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Socio-economic challenges faced by tea tribes in the Nilgiris: A comprehensive study

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Abstract

The tea tribes in the Nilgiris region of India have played an integral role in the growth of the tea industry, contributing significantly to the nation's economy. However, their journey has not been without obstacles. This article presents a comprehensive study that delves into the socio-economic challenges faced by the tea tribes in Nilgiris. By exploring the historical context, current conditions and potential solutions, this research sheds light on the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve the well-being and livelihoods of these marginalized communities.

Keywords: Nilgiris, tea tribes, tea industry, culture, education, trade union, challenges

1. Introduction

The Nilgiris region has earned a distinguished reputation for its opulent tea plantations and captivating natural beauty. These plantations rely on the indispensable labor of the tea tribes, predominantly comprising Adivasis and individuals from a diverse array of ethnic origins. Across the Tamil Nadu landscape, the intricate art of tea cultivation finds its home in various districts such as Nilgiris, Valparai, Kodaikanal, and Manjulai in Tirunelveli. Notably, the Nilgiris region assumes a paramount role in shaping Tamil Nadu's tea cultivation industry. The historical roots of this industry can be traced back to the strategic efforts of the British Government during its colonial reign. The British administration engaged a multitude of individuals, including migrants, repatriates, refugees, local tribes deeply rooted in the land, and other indigenous inhabitants. This collective workforce played a pivotal role in fostering the growth of the expansive tea sector that we witness today.

In the expanse of the Kotagiri region, the tea estates are interwoven with the presence of tribal laborers hailing from ancient tribal communities such as Kurumbas and Irulas. Likewise, the Gudalur and Pandalur areas see the active participation of Paniyas and Kattunaickens from local tribal groups engaging in the intricate work of tea cultivation as dedicated laborers. Currently, the district accommodates approximately 17 INDCO (Industrial Co-operative Tea Factories) and hosts a network of 12 well-recognized trade unions representing the interests of tea laborers.

A significant portion of the tribal tea labor force remained unregistered with any trade unions. This factor contributed to their vulnerability in the face of tea companies operated by private entities, ultimately resulting in their exploitation. Moreover, their inability to accurately document their true working hours further compounded their challenges.

The findings from our field assessment strongly underscore the challenging circumstances faced by tribal tea laborers, who are situated at a significant economic and social disadvantage compared to their contemporary counterparts. Their lack of familiarity with labor laws, to the point of being unfamiliar with the very term "labour law," highlights their vulnerable position. Notably, a substantial portion of tribal tea laborers remains unaffiliated with any trade unions, rendering them susceptible to exploitation by privately-operated tea enterprises.

Compounding their situation is the inherent variability in their documented work schedules, with day-to-day fluctuations observed. Despite this volatility, a conspicuous trend emerges: These laborers consistently clock in longer hours, surpassing the limits prescribed by labor legislation. These findings call for urgent attention to advocate for and support these marginalized workers.

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Their daily work hours exhibit fluctuations, yet a consistent trend emerges they consistently put in more hours, exceeding the limits stipulated by labor regulations. While their preceding generations might have been engaged in traditional tribal occupations, economic factors and occasional influence from neighboring tea factories have compelled them to take up positions as tea laborers. This article seeks to delve into the socio-economic challenges confronted by tea tribes, exploring their reverberations across both the community and the tea industry.

Historical Background

To comprehend the present challenges faced by tea tribes, it is crucial to explore their historical context. The article delves into the origin and development of the tea industry in the Nilgiris and the role tea tribes have played throughout its growth. There are six taluks in the Nilgiris district namely Udhamandalam, Coonoor, Kotagiri, Gudalur, Kundah and Pandalur and 18 urban units. The total population of the district is 735,394. The population growth of the Nilgiris is negative from 2001 to 2011 due to the fall in tea plantation and production. The total tribal population in the district is 32,813 in which the rural population is 22,752. Around 70 percent of the tribal population reside at villages and inside forest premises. The tribal groups which have been concentrated for the study include Kurumbas, Irulas, Todas, Kattu Naickans, Kotas, and Paniyas. Kotagiri, Coonoor and Gudalur Taluks are the study area taken into consideration.

Socio-Economic Challenges

The core of the study lies in examining the various socio-economic challenges faced by tea tribes. Issues such as low wages, lack of access to education and healthcare, housing conditions, and limited upward mobility opportunities are analyzed. The research highlights how these challenges perpetuate a cycle of poverty and marginalization.

Cultural Preservation and Identity

Apart from economic challenges, the article also explores the impact of modernization on the cultural heritage and identity of the tea tribes. The influence of globalization, assimilation of mainstream culture, and loss of traditional knowledge are factors that need careful consideration.

Community empowerment and sustainable development

To address the challenges faced by tea tribes, the article proposes sustainable development strategies and community empowerment initiatives. By involving local stakeholders and fostering partnerships, the article suggests ways to improve living standards, education, and healthcare facilities.

