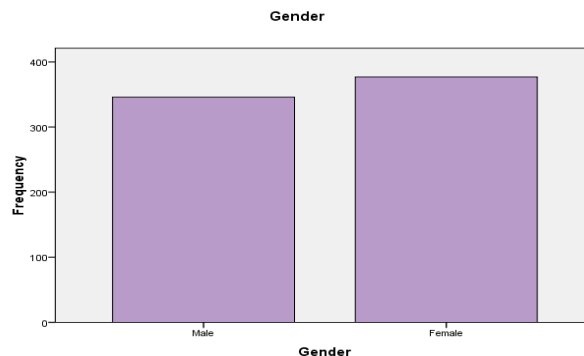


Figure 4.1 presents the distribution of the research sample across seven key localities in and around Chalsa, where tea plantation workers reside and work. The data reflects a deliberate effort to ensure geographical diversity in the field study, capturing varied workplace and living conditions within the plantation economy. Paschim Batabari had the largest percentage of responders (22.1%), followed by Tilabari (20.7%) and Batabari Factory Lane (14.8%). Together, these regions make up more than 57% of the sample, demonstrating their importance in terms of fieldwork accessibility and worker population density. These locations are important areas of labor concentration because of their closeness to big tea estates. Zurrantee (14.4%) also represents an important cluster of tea workers, particularly those engaged in both field and factory operations.

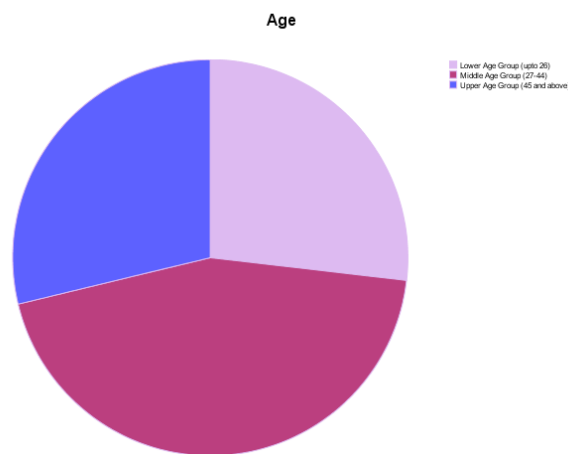
Figure 4.2 Bar Graph of Gender



With women making up 52.1% of the sample and men 47.9% as depicted in figure 4.2, gender makeup of the respondents shows a modest predominance of female workers. Because of gendered division of labor recruiting and allocation practices, women now make up a sizable share of the workforce in this industry. It enables a more thorough knowledge of how gender influences the nature of work, access to resources,

and general well-being of workers. This demographic reality is extremely relevant to the study of working conditions in tea plantations. Because women make up the majority, it is important to look at working conditions from a gendered perspective, taking into account things like workload, occupational segregation, wage disparities, and exposure to hazards in the workplace.

Figure 4.3 Pie Chart of Age



The age distribution of respondents provides important information on how labour experiences differ between generations in the context of the study on the working conditions of tea plantation workers in Chalsa. The respondents are divided into three age groups, as seen in *figure 4.3*: 26.8% of the total respondents are in the lower age group (up to 26 years), 44.4% are in the medium age group (27–44 years), and 28.8% are in the upper age group (45 years and above). The majority of the group is middle-aged, and they make up the primary workforce of the tea plantations. These people have become embedded in the labor system and frequently bear the combined weight of financial accountability and chronic occupational exhaustion brought on by years of hard, repetitive manual labor.

The younger age group, on the other hand, represents a transitional stage. While many of them are making their way into the workforce, they are also closer to the formal education system. Their viewpoints are essential for comprehending changing goals, rights consciousness, and growing dissatisfaction with exploitative behaviours. Their answers provide insight into the younger generation's perceptions of the socioeconomic limitations of plantation life and their possible desire to look for other sources of income.

Figure 4.4 Social Composition of Respondents

As noted by Sarkar (2019), and majority of tea regions like Chalsa recruited from areas present-day and Bihar—regions

concentration of tribal communities. These tribal groups were systematically relocated during colonial times to meet the labor demands of the burgeoning tea industry. As presented in figure 4.4, the caste-wise distribution of respondents reveals that Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute the majority at 54.2%, followed by Scheduled Castes (SCs) and General Caste respondents, each comprising 19.8%, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) at 11.1%. This caste composition reflects the historical recruitment patterns of the tea plantation sector, which heavily depended on marginalized and vulnerable social groups. The dominance of tribal workers is consistent with historical accounts of labor migration from tribal belts of central and eastern India during the colonial period.