2. Review of Related Literature

Biraj Jyoti Kalita (2018) ^[2], in his study 'Socio-cultural life of tea plantation workers in Assam: A study from historical perspective', mentioned that Alcoholism is one of the drawbacks of their society, impeding their overall development, including their education.

Bhabajyoti Saikia and Homeswar Goswami (2022) ^[4], in their research paper "An Evaluation on the Socio-cultural life of Tea plantation workers in Assam with respect to its historical perspective", emphasized that Assam is a major player in the tea industry. This research study examines the

socio-cultural transformations occurring among tea workers within Assam's tea plantation industry. The findings indicate that to navigate a socio-cultural shift within a new environment, these workers need to engage with a prevailing cultural majority. Additionally, the tea plantation labor force encountered obstacles related to assimilation and adjustment alongside the local population.

Ekta Sahu, and Shyamolee Bhuyan (2022) ^[5], in their research article "A study on the Educational Status of Tea-Tribe Community in Assam". This research investigates into the educational challenges faced by the tea-tribe community within a specific village in Assam. The study employs a combination of primary and secondary data collection methods. The findings reveal noteworthy educational issues affecting the children of the tea-tribal community.

3. Objectives of the study

- To analyze the socio-economic attributes of tribal tea laborers.
- To examine the challenges faced by the tribal tea laborers.

4. Scope of the study

- To contribute to the socio-economic advancement of tribal tea laborers.
- To provide them with awareness regarding the functions of trade unions and the available welfare measures for laborers.

5. Limitation of the study

- The survey has been conducted only within the District of the Nilgiris.
- The survey is based on convenient sampling as the tribal settlements are hard to reach inside interior forest via roadways.
- The data are collected from 90 respondents and the findings may not be generally applicable.

6. Research Methodology

The target respondents of this survey are the tribal tea labourers of the Nilgiris District. The interview schedule has been framed based on the objectives of the study. The questions are mainly related to the socio-economic conditions and other problems faced by the tribal tea labourers. The sample size is 93 as it is the population of tribal tea labourers could not be easily identified in the tea estates. Random sampling technique is adopted due to this reason. The collected data have been analysed by employing simple percentage method, one sample t test Paired sample test, Independent sample test and ANOVA.

7. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The presence of tribes plays an essential role in tea plantation and production due to the prevalence of tea estates near tribal settlements. These communities, along with repatriates, form a significant labor force within these estates. Despite their sizable representation, they confront issues related to education, safety, hygiene, and economic circumstances. The tribal tea laborers possess limited knowledge about labor welfare and trade unions. Majority of the labourers from small tea estates were not enrolled in trade unions. The data are collected from the 93 tribal tea labourers from Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of different tea estates.

Table 1: Frequency table demographic profile

S. No	Particulars	Number of Respondents	Percent
1.	Age		
	20-25	16	17.2
	25-35	14	15.0
	35-45	38	41.0
	Above 45	25	26.8
	Total	93	100.0
2	Sex		
	Female	60	64.5
	Male	33	35.5
	Total	93	100.0
3	Marital Status		
	Married	55	59.2
	Unmarried	21	22.6
	Widows	17	18.2
	Total	93	100.0
4	Education		
	Illiterate	38	40.9
	Primary	24	26.0
	Secondary	31	33.1
	Total	93	100.0
5	Nature of Work		
	Plucking	74	79.6
	Packing	07	7.5
	Transport	12	12.9
	Total	93	100.0

Source: Primary Data 2023

From the above Table 1, it is inferred that majority (41%) of the respondents who fall between the age of 35-45. The majority (64.5%) of the respondent is female. The majority

(59.2%) of the respondent is married. The majority (40.9%) of the respondent are illiterate and the majority of (79.6%) of the respondents were involved in tea leaf plucking.

Table 2: Difference between satisfaction of income and type of work

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value=0.05					
	T	DF	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Type of work	11.050	92	.000	1.54140	1.2644	1.8184
Satisfaction on Income from tea estate	52.929	92	.000	2.13280	2.0528	2.2128

Source: Computed data

Hypothesis: 1

Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant mean difference in "Satisfaction on Income from Tea Estate".

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): There is a significant mean difference in "Satisfaction on Income from Tea Estate".

From the above analysis, the one-sample t-tests were conducted to examine whether the mean differences in

"Type of Work" and "Satisfaction on Income from Tea Estate" are significantly different from the test value of 0.05. The T-Values were found to be 11.050 and 52.929, respectively, both with p-values < 0.001. Consequently, the null hypotheses were rejected in both cases, indicating that the mean differences for both variables are statistically significant and significantly differ from the specified test value.

Table 3: Exploring tea tribe dynamics work type & income satisfaction t-test

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value=0.05					
	T	DF	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Type of work	11.050	92	.000	1.54140	1.2644	1.8184
Satisfaction on Income from tea estate	52.929	92	.000	2.13280	2.0528	2.2128

Source: Computed data

Pair 1: Annual income details vs. Type of work

Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant difference in the mean annual income details between different types of work.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): There is a significant difference in the mean annual income details between different types of work.

For Pair 1 (Annual Income Details vs. Type of Work), the t-value is 0.608 with a p-value of 0.545. Since the p-value is greater than the common significance level of 0.05, we do not have enough evidence to conclude that there is a significant difference between the means of annual income details based on the type of work. This analysis aimed to examine whether the differences in "Type of Work" and

"Satisfaction on Income from Tea Estate" were significantly different from a test value of 0.05 within the tea tribe community. By performing one-sample t-tests, the goal was to understand whether these differences hold statistical significance and provide insights into the perceptions and satisfaction levels of tea tribe members regarding their work types and income from tea estates.

Table 4: Show paired samples test

		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences					T	DF	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
Lower	Upper								
Pair 1	Annual income details type of work	.08602	1.36458	.14150	.19501	.36705	.608	92	.545
Pair 2	member of trade union satisfaction on Income from tea estate	.18280	.38859	.04030	-.26283	.10277	4.536	92	.000

Source: Computed data

Pair 2: Membership of trade union vs. Satisfaction on income from tea estate

Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant difference in the mean satisfaction with income from a tea estate between individuals who are and are not members of a trade union.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): There is a significant difference in the mean satisfaction with income from a tea estate between individuals who are and are not members of a trade union. For Pair 2 (Membership of Trade Union vs.

Satisfaction on Income from Tea Estate), the t-value is 4.536 with a very small p-value (< 0.001). This indicates strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis, suggesting that there is a significant difference between being a member of a trade union and the level of satisfaction with income from a tea estate. In summary, the paired sample t-test results suggest that there is a significant difference in satisfaction on income from tea estate based on membership in a trade union. However, there is no significant difference in annual income details based on the type of work.

Table 5: Difference between satisfaction of employment and benefits gained by the tea tribes.

		ANOVA				
Variables		Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Overtime work	Between Groups	11.478	2	5.739	10.712	.000
	Within Groups	48.221	90	.536		
	Total	59.699	92			
Annual Income	Between Groups	17.627	2	8.813	8.376	.000
	Within Groups	94.696	90	1.052		
	Total	112.323	92			
Social security of the respondents	Between Groups	4.199	2	2.100	10.244	.000
	Within Groups	18.446	90	.205		
	Total	22.645	92			
Debt status	Between Groups	11623.073	2	581199.03	12.050	.000
	Within Groups	43409.153	90	482324.92		
	Total	55033.226	92			
Electricity	Between Groups	.279	2	.139	.131	.878
	Within Groups	60.655	90	1.064		
	Total	60.933	92			
Credit facility	Between Groups	.056	2	.028	.148	.863
	Within Groups	10.877	90	.191		
	Total	10.933	92			

Source: Computed data

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is no significant difference between the satisfaction of employment and the benefits gained by the tea tribes.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁)

There is a significant difference between the satisfaction of employment and the benefits gained by the tea tribes.

From the above table, The ANOVA results reveal significant variations across various factors marital status, annual income, social security, debt status, electricity, and credit facility regarding benefits and satisfaction within the tea tribe community all p-values < 0.05, indicating potential interdependencies.

Table 6: Nature of work and various problems faced by the respondent

Problems	Type of work	N	Mean	SD	T-Value	P-Value
Health related Issues	Tea Plucking	74	2.54	0.95	4.026	0.000
	Packing	19	4.00	0.00		
Tea Work related problems faced by the respondent	Tea Plucking	74	2.20	1.24	3.163	0.002
	Packing	19	3.71	0.48		

Source: Computed data

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is no significant difference in the mean scores of tea work-related problems between tea pluckers and packers among the respondents.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁)

There is a significant difference in the mean scores of tea work-related problems between tea pluckers and packers among the respondents.

The mean score for tea work-related problems was significantly higher for tea pluckers (M=2.20, SD=1.24) compared to packers (M=3.71, SD=0.48). The calculated t-value was 3.163 with a corresponding p-value of 0.002, indicating a statistically significant difference. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative hypothesis, suggesting that tea pluckers and packers significantly differ in their mean scores of tea work-related problems.

8. Policy Recommendations

The study puts forth policy recommendations aimed at government agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders to create targeted interventions and ensure the equitable development of tea tribe communities. These recommendations advocate for policy changes that promote inclusivity, social justice, and protection of the tea tribes' cultural heritage.

9. Conclusion

The article concludes by reiterating the significance of recognizing and addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by tea tribes in the Nilgiris. It emphasizes the need for collective efforts to foster sustainable development, empower the community, and preserve their unique cultural identity.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the often overlooked socio-economic challenges faced by tea tribes in the Nilgiris region. By understanding these issues and advocating for effective solutions, we can work towards ensuring a brighter and more equitable future for these vital contributors to the tea industry and the Indian society at large.

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