Bhattacharya (2024), Bhadra (1997), the plantation laborers in were historically that now constitute Chhattisgarh, Odisha, with a high

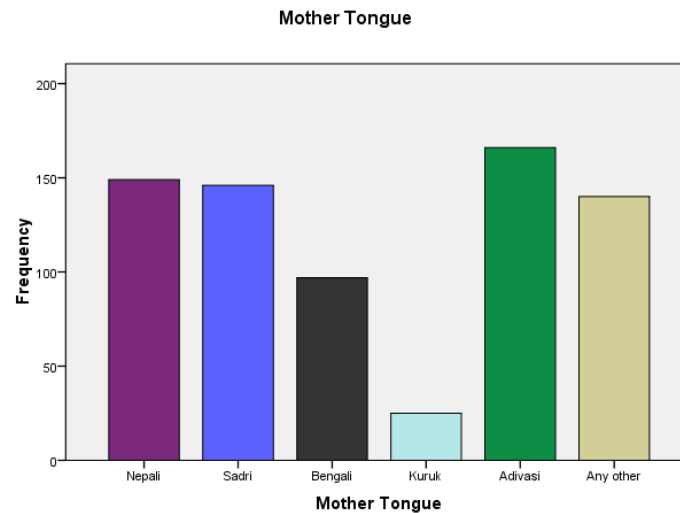


Figure 4.5 Language of the Respondents

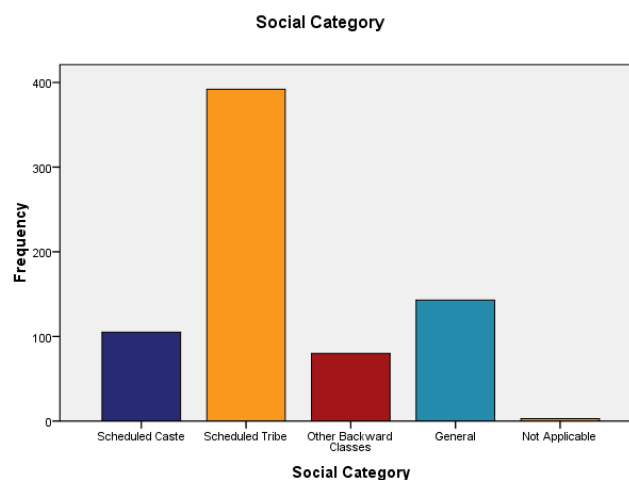
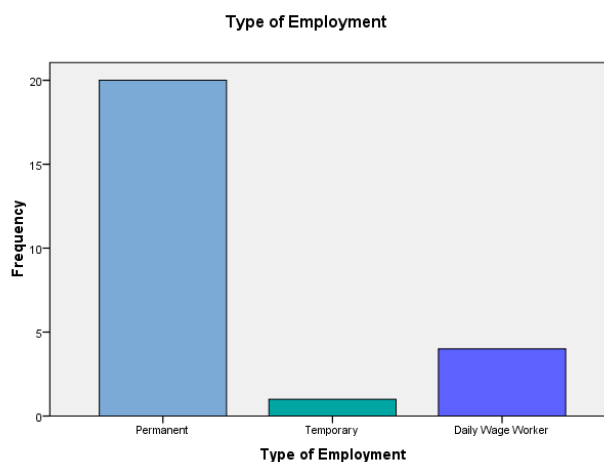


Figure 4.5 depicting the mother tongues of tea plantation workers in Chalsa highlights the region's deep-rooted ethnic and linguistic diversity. Adivasi languages form the dominant group, with the highest frequency, followed closely by Nepali and Sadri. This reflects the historical migration and recruitment of tribal and hill communities—primarily from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Nepal—during colonial times

to work in the Dooars tea gardens. Bengali speakers, despite the state's official language being Bengali, are fewer in number, indicating that the plantation community remains culturally distinct from mainstream Bengali society. The presence of Kuruk, a tribal language, though minimal, adds to the linguistic complexity. Such diversity impacts workplace communication, union mobilisation, and access to state welfare schemes, many of which are delivered in Bengali. The data also reveals how Chalsa remains a unique socio-cultural enclave where labour identities are shaped by language, ethnicity, and a shared legacy of marginalisation within the informal tea plantation economy.

Figure 4.6 Bar Chart of Gender and Pay level



The cross-tabulation between *Gender and Worker Pay level* reveals significant insight (Figure 4.6). There is a clear gender gap in the way that workers' wage levels are structured in the bar chart, which suggests that there are underlying gender-based disparities in income distribution.

While both male and female workers are predominantly situated in this Middle-Income Group category, female workers outnumber their male counterparts. This indicates that a substantial proportion of women are concentrated in moderate wage brackets, possibly reflecting limited access to higher-paying opportunities. On the other hand, a significantly higher number of female workers fall into the lowest-income bracket, suggesting greater economic vulnerabilities. Male workers are more represented in the highest income group indicating a gender-gap in access to better-paying positions.

The distribution clearly highlights a gendered wage structure, where women are disproportionately present in the lower-income groups and underrepresented in higher-income categories. This reflects broader patterns of gender-based occupational segregation and income inequality.

Figure 4.7 Type of Employment

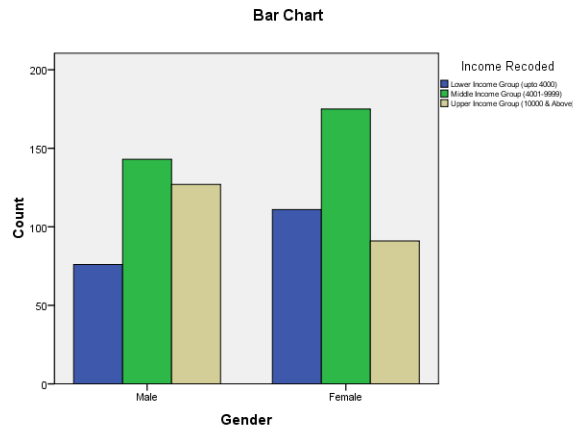


Figure 4.7 provides insights into the nature of employment among 25 surveyed plantation workers in Chalsa. The data reveals that a significant majority, 80% (20 workers), are employed in permanent positions, while only 4% (1 worker) is engaged in temporary employment, and 16% (4 workers) work as daily wage labourers. This distribution suggests a relatively stable employment structure on paper, with a large portion of workers holding permanent status. However, in the context of tea plantations, the term "permanent" can be misleading. Permanent workers may still face low wages, job insecurity, lack of benefits, and poor working conditions, especially in the absence of active union representation or enforcement of labour rights. Despite their classification, many such workers often do not enjoy the full spectrum of protections outlined under the Plantation Labour Act, such as housing, healthcare, and maternity benefits. The 16% of daily wage workers represents a more precarious section of the workforce. These workers are typically excluded from formal entitlements, receive lower pay, and lack job security. Their increasing presence may indicate a shift toward casualisation of labour, a trend driven by cost-cutting measures and weakening labour protections in the plantation sector. The 4% temporary workers might be seasonal or probationary employees, further highlighting the fragmented nature of employment.

Figure 4.8 Workplace Discrimination

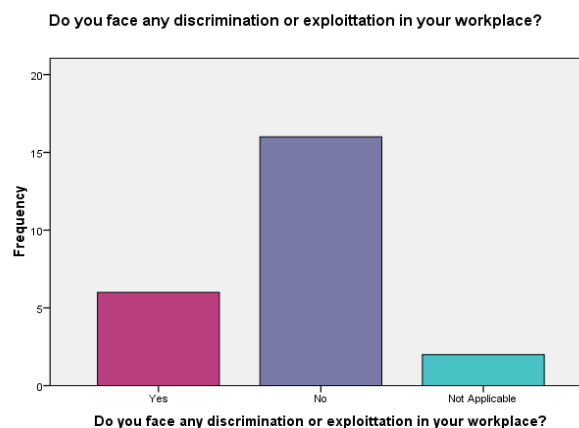


Figure 4.8 provides insights into the perceptions of workplace discrimination among tea plantation workers in Chalsa. Out of 24 valid responses, 6 workers (25%) reported experiencing discrimination at the workplace, while 16 workers (66.7%) stated they did not face any discrimination. Additionally, 2 respondents marked the question as Not Applicable, possibly indicating limited awareness or indirect employment. One response was missing, bringing the total to 25. The fact that a quarter of the respondents acknowledge discrimination is significant. This suggests that issues such as unequal treatment based on gender, caste, language, or job roles may be present in the plantation environment. Given the hierarchical nature of plantation labour and the dominance of upper-level management from outside communities, such discrimination may take subtle forms—such as unequal workload, denial of promotions, or verbal abuse—especially against women and tribal workers.

Figure 4.9 Education Status of the children

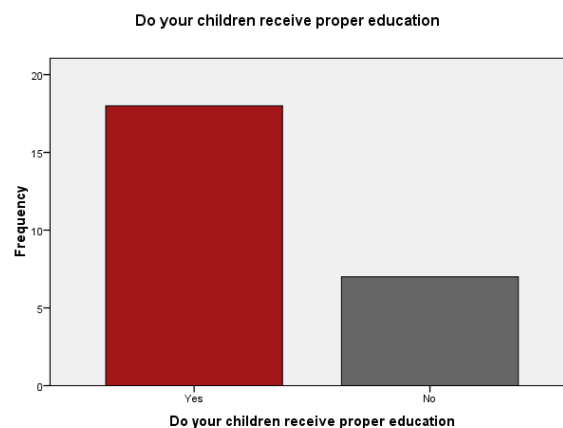


Figure 4.9 presents data on whether the children of tea plantation workers in Chalsa receive proper education. Out of the 25 respondents, 18 workers (72%) reported that their children are receiving proper education, while 7 workers (28%) stated that their children are not.

The fact that a majority of respondents affirmed access to education reflects some level of educational outreach in the region, possibly facilitated by government-run or plantation-managed schools. However, the 28% who reported lack of proper education for their children is a matter of concern. This indicates persistent barriers such as poverty, long travel distances to schools, lack of educational infrastructure, and possibly the need for children to contribute to household income through work.

The data also highlights the intergenerational impact of plantation labour. While adult workers may be trapped in cycles of low-paying jobs, their children's access to education could provide a path out of the plantation system. However, for this potential to be realised, focused interventions are needed—such as scholarships, transport facilities, mid-day meals, and free uniforms and textbooks—to ensure that economic constraints do not continue to limit educational opportunities for the next generation.

5. Conclusion

The study on the working conditions of tea plantation workers in Chalsa highlights the persistence of structural inequalities and exploitative labor relations that continue to shape the everyday lives of plantation workers. Although the tea industry remains an important contributor to the economy and serves as a major source of employment in North Bengal, the findings reveal that the benefits generated by the industry are not equally distributed among those whose labor sustains it. Instead, tea plantation workers continue to experience economic deprivation, social marginalization, and limited opportunities for upward mobility. The study demonstrates that poor working conditions remain a significant concern within the plantation sector. Workers are often compelled to work for low wages under difficult conditions, with inadequate access to proper healthcare facilities, sanitation, housing, and social security benefits. Despite existing labor laws and welfare provisions, the actual implementation of these policies remains insufficient. The plantation system continues to operate in a manner that creates dependency among workers by linking their access to housing, healthcare, and basic facilities to the estate itself. Such dependency reduces workers' bargaining power and reinforces unequal power relations between management and labor.

The findings also emphasize the gendered nature of labor within tea plantations. Women constitute a large proportion of the workforce and play a crucial role in maintaining plantation productivity, especially through labor-intensive activities such as leaf plucking. However, despite their significant contribution, women continue to occupy lower-paying positions and remain underrepresented in technical, managerial, and decision-making roles. The unequal distribution of work and income reflects broader patriarchal structures operating within the plantation system. Women are further burdened by the expectation of carrying out unpaid domestic responsibilities in addition to their economic labor, creating a dual burden that deepens gender inequality.

The study further reveals that education has a limited impact on wage determination and occupational mobility within the plantation economy. Rather than rewarding skill or educational attainment, the wage structure remains largely influenced by inherited labor practices, job categories, and social hierarchies. This limits opportunities for workers to improve their socio-economic conditions and reinforces patterns of generational poverty. Another important finding of the study is the concentration of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities within the plantation workforce. Their predominance is rooted in historical processes of colonial labor recruitment that targeted socially and economically marginalized populations. The continuation of this demographic pattern demonstrates that the plantation economy still reproduces historical inequalities based on caste, ethnicity, and class. Workers from these communities continue to experience multiple forms of exclusion, including limited access to education, healthcare, land rights, and participation in decision-making processes.

From a sociological perspective, the study establishes that the tea plantation system is not merely an economic institution but also a social structure that reproduces inequality, dependency, and power imbalances across generations. The theoretical perspectives of Marx, feminist scholars, Castells, and Goffman collectively help explain the interconnected nature of labor exploitation, gender inequality, informality, and institutional control within plantation settings.

In conclusion, improving the lives of tea plantation workers requires more than economic reforms alone. There is an urgent need for stronger implementation of labor laws, improved welfare provisions, equal opportunities for women, educational development, and greater social and political inclusion of marginalized communities. Sustainable growth of the tea industry should not be measured only through production and profit but also through the well-being, dignity, and rights of the workers who remain at the heart of the plantation economy.

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